

MENTAL DISCIPLINES

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Many of us have personal computers. And these personal computers come equipped with extensive software. But to operate that software, you need what is called a disk operating system or DOS for short. Without that, the computer will not work. I recall our Swami once saw the book, ‘DOS for Dummies’ on the desk. He picked it up and said, “Do’s for dummies. ... What about Don’ts for dummies ?”

At the time, I found the remark funny and amusing. But on closer reflection, the Swami was right. ‘DOS for Dummies’ is a list of instructions you can **do** to the computer. We should also have a list of **don’ts**. Most importantly, we should have a knowledge of how to ‘exit’ a program. how to quit, how to make it stop.

We are all born with a supercomputer. It is the human mind. It is far more intricate, far more powerful than any man-made computer ever devised or ever will be devised. If a computer needs a disk operating system, or as our Swami says, a list of ‘Do’s’ so do **we** in order to operate our own supercomputer. We also need a list of ‘don’ts’. More importantly, if we are caught in a harmful cycle of thought, we must know how to put an end to it, how to ‘exit’ the program.

All religions are an attempt to provide a ‘DOS’ manual for the human race so that each of us can learn to operate our own supercomputers, namely our own mind. Each religion gives us a list of do’s and don’ts: ‘thou shalt’ and ‘thou shalt nots’. These are the ten commandments of the Old Testament, the beautitudes of the New Testament, the eight fold way of the Buddha or the yamas and niyamas as they are called in Raja yoga.

Most of us have probably not read our DOS manual. Very likely we only use a tiny fraction of the computer’s capabilities. Alas, it is the same with our minds. We only use a tiny fraction of our powers and capacities. We never access our higher potentials.

The scriptures of the world are telling us that we are capable of much more. They tell us that if we follow some mental disciplines, our higher capacities will become activated.

Many people ask: what is there to discipline ? What is the need for discipline? Can we not lead a natural life? In the case of our computers and our ignorance of DOS, all that has happened is we wasted money. We have bought a personal computer when perhaps a desk calculator would have done. But in the case of our minds, there is a great danger. The mind is organic, living and it seems to rebel when not used properly. This is the drama of human life. This is the source of all personal and interpersonal conflicts. We haven’t read our DOS manuals or more precisely, our ‘do’s manual’ and our ‘don’ts manual’. That is the source of our difficulty.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 6, verse 6, we find:

Bandhur atma'tmanas tasya yena'tmai'vatmana jitah
Anatmanas tu satrutve varteta'tmai'va satruvat

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For him who has disciplined the mind, the mind becomes his friend. For him who has not, the mind acts like an enemy.

Some people don't like the word 'discipline'. They believe in 'letting go.' If you question them, they say they like to be natural and spontaneous. Well the animal is natural and spontaneous. But they certainly don't mean that kind of life. We all admire a great musician who is natural and spontaneous. The music seems to flow effortlessly for such a maestro. In fact, if we look at any great artist, or a great scientist, anyone who has perfected their craft, the talent seems natural and spontaneous. But behind that naturalness and spontaneity were years and years of discipline.

We marvel at an Olympic athlete, the endurance, the grace, the skill in the performance. But behind that were years and years of discipline. The story is told of a farmer who used to carry a little pet calf across the stream every day. The calf gradually grew up but the farmer continued to carry it without being conscious of its growth. When his attention was drawn to the fact, he realized that he was carrying a full grown bull across the stream very easily. Although a story, this illustrates how by gradual exercise one can develop muscular power to an unbelievable degree. This is what athletes do all the time. By gradual and systematic training, we can perform any feat. The same is true of the sensational acts of the circus. The trapeeze artists, the acrobats, and those who train dogs, horses, monkeys and even wild animals like lions, tigers, and bears do so by regular and systematic discipline.

Apparently some martians had come to observe life on our planet. They reported back to the martian king that the dog was at the head of the evolution game. When asked why, they told the king that the dog had managed to train the self-willed human beings to follow them wherever they went with a plastic bag in their hands! Of course, the martian king wouldn't take this as a final conclusion. So the martians brought out a sample dog and said it could talk! 'Prove it,' challenged the king. 'Okay dog, what is on top of a house?' 'Roof' replied the dog. 'Okay dog, how does sandpaper feel?' 'Rough,' replied the dog. Then the martian king said, 'This is not a proof. Any dog will say 'roof' or 'rough'.' And then the dog looked at the king and said, 'But those were two easy questions!'

If we can discipline the animals, why can't we discipline our own minds? 'Yan sadhan tan siddhi,' Sri Ramakrishna used to say. "Whatever you discipline, that you get." He should know since he is the embodiment of mental discipline.

Actually, if we look around us, we see that 'to control' means to 'to discipline.' For example, nature's energies are untamed and unharnessed. What we have been doing is disciplining nature's energies. If a river flows uncontrollably, we build dams and generate hydro-electricity. We build canals and re-direct its chaotic energies. Even such a flimsy thing as air can gain extraordinary strength by discipline. What is after all a vacuum cleaner? Air is forced through a tube by suction and this is what we use to clean and to pick up dust from even the tiniest of crevices. Air can even be used as a drill. When put under pressure, it gains penetrative power. In fact, some drills used to cut rocks use compressed air.

So we see that we are disciplining nature's energies all the time. In human society, we require each citizen to behave decently and responsibly.

Our Swami tells the story of two men walking along a beach; one of them was twirling his umbrella so vigorously that it almost hit the other guy. So he told him, 'Hey you, stop twirling that umbrella.' 'Why should I? This is a free beach. I can do whatever I want,' retorted the other. 'Yes, but your freedom ends where my nose begins.'

I believe it was Victor Frankl who said that just as there is a statue of liberty on the east coast, there should be a statue of responsibility on the west. For a community, or a society to function properly, each citizen must act responsibly. Thus our freedom must be curbed by responsibility. This curbing of our tendencies is what we expect as a minimum from every human being. If he or she doesn't, then they become guests of the government; that is, they are put behind bars!

Every citizen is expected to discipline his or her mental energies to a certain minimum level so that they don't harm others. Laws are there to ensure just that. This is why mental discipline is essential for all of us.

In the Bhagavata Purana, we find that there are only two kinds of people who don't need any discipline: the utter fool below and the paramahansa above. But in between are all of us, whose minds are in varying degrees of tension and so we all need mental discipline.

Sri Ramakrishna used to compare the mind to a garden. He would sing, 'O mind, you do not know how to farm. If only you knew how to farm, how rich a harvest you might reap.'

Our virtues, our talents, our strengths are the flowers of our mental garden. They are to be cultivated and watered daily. Our vices, our faults, our negative emotions and thoughts are like weeds that should be removed and discarded, for otherwise, they take away the nutrients of our mental field.

According to Vedanta, we are already pure and our real nature is pure consciousness. But that purity has been covered up by mental clouds and impressions. In fact, in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, we find the agricultural analogy used. Patanjali says by doing good, by being virtuous, we are removing the obstructions that are preventing the manifestation of our inner purity. Then, the inner Self shines in all its glory.

Explaining this verse, Swami Vivekananda writes: "The water for irrigating the fields is already in the canal, only held back by the gates. The farmer opens the gates and the water flows by itself, by the law of gravitation. ... Perfection and purity are the nature of every human being; only it is barred off and so prevented from taking its proper course. If anyone can take the bar away, in rushes nature. ... All these practices and struggles to become religious are to take off the bars and open the doors to that perfection which is our birthright, our nature." (Yogas and Other Works, p. 680.)

In Raja Yoga, we find ten mental disciplines listed in the form of *yama* and *niyama*. *Ahimsa*, *satyam*, *asteya*, *brahmacarya*, *aparigraha* comprise *yama*. That is, *yama* consists

of: non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, chastity and non-receiving of gifts. Then comes *niyama* consisting of *saucam, santosa, tapas, svadhyaya, isvara pranidhana*. That is, cleanliness, contentment, austerity, study and offering the fruits of work to God. Let us try to understand the meaning of each of these, one by one.

Ahimsa means non-violence, non-injury to any living being, either by thought, word or deed. This has been listed in some books as the supreme virtue. How true it is in this world that is increasingly becoming more violent. Even kids are being infected by violence through television and video games. Studies that show the harmful effects of sex and violence on children are being suppressed at the moment just as the tobacco industry was fully aware of the carcinogenic nature of smoking almost 50 years ago but suppressed the information from reaching the public. It may take another 20 years before proper legislation is in place to control television, but by then the damage has been done. Governments seem to be putting corporate interests ahead of the interests of the people. That seems to be democracy as we know it today.

Let us analyse the meaning of *ahimsa* or non-injury. If we have done something wrong to anyone, we must reconcile with that person and offer our apology. If someone has done something wrong to us, we must seek out the truth about the matter if it is really so and if dialogue fails, we must pray for them. That way, we remove any ill-feeling that we may have. The Holy Mother advises us that we should try and associate some good quality with everyone we know so that when we think of them, that good quality also appears.

Ahimsa or non-violence must also be practiced in our speech. We must not use harsh words or rude words. The Holy Mother warns that by using rude words, one's nature becomes rude.

A child told his mother that he hated bananas. "You hate bananas?" the mother asked. "Hate is a very strong word. What did the banana do to you? Did it hurt you?" "No," replied the boy. "Then, don't use the word 'hate'. Say 'I prefer not to eat a banana.' That banana didn't do anything to you."

Sometimes students come and tell me 'they hate mathematics.' What did mathematics do to them? It would be more accurate to say, 'I don't understand mathematics.' And if we analyse any conflict, we see it rooted in misunderstanding. In fact, all religious conflicts are based on a lack of understanding. That lack of understanding does not seem to be a cause for 'hate'.

Language is a potent force. If you tell yourself 'I can't do math' and repeat it often enough, we make it difficult for ourselves. Virgil wrote, 'They can who think they can.' The problem is we have hypnotised ourselves, society has hypnotised us into thinking we can't do this or that. We can do much more. Yoga is a process of de-hypnosis.

Satyam refers to the practice of truthfulness. Again, this means a three-fold discipline in thought, word and deed. To be truthful means to be accurate, not to exaggerate, in what you say.

Our legal profession has degenerated so much that people now think they can do anything as long as you have the money to hire a good lawyer. Once a man needed and a

lawyer and went to the most expensive and said to him, ‘I know you charge a lot of money but for 500 hundred dollars, can you answer two questions?’ ‘Sure,’ replied the lawyer, ‘what is the other question?’

Ahimsa and *satyam*, non-violence and truthfulness support each other. In the Bhagavad Gita, we find in Chapter 17, verse 15:

*Anudvega karam vakyam satyam priyahitam cayat
Svadhyaaya bhyasanam caiva vanmayam tapah ucyate*

The utterance of words which give no offence, which is truthful, pleasant and beneficial, along with self-study and practice are said to be the discipline of speech.

The word ‘satyam’ is derived from the Sanskrit work ‘Sat’ which means ‘Being.’ ‘*Ekam sat viprah bahudah vadanti*’ means ‘That which is, is one, the wise speak of it variously.’

The practice of truthfulness is again linked to the practice of silence. the practice of thoughtfulness. We are often too impatient to say our bit, but sometimes silent reflection is a better route.

Mahatma Gandhi, in his autobiography, writes of his natural shyness and how he transformed it into the practice of truthfulness. He wrote: “I never overcame my shyness. It was impossible for me to speak impromptu. I hesitated whenever I had to face strange audiences and avoided making a speech whenever I could. ... My hesitancy in speech, which was once an annoyance, is now a pleasure. Its greatest benefit has been that it has taught me the economy of words. I have naturally formed the habit of restraining my thoughts. And I can now give myself the certificate that a thoughtless word hardly ever escapes my tongue or pen. ... Experience has taught me that silence is part of the spiritual discipline of a votary of truth. Proneness to exaggerate, to suppress, or modify the truth, wittingly or unwittingly, is a natural weakness of man and silence is necessary in order to surmount it.” (Experiments in Truth, p. 62)

We are all familiar with the story of Pinocchio. The puppet maker makes Pinocchio and gives it life. Every time Pinocchio tells a lie, his nose becomes longer and longer, the idea being that even so-called ‘little white lies’ can grow into great falsehoods and become as plain as the nose on one’s face.

Next comes *asteya* or non-stealing. At the exterior level, the meaning of this is clear. We must not take that which belongs to someone else without their permission. GANDHI would say that taking more than what one needs, hoarding, monopolizing is also a form of theft. By doing so, we deprive others of the same commodities.

But if we go deeper, and analyse the meaning of ownership, we realise that we don’t own anything. All that I have was not born with me. Nor will I be able to take them with me when I die. Thus, it doesn’t belong to me. It belongs to God. I am simply a trustee, a custodian of that. And I must distribute that wealth as God’s caretaker. This body, for example, does not belong to me. It is God’s. I have it on lease, as a means to serve others. Such an attitude prevents our attachment to our body, to our knowledge and wealth. Literally speaking, they are not ours.

In the *Isa Upanisad*, we find in the opening verse:

*Isavasyam idam sarvam yatkinca jagatyam jagat
Tena tyaktena bhunjitah, ma grdhah kasya svid dhanam*

Whatever you see, whatever there is in this changeful universe, everything belongs to God. Thus nothing belongs to you and by this understanding, support yourself.

Even our body and mind, our energies do not belong to us. They belong to God. If we can keep this awareness always, we have no choice but to place them at the altar of the Divine in the form of loving service to all beings. Mahatma Gandhi was so impressed by this verse of the *Isa Upanishad* that he would say the essence of religious life is contained in it.

Next comes *brahmacarya*. A limited interpretation of it is the control of the sex impulse. In its wider context, it means re-directing of our energies in a creative and constructive direction, such as study, meditation, prayer and contemplation.

The energies distributed throughout the body are summoned by the will when the need arises. The yogi is well aware of this. That is why he consciously transmutes his energies into a higher direction.

Finally, *aparigraha* means the non-receiving of gifts. At the grosser level, it means not to accept bribes, not to abuse power or privilege. At the subtler level, it means not to be obligated to anyone. Because, to be obligated means that another person has control over you. It is one thing to do service to another out of one's own volition, but it is quite another to be in servile relationship to another human being. One must sever such a relationship.

This five-fold yama allows the mind to rid itself of any guilt complexes and keep the conscience clear. When the conscience is clear, we are not weighed down by the iron chains of guilt. We are our own witness and we are our own judge.

It was indeed a spiritual experience that Ebenezer Scrooge had on that fateful Christmas eve. No doubt, the festive mood and spiritual meaning of Christmas day had sent his subconscious into contemplation and it was asking him what he was doing with his life. The exclusive pursuit of wealth did not give him any meaning. So the subconscious conjured up the three ghosts. First he had to look at his past actions dispassionately and see where he had made his mistakes. Then he had to realise that he was not connecting himself to anyone in the present in any meaningful way. All of a sudden he glimpses the gloomy future that awaits him: "Is this the picture of what will be, or might be?" he asks. The realization comes that if he doesn't change his ways that this is the picture of what will be. From that day onwards, he changes his behaviour. So acting properly today, we can negate the effect of the past.

These five mental disciplines are to be followed by everyone, irrespective of nation or position. They keep the conscience clear and prepare the foundation for higher realizations.

The *niyamas* are habits to be cultivated. 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness,' it is said. Cleanliness not only means external cleanliness of ourselves and our habitation, but also

internal cleanliness. But how should we sweep the floor of our mind? I have found that speed reading about 100 pages of some spiritually uplifting books helps to saturate the subconscious mind with spiritual thought. One can then maintain an undercurrent of a meditative mood throughout the day. Another effective method is reading out loud about 10 pages of Swami Vivekananda's writings. His English is simple, elegant and of a very high standard. As such, every word of his like a mantra, that which protects the mind.

Romain Rolland, Nobel laureate in literature, and biographer of Beethoven, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Gandhi wrote the following about the words of Swami Vivekananda. "His words are great music, phrases in the style of Beethoven, stirring rhythms like the march of Handel choruses. I cannot touch these sayings of his, scattered as they are through the pages of books at thirty years distance¹ without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric shock. And what shocks, what transports, must have been produced when in burning words they issued from the lips of the hero!"

With Swami Vivekananda's writings, we have his direct words, not through the intermediary of any translation. It is exciting to know that those were the words he spoke so reading them out loud is doubly exhilarating and disciplines our faculty of speech.

Nest comes *santosa*, or contentment. One must be cheerful and not gloomy. This is because the mind is magnetic. Cheerfulness attracts cheerfulness and gloom attracts gloom and we can do without that. Once a grumpy man went to a restaurant and asked the head waiter if they served crabs there. The waiter replied, 'Sure, we serve everybody.'

In addition to cheerfulness, *santosa* means thankfulness, being grateful for what we have, learning to see the positive side of things. There is a Bengali proverb that says, 'we don't know the value of teeth as long as we have them.'

Tapas means discipline. Its literal Sanskrit meaning means 'heat' which indicates effort and endeavour, which has a tendency to heat up any system. In the context of *niyama* it means a voluntary and cheerful experiencing of a privation with a view to attaining a higher value. In his impressive book, "The Message of the Upanishads," Swami Ranganathananda writes, "What is given up is always a lower value and what is sought is always a higher value. [For example], lust emerges as love through the *tapas* of marriage. A seeker of knowledge gladly welcomes privations in the field of sense pleasures. A patriot seeking the liberation of his country from political slavery cheerfully faces physical privations and even death itself. The ethical man cheerfully undergoes physical and mental privations at the call of duty." These are examples of *tapas*.

Without daily discipline, the mind becomes flabby. *Tapas* is like exercise for the mind. One teacher of mind used to say, "It is good to challenge the mind with fundamental questions. For if you don't, then it is certain you will not solve them." Thus effort is a very important part of *tapas*.

At present, the mind is scattered, just as light is diffused everywhere. If the rays of light are gathered and focussed at one point my means of (say) a magnifying glass, the

¹ Rolland wrote this in 1930.

strength of the focussed rays is enough to burn paper. The same is true of our energies. We dissipate them. But if we gather them and focus them on a significant idea or problem, then we gain insight into it and even a solution for it. It is the means of churning the mind for knowledge. All great scientific discoveries have been made by means of *tapas*. All great artistic and creative achievements are through *tapas*. And in fact, all the revelations of the saints and sages of the world have been through the power of *tapas*. It means channeling of one's energies in a higher direction rather than wasting them on lower levels.

Tapas also strengthens the will, which is essential in controlling the mind. In this connection, vows are a common way of practicing *tapas*. For example, we have marriage vows indicating that our goal is to transmute our animal energies and humanize them. In a family, there is an automatic check on selfishness. It is not 'mine' but rather 'ours'. Everything must be shared. By giving up our selfishness and always thinking of one's own welfare, one is forced to think about the collective welfare of the family. This is *tapas*.

The will can be strengthened in steps. By setting a goal and firmly setting one's course towards that goal, our will power gets strengthened. For example, suppose our goal is to lose weight. We can cut our food intake by 25 percent and add a modest regimen of exercise. Even a ten minute walk improves circulation and breathing. This would be *tapas*.

When we have a big task to complete, it is best to divide it into parts and set daily goals. Maintaining regularity to finish the task would be *tapas*. Effort is *tapas*.

In the life of Sri Ramakrishna, we see extraordinary *tapas*. His superhuman concentration and meditation has brought us the knowledge of how we all can lead a spiritual life. It taught us the harmony of religions. It taught us about the ripe and unripe ego and that we can make rapid progress if we think of ourselves as a child of God. All of this is through the *tapas* of Sri Ramakrishna. Our lamp of wisdom has been lit by the torch of the *tapas* of Sri Ramakrishna. If one person performs *tapas*, it like lighting a torch, and millions can see by that light.

The spiritual giants of all religions performed *tapas*. They had a cosmic vision of things. They told us that we must change our perspective, from leading an ego-centric life to a God-centred life. This change in perspective makes all the difference in the world.

In fact, in Swami Brahmananda's book, 'Words of the Master,' the first teaching of Sri Ramakrishna is 'Know yourself and you shall then know God. What is my ego? Is it my hand or foot, or flesh or blood or any other part of my body? Reflect well and you will know that there is no such thing as 'I'. The more you peel the skin of an onion, the more skin only appears - you cannot get any kernel. So when you analyse the ego, it vanishes away into nothingness. What is ultimately left behind is the Atman, pure Knowledge. God appears when the ego dies.'

Svadhya or self-study is next in the list of *niyamas*. At the primary level, it means study, contemplation, and reflection. We know nothing until we can think something out for ourselves. A teacher can help; a book can help; but I have to reflect upon the idea. I have to compare and contrast it to what I know. I have to ask the question: what does

this mean to me? Can I use it in my spiritual development? What is the deeper meaning of this? Can I illustrate this with an example?

At the higher level, *svadhyaya* refers to introspection, cogitation, self-analysis, something that Sri Ramakrishna refers to in his teaching. That is the only way to get at the meaning of the meaning.

The Holy Mother has taught us not to find fault with others; but rather to look at our own faults and correct them. In this connection, it is important to realise that thought is the guiding force. The Dhammapada says that “All that we are is the result of what we have thought; it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts.” Thus, to undo a bad habit or fault, the method is again by using thought. This involves a two-fold process. First, to dissociate oneself from the undesirable quality, to objectivise it. Recognizing one’s own shortcomings is almost 50 percent of the way in the path of self-improvement. The recognition is the process of objectivisation; it indicates a desire to change.

It is asked, how many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? ... None. The light bulb should first *want to change*. ... How many yogis does it take to change a light bulb? ... None. They don’t need light bulbs. The light is within!

Getting back to introspection, recognition of the fault and wanting to change is already half the journey. We must realise that we are not the thoughts. Thoughts come and go. We are the witness of the thoughts. In this way, we can intensify the objectivisation. Having clinically separated the quality from your mind, there are now three ways to prevent the recurrence of the bad quality. The simplest is to *avoid* the circumstance and environment that will awaken those thoughts. This doesn’t solve the problem. The next step is to *replace* the thought by its opposite. Hatred can be replaced by love. We actually can do this more effectively than we think. If in a family, the husband and wife are having an argument and the baby crawls in, the mother’s anger subsides and her thoughts get centered on the baby. This is an instance of replacement of thought. The third step is *sublimation*, for energy in the body cannot be annihilated; it must be redirected along higher channels. This is why, study, introspection, prayer, and meditation are important practices. Even though we may think we are not progressing, we *are*. The energies that would otherwise be spent in destructive ways are being given a higher direction.

The final aspect of *niyama* is *ishvara pranidhana*, offering the fruits to God. Sometimes, it becomes easier if we combine our offering to practice. For example, when we sit for meditation, offer time to God. Offer the half-hour and be absorbed in the contemplation of the divine for that period of time, at least. When you have to exercise or walk for 15 minutes, offer that to God. That way, the path is made easier for the current of effort to flow.

In Chapter 9, verse 27 of the Bhagavad Gita, we find:

Yat karosi yad asnasi yaj juhosi dadasi yat
Yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kurusva madarpanam

Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer, or give away, whatever austerity you perform, do that as an offering to God, Sri Krishna says. This attitude takes much of the drudgery out of self-discipline and transforms it into spiritual discipline.

May we all discipline our mind, by gathering our thoughts and emotions and consecrate them in our work, and place them at the altar of the Divine. That is my prayer.