

1. Seek Brahman-God
 2. Image Worship
 3. Meditation and Prayer
 4. Utter the Name of the Lord
 5. Self-Surrender
 6. Read the Scriptures
 7. Higher Knowledge is Hidden
 8. Counter-Karma and Samskaras
 9. Future Life is Determined at the Moment of Death
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X. Religious Practices

1. Seek Brahman-God

Indian: “He who worships him [Brahman-Atman], and puts his trust in him, shall surely attain him” (Ch. Up.* 3:14.4, p. 103). “Give me your whole heart, love and adore me, worship me always, bow to me only, and you shall find me” (BG* 18:65, p. 172; cf. 9:34, p. 109).

Old Testament: “From there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Dt. 4:29 cf. Jer. 29:13). “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God” (Ps. 42:2; cf. Is. 26:9 cf. Prov. 3:6; Ps. 13:6)? New Testament: “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Mt. 7:7-8; cf. Mk. 11:24; Lk. 11:9-10; Jn. 15:7; 16:23; Rom. 10:13; 1 Jn. 3:22).

Accept God’s teachings and you will be free of evil. Indian: “Since you accept me and do not question, now I shall tell you that innermost secret: knowledge of God ... Understand this and be free forever from birth and dying with all their evil” (BG* 9:1, p. 100). Old Testament: “He who listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of evil” (Prov. 1:33).

Seek God to receive wisdom. Indian: “On those who are ever devoted to me and worship Me with love, I bestow the yoga of understanding, by which they come to Me” (BG 10:10). “Strive without ceasing to know the Atman, seek this

knowledge ... the roots of true wisdom” (BG* 13:11, p. 135). Old Testament: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Prov. 9:10; cf. 1:7; Ps. 111:10).

Easy to practice. Indian: “The greatest mystery of knowledge combined with realization ... it is easy to practice” (BG 9:1-2). New Testament: “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:30).

The *Sandilya Bhakti Sutras* (c. 200-900 A.D.) constitute one hundred aphorisms on the love of Brahman (God) (bhakti yoga). “Sandilya observes that honoring Him [God], honoring any thing or creature that evokes His remembrance, thrill of joy in meeting Him, pangs of separation, aversion to all things that are not associated with Him, constant singing of the glory of God, preservation of life for His sake, the consciousness that ‘I and everything that is mine are Thine,’ the consciousness that He is immanent in all things, and absence of hostility towards Him (i.e. not only not going against Him in thought and deed, but accepting everything that He does even if that costs one's life), are the marks of devotion.”¹

Scriptural knowledge and meritorious works are effective only if they are accompanied by sincere devotion according to Jiva Goswami (c. 1511-96) the great Bengal Vaishnavist. “Whatever benefits come from the performance of rituals or austerity, from knowledge or renunciation, through the practice of yoga, charity or virtue, or any other righteous means, my devotee attains them all without effort, through bhakti yoga [love of God] aimed at realizing me, whether it be heaven, liberation, my own abode, or whatever else he might desire” (Bhagavata 11:20.32-33).² The following characteristics of love (priti) for Bhagavat (God), as summarized by Jadunath Sinha were taught by Jiva Goswami. “(1) It is a mode of the essence of God's essential power of bliss. It is an intense mode of this power. This is its essential characteristic. (2) It is in the form of the cognition, which is in the nature of being favorable to God and full of yearning for Him.... (3) It spontaneously emerges from within the mind, and is self-manifest. (4) It fills the mind of a devotee with joy, because it is blissful in its own essential nature. It does not depend upon other conditions for its blissful nature and sweetness.... (5) It is not tainted by the desire for earthly or heavenly happiness and liberation. (6) It does not aim at any other end; it is an end in itself.... (7) Sweetness reaches its acme of excellence in love for God.... (8) Love for God is the abode of all virtues, because devotion destroys all vices.... (9) All covetable ends of life, wealth, happiness, virtue, and liberation, are handmaids of love for God.... (10) All the

actions of a devotee are directed toward love for God and service to Him. (11) Love for God produces only one desire to serve God and produce His pleasure ... Formalistic devotion purifies the mind, and when it is completely purged of its impurities, pure devotion or love is manifested in it.”³

The idea as expressed by Sri Ramakrishna is, “Cry to the Lord with an intensely yearning heart and you will see Him. People shed a whole jug of tears for wife and children. They swim in tears for money. But who weeps for God? Cry to Him with a real cry.... Love God even as the mother loves her child, the chaste wife her husband, and the worldly man his wealth. Add together these three forces of love, these three powers of attraction, and give it all to God. Then you will certainly see Him.... The bliss of worship and communion with God is the true wine, the wine of ecstatic love. The goal of human life is to love God.... There is another way: earnestly praying to God. God is our very own. We should say to Him: ‘O God, what is thy nature? Reveal Thyself to me. Thou must show Thyself to me; for why else hast Thou created me?’... To my Divine Mother I prayed only for pure love. I offered flowers at Her Lotus Feet and prayed to Her: ‘Mother, here is thy virtue, here is Thy vice. Take them both and grant me only pure love for Thee. Here is Thy knowledge, here is Thy ignorance. Take them both and grant” me only pure love for Thee.” “Yearning is all you need to realize God.”⁴ “Spit on public opinion! Look towards God and try to please him.”⁵

Ramakrishna practiced and advocated for others: mediation, worship, prayer, and japa; singing, bhajans and dancing kirtans; studying scriptures and discussing religious topics with others; keeping holy company, entering into solitude, going on pilgrimages, and serving Brahman-God in others.⁶ Refraining from drinking alcohol, smoking, and swearing are also recommended.

His disciple Swami Shivananda (1854-1934) writes, “A person cannot have supreme devotion and knowledge without God’s grace. The Lord is sure to grant the desire of one who sincerely yearns for devotion and knowledge.... Without devotion and faith, worship is meaningless.... Know it for certain that the ultimate goal of life is to see God. Keep your eyes always turned towards Him. This world is, after all, ephemeral: it lasts just for a few days. The only eternal reality is God. Live a very pure life. God reveals Himself to those hearts that are sincere and pure. Purity is the only basis of a spiritual life.”⁷ All that one has to do is to establish God in one’s heart by any means. Then, one need make no separate effort to build up a moral character. All such Divine qualities as truthfulness, kindness, love, etc. then come to one as a matter of course.... God is a lover of His devotees; He is satisfied

with love and devotion alone. He reveals Himself wherever there are yearning and love.”⁸

The third President of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Akhandananda (1866-1937) imparted this, “There is no other way. Call upon God with all your heart. Go on telling Him, 'Show Thyself to me. I do not want anything else. I do not want the happiness of Heaven. I want You. O Lord, bring my desires to an end.'... But you have to cry aloud earnestly and piteously, 'Appear before me, appear You must. To so many devotees You have appeared; why not me? You have declared that whoever shall weep for You, to him You will surely come. Then why are You not coming to me? Show Yourself to me.' Cry to Him with a heart full of yearning.”⁹

Abraham Maimonides (1186-1237) the son of Moses Maimonides was greatly influenced by Islamic Sufism in Egypt. His biographer Samuel Rosenblatt affirmed that for Maimonides the purpose of human life is to attain, “mystic union with God brought about by knowledge of God, love of Him, sight or meeting of God, being present before Him, beholding the light of certainty or tasting of His grace.... The goal has been reached when the heart is divested from aught but God both with respect to desire and will as also with regard to knowledge and gnosis, and when the soul is wrapt in the contemplation of the Divine essence. Then is man perfect. This result is brought about by severing as much as possible the connections with this world, the world of sense and matter which is an obstacle to this sort of perfection.... The end in view in perfecting the soul is to arrive at the highest kind of perfection attainable by man. This ‘perfection’ is further defined as a clinging to God, that is to say that the person’s thoughts are entirely wrapt up in God, and he is liberated from and forgets about everything else, which effect is brought about by man’s dedicating all his faculties to God, by his using his reason to acquire the knowledge that would aid him in comprehending God's existence and by sincerely loving God and being present before Him. For these reasons renouncing this world is equivalent with union with God. Again the ‘perfection’ is interpreted as denoting being near to God, meeting God, being seen by God, seeing God, knowing God, i.e. comprehending God's greatness—an excellence enduring in this world as well as the world to come—speaking to God in a prophetic vision, attaining the ‘spirit of holiness,’ and praising God while one is under its influence. The ‘perfection’ is also called bliss.”¹⁰

Thomas A’ Kempis (1380-1471) a German-Dutch mystics who authored *The Imitation of Christ*, stressed, “Put your whole trust in God; direct your worship and

love to Him alone. He will defend you, and will dispose all things for the best.... If your inner life were rightly ordered and your heart pure, all things would turn to your good and advantage.” “Love is a mighty power, a great and complete good; Love alone lightens every burden, and makes the rough places smooth. It bears every hardship as though it were nothing, and renders all bitterness sweet and acceptable. The love of Jesus is noble, and inspires us to great deeds; it moves us always to desire perfection. Love aspires to high things, and is held back by nothing base. Love longs to be free, a stranger to every worldly desire, lest its inner vision become dimmed, and lest worldly self-interest hinder it or ill fortune cast it down. Nothing is sweeter than love, nothing stronger, nothing higher, nothing wider, nothing more pleasant, nothing fuller or better in heaven or earth; for love is born of God, and can rest only in God, above all created things.... Deepen Your love in me, O Lord, that I may learn in my inmost heart how sweet it is to love, to be dissolved, and to plunge myself into Your love. Let Your love possess and raise me above myself, with a fervour and wonder beyond imagination. Let me sing the song of love. Let me follow You, my Beloved, into the heights. Let my soul spend itself in Your praise, rejoicing for love. Let me love You more than myself, and myself only for Your own sake. Let me love all men who truly love You.”¹¹

On this subject Fénelon (1651-1715) the French Archbishop stressed, “It is only in beholding and loving God that we can learn forgetfulness of self, measure duly the nothingness which has dazzled us, and accustom ourselves thankfully to decrease beneath that great Majesty which absorbs all things. Love God and you will be humble; love God and you will throw off the love of self; love God and you will love all that He gives you to love for love of Him.” “Ceasing from a restless self-contemplation, the soul begins to dwell upon God instead, and by degrees forgets itself in Him.”¹²

For Augustus Strong (1836-1921) the American Baptist, “The Scriptures declare that, through, the operation of God, there is constituted a union of the soul with Christ ... a union of life, in which the human spirit, while then most truly possessing its own individuality and personal distinctness, is interpenetrated and energized by the Spirit of Christ, is made inscrutably but indissolubly one with Him, and so becomes a member and partaker of that regenerated, believing, and justified humanity of which He is the head.... The believer is said to be in Christ. Christ is said to be in the believer. The Father and the Son dwell in the believer. The believer has life by partaking of Christ, as Christ has life by partaking of the Father. All believers are one in Christ. The believer is made partaker of the Divine nature. The

believer is made one in spirit with the Lord.... Positively—It is: An organic union—in which we become members of Christ and partakers of his humanity. A vital union—in which Christ's life becomes the dominating principle within us. A spiritual union—that is, a union whose source and author is the Holy Spirit. An indissoluble union—that is, a union which, consistently with Christ's promise and grace, can never be dissolved. An inscrutable union—mystical, however, only in the sense of surpassing in its intimacy and value any other union of souls which we know.... Union with Christ involves a change in the dominant affection of the soul. Christ's entrance into the soul makes it a new creature, in the sense that the ruling disposition, which before was sinful, now becomes holy. This change we call Regeneration. Union with Christ involves a new exercise of the soul's powers in repentance and faith; faith, indeed, is the act of the soul by which, under the operation of God, Christ is received. This new exercise of the soul's powers we call Conversion (Repentance and Faith). It is the obverse or human side of Regeneration.”¹³ For more on this subject see: *Swami Vivekananda on Religious, Ethical, and Psychological Practices*, Ch. II. Striving to Realize Brahman-God, Section 3. Love and Worship Brahman-God.

Traditional Hinduism describes the four goals of human life (Purusartha) in ascending order: kama (desires, pleasure), artha (wealth, success), dharma (right way of living), and moksha (liberation, salvation). The father of the existential philosophical movement, Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55) from Denmark taught a dialectical progression of three existential stages of life or levels of consciousness that bears some resemblance to the Indian conception. They are not abstract, but concrete levels of internal and external existence. For Kierkegaard stage one is aesthetic characterized by immersion in sensuous desires (kama) egotism, impulses, and emotion. In order to transform boredom and dullness into happy life the individual uses deception, sarcasm, cynicism, and willful imagination to recreate the world in his/her own image. The second level of existence is that of ethical life (dharma), becoming aware of and taking responsibility for ones actions and forming a moral commitment to oneself and others. Ones actions are to be in accordance with socially prescribed norms, rules that are universally applicable to moral agents. In the higher religious stage, good and evil is ultimately dependent on obeying Divine commands as a matter of religious faith. Living in the religious sphere involves a commitment and relation to a Personal God. We accept God's forgiveness through faith, sincerely, inwardly, contritely, with gratitude and hope,

opening ourselves to the joyous prospect of beginning anew. In Hegel's dialectic, when contradictory positions are reconciled in a higher unity (synthesis) they are both annulled and preserved. Similarly with Kierkegaard the aesthetic and the ethical are both annulled and preserved in their synthesis in the religious stage (moksha). A religious person is involved in aesthetic enjoyment and ethical duty.¹⁴

Bhakti (Devotion for Brahman-God) is the most widely practiced form of religious practice, universally found in every major faith. As a religious encounter it occurs on the personal, experiential, and mystical level. It has the potentiality to ontologically lead to the higher Reality, which is perceived as a heavenly existence of selves, forms, bodies, and relationships. Through the practice of bhakti, the devotee gains a sense of personal identity. By partaking of the various ways of expressing love, it takes on many forms. It is subsequently transfigured into scriptural wisdom by an Avatar (Divine Incarnation), books of religious practices, and sometimes into myth or poetry.¹⁵

By contrast in developmental psychology since 1950, many thinkers regard dharma (broadly defined) as the highest stage in human development. These writers consider the meaning of life to be the secular goal of adaptation and reconciliation with this world and not the more ambitious broader spiritual objective of finding God and realizing the divinity within that Ramakrishna emphasizes. This is a radical perspective since these goals are to be attained in this lifetime, not waiting for a post-mortem existence. The following five psychologists offer three to nine stages of psychosocial development that occur over a lifetime. According to them the highest stages are:

Of the three main cultural types the preferred one is being an inner-directed person with self-confidence who lives and acts according to the potential they discover within themselves rather than by norms imposed by others (David Riesman, et. al).

Of the eight stages of psychosocial development the highest occurs in late adulthood when one reflects back on their life and feels a sense of satisfaction, ego integrity, accomplishment, and productivity (Erik Erikson).

The six and final post-conventional moral level of development involves following universal ethical principles. Emphasis is on commitment to human rights, justice and equality with it an obligation to disobey unjust laws. One's own ethical principles and set of moral guidelines may take precedence over society's view even if that means paying a penalty (Lawrence Kohlberg).

The ninth and highest stage of development is rarely attained that of the Integrated Ego with a full sense of identity, wisdom, empathy toward oneself and others, accepting one's destiny, and making peace with inner conflicts (Jane Loevinger).

The third and highest stage of happiness and personal joy (after pleasure and engagement) is a life of meaning and purpose. It includes belonging to and serving something much larger than one's own life. It is fulfilled through selfless altruism, acts of kindness, loving someone, and being loved in return (Martin Seligman).¹⁶ There are also transpersonal psychologists like Abraham Maslow and Ken Wilber who are aware of the higher goals of life.

For Ramakrishna also the lower states are not abandoned but are sublimated to become part of the higher stage. In the state of moksha the devotee redirects their desires (kama), actions (artha), and morality (dharma) to the religious realm. "If you must feel desire and temptation, then desire to realize God, feel tempted by Him." "I have the desire for bhakti. That is not bad. Rather it is good." "If he has bhakti and the desire to know God, then he will attain Him through the force of sheer bhakti."¹⁷ "If these activities are done in a selfless spirit they will lead to God." Dharma involves action (artha). "Dharma means religious acts enjoyed by the scriptures, such as charity, shraddha, feeding the poor, and the like." "Dharma means good actions, like giving in charity."¹⁸

2. Image Worship

As expressed by Rupa Goswami (1489-1564) and the Chaitanya School of Bengal Vaishnavism and explained by Jadunath Sinha (1894-1978) a Professor of Indian Philosophy, "An Image of God being identical with the nature of God, and being made of infinite consciousness and bliss is another great spiritual discovery. Many Hindu saints worshipped an Image (vigraha), not as a symbol, but as God Himself, and realized the Divine. To worship an Image is to treat the Divine as a near and dear one. Think of God as near, and He will come near. Think of God as far, and He will go farther from you. Chaitanya realized 'Krishna' in the Image of Jagannatha at Puri. He gazed at it for hours, and shed profuse tears. Surely, he gazed at an Image made of consciousness-bliss."¹⁹

Sri Ramakrishna reached perfection through image worship, realizing its true meaning and significance. He affirmed that image worship is useful for

concentrating the mind on the form of the Lord. You should realize there is a Divine presence in the consecrated image that is made of Spirit. “As you recall your father by his photograph, so likewise the worship of the image reveals in a flash the nature of the Reality.”²⁰ “If a worshipper is convinced that the images of the Deity in the shape of various Gods and Goddesses are verily Divine, he reaches God by their worship.... If there is anything wrong in performing image-worship, does He not know that all worship is meant for Him? He will surely be pleased to accept the worship, knowing that it is meant for Him alone. Love God; that is the duty nearest to you. When one sees God, one realizes that everything, images and all, is a manifestation of the Spirit. To him the image is not made of clay but of Spirit.” “Whatever you offer to the Lord is returned to you, magnified manifold. Take care, therefore, that you do not offer anything bad to Him.” “Suppose there is an error in worshiping the clay image; doesn’t God know that through it He alone is being invoked? He will be pleased with that very worship.”²¹

His nephew Ramlal reveals, “If anyone would meditate or close his eyes while repeating his mantra inside the Kali temple, the Master [Ramakrishna] would tell him: ‘What are you doing? You are seated here in front of the living Mother. Look at Her to your heart's content. Practice those spiritual disciplines elsewhere, where you cannot get this direct experience. Suppose you have gone home to visit your mother. Would you sit before her with closed eyes and repeat her name?’”²²

In his writings Swami Abhedananda (1866-1939) emphasized, “The people of India are condemned as idolaters and their religion is called idolatry because they use symbols and images at the time of devotional exercises. Are not the worshippers in other religions idolaters in the same sense?... It is not God, but a symbol of God.... If it be true that we can neither read, nor write, nor speak, nor think without symbols, then we ask, would it be possible for us to worship or pray to the unknown Being except through symbols? No, it would be impossible. All religions and all philosophies are but the symbols of the Divine principle, the embodiment of abstract thoughts clothed with the garment of poetic language.... Can the limited human mind approach the infinite Being or think of His infinite powers, inexhaustible goodness, without forming a mental picture, which must be limited by its capacity, and by its power of comprehension? The Supreme Being who is the object of worship and devotion in all religions is infinitely greater than our highest conception of Him.... And if any one of us, however enlightened or advanced he may be, wishes to concentrate or meditate upon any of these Divine attributes, he will have to start from one of these imperfect pictures, images, or

symbols, either mental or concrete.”²³ “Some cannot concentrate their minds upon abstract ideals, cannot worship the absolute Spirit except through concrete forms and symbols. It is perfectly natural. Because our minds receive deeper impressions from concrete tangible objects.” In Hindu ritual the altar is a symbol of the heart, candlelight of the light of the intellect, flowers of good and pure thoughts, and the fruits of our actions.²⁴

From a practical standpoint Swami Prabhavananda (1893-1976) head of the Vedanta Society in Southern California explained, “Ritualistic worship is a great aid in fixing one’s mind and heart in God. If one learns the ritualism of the Hindus, one can find in it a practical way to learn through devotion to see God or Brahman.”²⁵ “The Hindu ritual which corresponds most nearly to the Mass or Lord's Supper is extremely elaborate, and its performance requires almost unbroken attention. For this reason, it is an excellent training for the wandering mind of the beginner. Each successive act recalls the mind to the thought behind the act. You are too busy to think of anything else. Thought and action, action and thought, form a continuous chain; and it is amazing to find what a comparatively high degree of concentration you can achieve, even from the very first. Also, ritual gives you a sense of serving God in a humble, but very direct and intimate, manner.... if [a devotee] is asked to worship God with flowers, incense, and other accessories of the ritualistic worship, his mind will gradually become concentrated on God, and he will find joy in his worship.”²⁶

The seven major aspects of Indian ritual are: a) Preparation requires gathering of items need for the worship. b) External purification of bathing and washed clothing, cleaning articles and the place of worship, purifying the ground, seat, and hands, use of flowers removing terrestrial and celestial obstacles, saluting the holy teacher, and purifying the deity and articles of worship. c) Internal purification consists in regulating the breath and destroying negative thoughts and forces by concrete imagery. d) Divinization by affirming one's unity with the Divine and invoking the Divine within the heart by mental worship. e) Invocation of the Divine into the image. f) Service to the Deity as an honored guest through elaborate worship by offering water to wash the feet to rinse the mouth and hands, and bathing; and offering the Lord perfume, flowers, garlands, sacred leaves, incense, candles, clothing, ornaments, food, and other gifts. g) Conclusion by prayer and surrendering the fruits of the worship to the Lord.

The Syrian John of Damascus (675-749) defined an image as “a likeness, an illustration, and a representation of something, showing forth in itself that which is imaged.... a likeness that characterizes the prototype in such a way that it also maintains some distinction from it.... They lead us through matter to the God who is beyond matter.... Perhaps you are sublime and able to transcend what is material ... but I, since I am a human being and bear a body, want to deal with holy things and behold them in a bodily manner.”²⁷ Latria is a form of worship that should be rendered only to God. Veneration or reverence (later called *dulia*) may be bestowed on the images of the Mother of God and the saints. Veneration is directed to what the image symbolizes and not to the wood or the paint. The American scholar Jaroslav Pelikan (1923-2006) from Yale University explains John’s position, “The prohibition of images and likenesses was based on the absence of any ‘form on the day that the Lord spoke’ in the *Old Testament*. But now, with the incarnation of the Divine Logos in Jesus Christ, the situation had changed and there was a likeness of God available; therefore the prohibition was superseded,” so the *Old Testament* prohibition against images was no longer valid. There is a definite need to have the divinity symbolized by images, as a visible mean through which to properly glorify God. Images function to remind the believers of the events of Jesus’ life and motivate them to perform good acts. Grace is communicated to the individual through the image that is being worshiped.²⁸

John A. Hardon (1914-2000) S.J. informs us, “The ecumenical Council Nicea II (787) defined the Catholic doctrine by stating that the veneration of images of ‘our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, of our unstained Lady the holy Mother of God, of the honorable angels, of all the saints and saintly persons’ is not only pleasing to God but highly commendable to the practice of the faithful. By such veneration, the people are more readily inspired to preserve the memory of the ancients and desire to be like them. Nevertheless, the respect and honor the people pay to them is not the absolute adoration that according to faith may be given only to the Divine nature.” According to the Council legitimate objects of Catholic worship include, “precious and lifelike figures of the cross, the holy Gospels, sacred relics and monuments, the use of incense and lights.... the person who venerates an image venerates the living reality whom the image depicts.” A distinction must be made between worship (*latria*) that is offered to God alone, and reverence or veneration that is rendered to images of angels and saints (*dulia*).²⁹

For more on this subject see: *Swami Vivekananda on Religious, Ethical, and Psychological Practices*, Ch. I. Yogic Practices, Meditation, and Prayer, Section 7.

Image Worship.

3. Meditation and Prayer

Indian: “Be devoted to Brahman. Meditate on him unceasingly” (Kai. Up* 2, p. 207). “Turn the senses and the mind inward to the lotus of the heart. Meditate on Brahman” (Svet. Up.* 2:8; cf. BG 13:24). “Without meditation, where is peace? Without peace, where is happiness” (BG* 2:66, p. 49)? “Fixing their minds in Him, at one with Him, abiding in Him, realizing Him alone as the Supreme Goal” (BG 5:17). Therefore you must remember me at all times, and do your duty. If your mind and heart are set upon me constantly, you will come to me” (BG* 8:7, p. 95; cf. 3:12; 6:12; Kat. Up. 2:2.1; Svet. Up. 2:10). “I [Lord Krishna] am easy of access to that ever steadfast yogi who, O Parthia, constantly meditates on Me” (BG 8:14; 10:17; 12:8-9, 14; Mun. Up. 3:1.8; Tait. Up. 3:10.4).

Old Testament: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight” (Ps. 19:14). New Testament: “I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also” (1 Cor. 14:15; cf. Jude 20). “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you” (Col. 1:3). “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving; and pray for us also” (Col. 4:2-3; cf. 2 Thes. 1:11). “Pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thes. 5:17-18; cf. Mt. 5:44; Rom. 12:12; Eph. 6:18).

Pray in Solitude. Indian: “Practice austerity and meditation in solitude” (Mun. Up.* 1:2.11). “A yogi should try to concentrate his mind, retiring into solitude and living alone” (BG 6:10). New Testament: “When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Mt. 6:6).

On this subject Sri Ramakrishna taught, “Throwing away all work, you must meditate upon God in the evening. The thought of God naturally comes to the mind at dusk.... Deep meditation brings out the real nature of the object of meditation, and infuses it into the soul of the meditator.... Do you know when a man becomes perfect in meditation? When, on sitting down to meditate, he becomes immediately surrounded with Divine atmosphere and his soul communes with God.... There comes deep concentration in meditation: when nothing else can be seen or heard. Even perceptions and feelings disappear. A snake may crawl over the body, but one does not feel it. Neither the person meditating nor the snake feels it.... The secret

is that the union with God (Yoga) can never happen unless the mind is rendered absolutely calm, whatever be the path you follow for God-realisation. The mind is always under the control of the Yogi, and not the Yogi under the control of his mind.”³⁰ “By meditating on God in solitude the mind acquires knowledge, dispassion, and devotion.” “In meditation one must be absorbed in God. By merely floating on the surface of the water, can you reach the gems at the bottom of the sea?”³¹ A person falls from spiritual life if they do not practice meditation regularly.³² “Unless the mind becomes steady there cannot be yoga. It is the wind of worldliness that always disturbs the mind, which may be likened to a candle-flame. If that flame does not move at all, then one is said to have attained yoga.” “If you meditate on an ideal you will acquire its nature. If you think of God day and night, you will acquire the nature of God.”³³

He continues, “Pray to Him in any way you like. He is always sure to hear you. He can hear the footfall of an ant.” Have faith that you will realize God by His grace. Ask for love, devotion and self-surrender, and not for worldly possessions. “Pray with a sincere and simple heart, and your prayers will be heard.... God is extremely attentive my boys. He has heard every time you have prayed to Him. He will surely reveal Himself to you some day or other, at least at the time of death.” “God dwells within us. If one knows that, one feels like giving up all activities and praying to God with a yearning soul.” Food that has not been eaten should first be offered to the Lord.³⁴ “When you sing any song about a particular God or goddess, first visualize that the deity is in front of you, and then think you are singing for him or her and forget yourself.” He would tell his disciples to lie flat on their back at nighttime and visualize the Mother in their hearts when they fell to sleep. And then they would have spiritual dreams.³⁵

A central message of Ramakrishna is that as many people as possible should meditate, discriminate, and seek a religious awakening. This applies not to a few elite mystics, but to the mass of people. This is something radically new particularly in the West. A large number of people meditating on a daily basis is certainly for the benefit of society and could bring about a major transformation in the social order.

In the words of Swami Shivananda, “If you practice japa and meditation regularly, without break for some years, you will see for yourself what result comes to pass. Your mind will become pure and you will be absorbed in the thought of God. Then you will be reluctant to leave off meditation even for a single day. There will come an inner tranquility which will fill your heart with joy.”³⁶ “It is through

constant devotion and meditation that God becomes gracious and reveals Himself in the heart of the devotee. What is needed is meditation—constant remembrance of Him.”³⁷

Swami Premananda (1861-1918) provides this wonderful advice, “God is the inner ruler; he sees and knows everything. Pray and tell him all your wants with a guileless and sincere mind. He is more yours than you yourself. He will certainly listen to your prayers.... Pray: 'Whatever I maybe, Lord, Thou hast to accept me as I am, for whom else do I have? Lord, I am thine, and Thou art mine.' Know that we are eternally related to him.... Call upon the Lord, and he will take away all falsity from the heart and give you the strength to hold on to truth. But you must exert yourself. Let your prayer arise from the heart; then alone you will get the answer.... Pray to the all-knowing, omnipotent Lord, and all weakness will fly away. Blessed will be your life and you will find joy.... God dwells in every being, and He knows the innermost thoughts of all. Pray to Him with your whole heart, weep before him. He is the one who can direct your mind toward the path of good, He is the one to give you the strength to follow the path. If you vow to yourself that you will follow the path of righteousness, you will be able to do so by the grace of the Lord. But pray to Him day and night, weep before Him; you will gain strength and you will attain devotion. He is the ocean of mercy, He is full of compassion and He is the embodiment of forgiveness. Remember sincerity counts before Him—not hypocrisy, nor a show of piety.... Be pure and sincere. Pray from your heart: 'Lord, have mercy upon me, have mercy upon me.' The supremely merciful Lord will give you strength, faith, and confidence. Call from the very bottom of your heart, and He will certainly hear and respond.... Weep and pray: 'Merciful Mother, be gracious to me and show Yourself to me. Open the path to me. I am devoid of austerity, devoid of devotion. I am your weak child. Save me, save me'.... Pray to God for spiritual treasures, such as devotion, knowledge, power of discrimination, dispassion, and so forth.”³⁸

This subject has been profoundly discussed by Swami Brahmananda (1863-1922) the first President of the Ramakrishna Order. “In beginning the mind will refuse to come under control, but force it, urge it, entreat it in order to fix it on meditation. Faith and regularity are very important; nobody can succeed in anything without them.... Perhaps now you do not enjoy meditating, but as you form the habit you will come to the point where you will actually feel unhappy if you do not meditate. When you reach this stage, you will know that you have advanced along the spiritual path.... You must have certain fixed hours for meditation and study. Under all circumstances follow this routine devotedly. Steadfastness is very

important; without it no success is possible.... Set apart a room or some place for daily worship; retire there every morning and evening. Perform japam and meditation and prayer regularly for as long as you can. The more you devote yourself to the contemplation of God, the more fruitful your life will become.... Meditation can be practiced in both centres (brain or heart). I would advise you at first, however, to meditate in the heart. By heart, I do not mean the anatomical heart. Think of the spiritual centre situated near the heart. In the beginning, as you think of God within the body, you will think of your flesh and blood. But soon you will forget the body and there will only remain the blissful form of the Chosen Ideal [Ishta Devata, that aspect of the Deity that you worship].”³⁹

Brahmananda continues, “Pray to the Lord with all your heart! Then alone you will long for Him.... We must pray; we must cry unto God that he may awaken in us longing for him and that our cravings for enjoyment may be wiped out. Pray: 'O Lord of the Universe, reveal your grace to me! I am helpless. I have no shelter but you. You are the only refuge of the weak. Give me strength to remember you always.' If one can really surrender oneself to God, then everything becomes easy; but it is not so easy to do this. Without Divine grace it is not possible to take refuge in God. And in order to feel this grace one must associate with holy men, read sacred books, and pray earnestly.... Pray to the Lord with a yearning heart. Tell him freely that you desire him alone. Do not doubt that he exists. Those who are meek and lowly are soon blessed with his vision. If you approach him with devotion, he will surely reveal Himself. Do not feel shy because you have made mistakes or have not called on him for a long time. He is the very embodiment of compassion. He does not care about your faults. Go to Him with the simplicity of a child, and He will receive you.”⁴⁰ “Surrender yourself wholeheartedly to God. Take refuge in Him. Pray constantly with a pure, sincere heart: 'O Lord, I do not know what is good and what is bad for me. I am entirely dependent on you. Grant me what I most need for the spiritual life. Take me along the path which will lead me to the greatest good. Give me the faith and strength constantly to remember you and meditate on you'.... We judge men by their actions, but God looks into their innermost minds. Be sure of this: God runs to him who prays with a sincere heart.... Whatever you do, whether you are sitting or lying down, or eating, or working, pray constantly: 'O Lord, make me able to understand and receive that grace which I know you are ready to give me.'”⁴¹ “Think of Him as your very own. Pray to Him, 'Lord, reveal yourself to me!' God cannot remain unmoved by the pleas of such a devotee. He hastens to him and takes him in His arms. Oh, how inexpressible is that

joy! How boundless that bliss! Only He can know who has had that experience, compared to which all worldly pleasures seem insipid and worthless.... Pray to him: 'Reveal your grace to me. Give me faith and devotion.' Pray earnestly. Make your mind and your lips one.... God's grace is supreme; without it nothing is achieved. Pray to him unceasingly for His grace. Prayer is efficacious. He lovingly hears your prayers."⁴²

Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) indicated, "Man shows reverence to God by means of prayer, in so far as he subjects himself to Him, and by praying confesses that he needs Him."⁴³ God may deny our prayers, "For the physician knows better that the sick man what is good for disease.... Certain things are not denied us, but are deferred that they may be granted at a suitable time."⁴⁴ Pray with holy desires asking for things that are conducive to attaining salvation, because the kingdom of God is to be sought first and temporal goods secondly. "For we pray, not that we may change the Divine disposition, but that we may impetrate [request] that which God has disposed to be fulfilled by our prayers, in other words that by asking, men may deserve to receive what Almighty God from eternity has disposed to give."⁴⁵ "Now the moral virtues curb the impetuosity of the passions and quell the disturbance of outward occupations. Hence moral virtues belong to the contemplative life as a predisposition."⁴⁶

A Benedictine mystic in England, Fr. Augustine Baker (1575-1641) wrote, "Prayer here specially meant is an offering and giving to God whatsoever He may justly require from us. Now prayer, in its general notion, may be defined to be an elevation of the mind to God, or more largely and expressly thus: prayer is an actuation of an intellectual soul towards God, expressing, or at least implying, an entire dependence on Him as the author and fountain of all good, a will and readiness to give Him his due, which is no less than all love, all obedience, adoration, glory and worship, by humbling and annihilating the self and all creatures in His presence; and lastly, a desire and intention to aspire to a union of spirit with Him. Hence it appears that prayer is the most perfect and most Divine action that a rational soul is capable of. It is of all actions and duties the most indispensably necessary."⁴⁷

Ramakrishna taught and practiced the metaphysics of immediate experience and feeling which is self-authenticating. Brahman-God realization is a direct non-abstract involvement in the spiritual world. A(lfred) E(dward) Taylor (1869-1945) of Oxford University stressed the importance of the immediate rather than an

abstract apprehension of reality. “All the material or reality of data consists of experience, experience being provisionally taken to mean psychical matter of fact, what is given in immediate feeling.... The real is experience, and nothing but experience, and experience consists of ‘psychical matters of fact’.... A completely adequate apprehension of reality would.... be all-embracing; it would include in itself every datum of direct experience, and since nothing but of experience, or as we have also called them, matters of psychical fact, are the materials of reality, it would contain nothing else.... It would, because complete in itself, involve at a higher level that immediacy which, at a lower level, we know as characteristic of feelings. It would thus experience the whole of real existence directly as a system with internal consistency and structure, but without any reference to anything beyond itself.... Actual life, as we have already learned is always a concrete unity of feeling in which the two distinguishable aspects of psychical fact, its existence and its contents, the that and the what, though distinguishable, are inseparable. A scientific reflection on the given we found to be always abstract, in the sense that its very essence is the mental separation of the content from the process. By such separation we mediately get to know the character of the separated content better, but our knowledge, with all its fullness, still remains abstract; it is still knowledge referring to and about an object outside itself. It is only when, as a result of the reflective process, we find fresh meaning in the individual process-content on its recurrence that we return once more to the concrete actuality of real existence.... reality is to be found in what is immediately experienced, as opposed to what is severed by subsequent reflective analysis from its union with feeling.”⁴⁸

The French philosopher Henri Bergson’s (1859-1941) description of intuition gives us a better understanding of the methodology of direct perception of the Divine world as taught by Sri Ramakrishna. For Bergson intuition is personal, internal, absolute, dynamic, concrete, and particular. Conversely, intellectual knowledge is impersonal, external, relative, static, abstract, and general. He wrote, by intuition “one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible.” This is the true empiricism. Through intuition we gain a special kind of immediate, direct, self-evident, non-symbolic knowledge of the nature of an object. We identify with the object through imagination and enter into it. When we intuit an object we identify ourselves with it, empathize with it. It yields its innermost nature, a total response to a total reality. This faculty probes into the inner depths of a private tangible actuality. To intuit

something is to know its individuality and uniqueness in a unitary sense. The object is experienced in its completeness, grasping the original reality. Metaphysics intuition is knowledge of reality in its ultimate living sense, of the dynamic character of a continually changing object. Feeling is more than a subjective experience, but what results from the merging of our inner self with the object. By intuition alone, certainty and indubitably are attained. It is the reversal of the ordinary method of thinking. One can pass from intuition to intellectual knowledge but not vice versa. Only after having this experience can intuition be translated into symbolic language and intellectual concepts.

Conversely, reason and intellect yield relative knowledge concerning abstractions, concepts; and symbolic, discursive, mediate knowledge of a limited aspect of a thing. Analytic thinking focuses in on a property common to all members of a class or kind. Analysis breaks up the object of knowledge from its total living situation into aspects or elements, each defined by an abstract concept. Once divided its unity is not recovered. This synthesis never gives us the thing itself; it only gives us a general concept of things. This process involves taking sides and argumentation.⁴⁹

In 1913, Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) an English writer assisted Nobel Prize winning author Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) in compiling and translating *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (1914-15, later called *Songs of Kabir*), and authored a scholarly eighteen-page Introduction to the book. In the same year she also wrote the introduction for *The Autobiography of Devendranath Tagore*.⁵⁰ In her classic book on comparative mysticism Underhill summarized the meaning of mystical prayer or orison. "It is, says 'The Mirror of St. Edmund,' 'naught else but yearning of soul.'—the expression of man's metaphysical thirst. In it, says Grou, 'the soul is united to God in its ground, the created intelligence to the Intelligence Increate, without the intervention of imagination or reason, or of anything but a very simple attention of the mind and an equally simple application of the will.' On the psychological side, its development involves a steady discipline of the mystic's rich subliminal mind, slowly preparing the channels in which the deeper consciousness is to flow. This discipline reduces to some sort of order, makes effective for life, those involuntary states of passivity, rapture and intuition which are the characteristic ways in which an uncontrolled, uncultivated genius for the Absolute breaks out. To the subject himself, however, his orison [prayer] seems rather a free and mutual act of love; a supernatural intercourse between the soul and the Divine, or some aspect of the Divine, sometimes full of light and joy, sometimes dark and

bare. In some of its degrees it is a placid, trustful waiting upon messages from without. In others, it is an inarticulate communion, a wordless rapture, a silent gazing upon God. The mystics have exhausted all the resources of all tongues in their efforts to tell us of the rewards which await those who will undertake this most sublime and difficult of arts.... The true end of orison, like the true end of that mystical life within which it flowers, is the supreme meeting between Lover and Beloved, between God and the soul.”⁵¹

According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Prayer in a broad sense is raising-the mind to God.... an act of acknowledgment of one's insufficiency and dependence on God. Furthermore, prayer is not selfishness since one seeks the object of prayer with humble submission to God's will and in obedience to His command (Lk. 11:9-13). Finally, man cannot attain salvation without graces from God, and many of these according to Divine providence are granted only in answer to prayer ... prayer moves God to show mercy. The psychological-moral value of prayer is a particular spiritual refreshment: prayer furnishes the intellect with religious knowledge; produces in the will sentiments of admiration, respect, fear, joy, and desire for God; and makes the virtues of faith, hope, and charity more vital and dynamic in a person's life.” A prayer may be uttered in private or communally by the presiding minister and the entire congregation (liturgical prayer).⁵²

In the words of John Lawson (1909-2003) a British theologian, “God certainly does not ‘break’ those fixed and reliable laws of nature which are themselves an expression of His being, His intelligent mind is in control of the universe, and He can ‘work through’ the laws of nature to accomplish His sovereign will.... And if He indeed be a God of love who is near to man in tender sympathy and compassion, it is the natural and proper impulse of His children to make all their requests known to Him. A denial of the rationality and efficacy of intercessory prayer is in fact a veiled denial of the God of sovereign power and loving providence.”⁵³ Prayer is beneficial for the reason that it makes the individual dependent on God, and it increases their faith in the Lord’s response to their need. A pious adherent should pray for increased love and faith, and for the conversion of nonbelievers.⁵⁴

Mediation provides the method to attain goodness, to work directly on the subtle forces of the mind. Practicing meditation which is a practical way of life yields the following results:

1) Powerfulness: A feeling of possessing power and the ability and confidence to attain one’s potential and desired goals.

- 2) Meaning: Life has a sense of meaning, value, and purpose.
- 3) Happiness: One feels fully alive, inner peace and joy often for no significant external reason.
- 4) Morality: One naturally follows the moral law and social norms of society without effort.
- 5) Intelligence: A sharpness of the mind gradually develops in a creative understanding of things.
- 6) Relationships: Meaningful and healthy social relationships are developed with other people.
- 7) Self-realization: A feeling of self-discovery, reflection, acceptance, and exploration.
- 8) Autonomy: Being free from reliance on external authorities or other people.⁵⁵ Being separated from Brahman-God produces the opposite results.

When a person has a spiritual experience they often feel a sense of joy. A major obstacle is that they then project this feeling of elation not on the Divine realm but on some worldly experiences in their memory, which they idealize. Instead of thinking of the Divine they concentrate their mind on a secular event or person that they associate with this joy.

4. Utter the Name of the Lord

Indian: “Meditate on Brahman with the help of the syllable OM [AUM]. Cross the fearful currents of the ocean of worldliness by means of the raft of Brahman-the sacred syllable OM” (Svet. Up.* 2:8). “Uttering the sacred syllable OM and meditating upon me. Such a man reaches the highest goal” (BG* 8:13; cf. Tait. Up. 1:8).

Old Testament: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Dt. 6:4-9). “Sing the glory of his name” (Ps. 66.2: cf. 5:11; 34:3; Rom. 10:13). New Testament: “When you pray, say: ‘Father, hallowed be thy name’” (Lk. 11:2). “For, every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will

be saved” (Rom. 10:13). “Therefore I will praise thee among the Gentiles, and sing to thy name” (Rom. 15:9).

The Name of God. Old Testament references are so numerous; the citations given below are limited to the book of Psalms. The Lords name is to be: praised (Ps. 7:17; 9:2; 18:49; 61:8; 68:4; etc.), trusted in (Ps. 33:21), exalted (Ps. 34:3), revered (Ps. 61:5; 86:11; 102:15; 111:10), called upon (Ps. 80:18; 99:6; 105:1; 116:13, 17), sought (Ps. 83:16), given thanks to (Ps. 106:47; 122:4; 140:13), remembered (Ps. 119:55), and loved (Ps. 119:132). The Lords name is: a protector of people (Ps. 20:1), full of glory and to be glorified (Ps. 29:2; 66:2; 72:19; 86:9, 12; etc.), holy (Ps. 33:21; 103:1; 111:9; 145:21), good (Ps. 54:6), eternal (Ps. 72:17; 135:13), blessed and to be blest (Ps. 72:19; 96:2; 100:4; 113:2; 145:1, 21), a bringer of salvation (Ps. 79:9), a forgiver of sin (Ps. 79:9), great (Ps. 99:3), our helper (Ps. 124:8), and exalted (Ps. 148:13). In the New Testament demons were cast out by the power of his name (Mk. 9:38; Lk. 9:49), which is hallowed (Mt. 6:9; Lk. 11:2). Jesus will do what you ask in his name (Jn. 14:13-14). The name of the Lord Jesus Christ should be: called upon (1 Cor. 1:2), glorified in you (2 Thes. 1:12), not blasphemed (Jam. 2:7) and believed in (1 Jn. 3:23). In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we: are sanctified and justified by (1 Cor. 6:11), should bow our knee (Phil. 2:10), and speak all words and perform all deeds (Col. 3:17).

Jiva Goswami emphasized that the holy name of God possesses all of the qualities of the Lord. It can be considered as an incarnation of the Lord in a nonbodily form of letters or sounds (Varna Avatar). In the spiritual realm the name, form and attributes of Bhagavat (God) are not separate. There is no difference between Bhagavat and His name, both are of the nature of Existence, Consciousness, and Bliss (Sat-Chit-Ananda). The Lord’s name expressed by the mantra is charged with spiritual power given to it by the guru. “All persons are transformed when they are initiated in mantras by worthy Masters.” A mantra is identical with God, since His name and form are one. It is recommended that a devotee should repeatedly recite the name of the Lord for a long period of time. “Chant the name of God in all conditions, while sitting or walking, waking or sleeping.” Chanting may be audible, inaudible, or mental and performed under all conditions.⁵⁶ “The names, qualities and actions of God being repeatedly uttered in the company of devotees quickly generate faith, attachment, and devotion.” “The

chanting of God's actions with faith produces the manifestation of God in the heart in a short time." When Bhagavat graciously manifests through His holy name, it arouses an intuitive experience of love for the Lord in the worshiper. This practice awakens innate spiritual strength in the worshiper; and leads to intense delight, the removal of sin and negative mental impression on the mind, and liberation if it is recited at the moment of death. "Chanting God's name purifies a person more than the vows and other means which are prescribed for the atonement of sins. It also makes the chanter experience God's qualities." It "generates dispassion for all other objects, fills one's heart with joy in meditating upon him, and destroys one's miseries."⁵⁷ Following Jiva Goswami's logic the name of Bhagavat is itself an incarnation of the Lord in a sonic nonbodily form, which he believed is as real as his physical form (Varna Avatar).

Sri Ramakrishna's instructions are, "Take His 'name' constantly. This will cleanse all sin, lust, anger and all desire for the pleasures of the body will vanish. Then pray with a yearning heart that, He may teach you to relish His 'name.' Undoubtedly He will grant your prayer.... if you daily feel a greater attraction for taking His 'name' and a greater joy in it, you need fear no more. The delirium must get cured, and His grace will surely descend on you. Why, is the 'name' insignificant? He and His 'name' are not different.... "Sing with Bhakti [devotion] the hallowed 'name' of the Lord, and the mountain of your sin will vanish, just as a mountain of cotton will burn to ashes and disappear if but a spark of fire fall on it.... Japa means repeating the 'name' of the Lord silently, sitting in a quiet place. If one continues the repetition with concentration and devotion, one is sure to be blessed with Divine vision ultimately--one is sure to have God-realization."⁵⁸ Holy Mother repeated her mantra 100,000 times daily.

Swami Shivananda recommended that with sincere devotion an aspirant should utter the name of Brahman-God with love. "Repeat the name often. The repetition of his name will purify your body and mind, washing away all impurities." "When one goes on repeating the name of the Chosen Deity with intense love, one becomes gradually filled with an ineffable bliss." A mantra consists of a mystical symbol of the name of the Lord. When the "mantra comes out of the mouth of a perfected guru, it becomes impregnated with a new power.... The guru makes the mantra come alive by his own spiritual energy; and he rouses the coiled-up energy of the disciple."⁵⁹ "When this becomes a firm habit, it will continue even during sleep and generate a current of joy in the mind.... You should sit for japa with steadfastness at least twice a day—morning and evening—and repeat the mantra for a definite

number of times. It should not be less than a thousand each time in your case.” “To repeat the name of the Lord over the rosary is good; repetition of the name on the fingers is better, but mental repetition of the name is the very best.” “The repetition of the Lord’s name must be practiced very secretly so that no one knows anything about it.” “As you repeat the mantra of a Chosen Deity, think of His form as well; thus you can have both japa and meditation simultaneously.”⁶⁰

Swami Brahmananda indicated that the power of Brahman-God’s name is great, because the mantra represents Brahman in the form of sound. “The way of japam is the easiest path to follow. By constantly performing japam the mind can easily be made calm and steady, and finally it will lose itself in God. Therefore, I ask you to perform japam regularly and often and at the same time meditate on the Chosen Ideal. This combined practice brings quick success.” Devote at least two hours daily to the performance of japam. It can be performed when engaging in daily activities. “You are bound to get results if you practice japam with devotion, or even without it, for devotion will follow.”⁶¹ Have intense faith in the potency of the Lord’s name and it will purify your mind and body. “In purely mental japam the mantram is repeated without moving the lips, but in ordinary japam the mantram is repeated silently with the movement of the lips.” Repeat the name of Brahman-God and “let the name of God flow like a current within you.” “The mantram is charged with spiritual power. The truth of this will be directly revealed to you as you practice”⁶² “Practice japam unceasingly. Practice it with every breath. Practice it until it becomes your second nature; then you will find yourself chanting the name of God as you fall asleep and again as you awaken.” “Your breathing will become finer and finer, and you will gain control of the vital energies in a natural way.” “It is a Hindu belief that if a man utters the Lord’s name at the last moment, he achieves salvation.”⁶³

Swami Prabhavananda wrote, “The practice of repeating the name of God over and over again is also taught in Catholicism: “Hail Mary” is a mantra. The Jesus Prayer, a form of mantra, is recognized in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Its practice is explained in two remarkable books, *The Way of a Pilgrim* and its sequel *The Pilgrim Continues His Way*, which record the spiritual pilgrimage of a Russian devotee in the nineteenth century. [The pilgrim wrote,] “The continuous interior Prayer of Jesus is a constant uninterrupted calling upon the divine Name of Jesus with the lips, in the spirit, in the heart; while forming a mental picture of his constant presence, and imploring his grace during every occupation, at all times, in all places, even during sleep. The appeal is couched in these terms, ‘Lord Jesus

Christ, have mercy on me.’ One who accustoms himself to this appeal experiences as a result so deep a consolation and so great a need to offer the prayer always, that he can no longer live without it, and it will continue to voice itself within him of its own accord.... this frequent service of the lips imperceptibly becomes a genuine appeal of the heart, sinks down into the inward life, becomes a delight, becomes, as it were, natural to the soul, bringing it light and nourishment and leading it on to union with God.”⁶⁴

A Christian mystic who lived in the desert of Sinai in Egypt, John Climacus (c. 579-649) gave the instructions that a worshiper should pray using simple words without being verbose. Approach God with humility and have a set time of the day for prayer. The short Jesus Prayer is an oral prayer that should be uttered with frequent repetition, accompanied by intense concentration on the meaning of each word. “Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with your every breath. Then indeed you will appreciate the value of stillness” “Is it not easy to say with every breath, ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me; I bless Thee, my Lord Jesus, help me?’”⁶⁵ Oral repetition of the prayer may even occur when one is asleep. True prayer of the heart is a source of grace that brings the expiation of sin. “Prayer, after all, is a turning away from the world, visible and invisible.” Speak directly to God as a friend or a master, since prayer is a dialog and union of the believer with God. Seek the enlightenment of your mind, and love toward God. “The beginning of prayer is the expulsion of distractions from the very start by a single thought; the middle stage is the concentration on what is being said or thought; its conclusion is rapture in the Lord.”⁶⁶

Gregory of Sinai (1255-1346) taught the practice of focusing the mind on the heart while at the same time, controlling the breathing process and chanting the Jesus Prayer which is “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” One’s mind is often scattered and dispersed over a multitude of external objects. Continuously reciting the Jesus Prayer is a method for concentrating and focusing the mind on Jesus within the heart. The ceaseless invocation may be an oral prayer performed outwardly by the lips, or at other times it is recited by the mind alone.⁶⁷ “Some teach that the prayer should be said vocally, others—with the mind alone. But I recommend both ways.... When the mind gets used to this work, it will receive strength from the Spirit to pray vigorously and in all ways. Then there will be no need to say the prayer orally, and it will even be impossible. He who has attained to this will be fully satisfied with mental prayer.”⁶⁸

The psychologist Edward Hoffman noted, “Typical Kabbalistic practices have also involved the recitation of special rhythmic prayers and chants, which seem to resemble the mantras of the Hindu traditions. The effect appears to be related, in which the mind becomes stilled and the whirlpool of thoughts is put in order. For instance, it is suggested that the individual meditate upon the inner sound of the Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. One can readily discern the similarity between this vowel sound and the ‘A-U-M’ of the Yogis.”⁶⁹

“More than 10,000 times when he was young [Benedict] Spinoza (1632-77) from Holland muttered in private devotion or in public prayer the biblical passage that begins, ‘Here, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one [Dt. 6:4-5].’ The conditioned conviction remained that ‘God is one.’” According to the rabbinical theologians, these words should be repeatedly uttered throughout the day.

5. Self-Surrender

Indian: “Those who consecrate all their actions to Me, regarding me as the Supreme Goal, and who worship Me” (BG 12:6). “Take refuge in Him alone with all your soul” (BG 18:62).

New Testament: “I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me” (Jn. 6:38; cf. 4:34; 5:30). “The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does His works” (Jn. 14:10; cf. 5:19).

It was professed by Ramanuja (c. 1017-1137) and his school that the goal of life is to establish direct contact with the Divine realm and complete resignation to the will of Brahman-God. Self-surrender (prapatti) is “taking refuge in God as the One who underlies everything, while cherishing the conviction that God is everything because he is the inner Ruler of all, so that, if one desires to achieve a certain end, be it prosperity, self-experience or the attainment of God himself, one has to follow Him, obey His commands and act according to His teachings.”⁷⁰ “Seeking surrender to the Lord with one-pointed mind is the only means for transcending the Gunas and for the attainment of the state of Brahman through that.”⁷¹

The point made by Jiva Goswami is that complete self-surrender (atmanivedana) without a feeling of self-effort, is the highest of eleven stages in the worship of Bhagavat (God) (Vaidhi Bhakti). “The Divine gives Itself to those

who give themselves without reserve to the Divine.” “The offering of the self is the supreme offering.”⁷²

On this subject Sri Ramakrishna realized that the surest way to Brahman-God is through absolute self-resignation. “A man verily becomes liberated in life if he feels: ‘God is the Doer. He alone is doing everything. I am doing nothing.’ Man’s sufferings and worries spring only from his persistent thought that he is the doer.” “It is God alone who does everything. You may say that in that case man may commit sin. But that is not true. If a man is firmly convinced that God alone is the Doer and that he himself is nothing, then he will never make a false step.” “Surrender everything at the feet of God. What else can you do? Give Him the power of attorney. Let Him do whatever He thinks best. If you rely on a great man, he will never injure you.” “God takes upon Himself complete responsibility for one who totally depends upon Him. It is like a guardian taking charge of a minor.”⁷³ Give the power of attorney to God since He always protects His devotees. “A person who is convinced that everything is done by the will of God, feels himself to be a mere tool in His hands. He is then free from all bondage even in this very life. Thou doest Thy work, Lord; but man says, ‘I do it!’” “When the embodied soul says, ‘O God, I am not the doer; Thou art the Doer. I am the machine and Thou art its Operator,’ only then does its suffering of worldly life come to an end.”⁷⁴

Sri Ramakrishna’s disciple Swami Premananda gave us these wise and practical teachings, “Always remember, the Lord is the ‘doer.’ If ever the idea that ‘I am the doer’ enters into your head, the Lord instantly flies away. All efforts will be in vain. Therefore I say, be careful holy man. Let not the ‘unripe’ ego ever enter your heart. Pray that you may only be an instrument in the hands of the Lord, through His grace. Then only will you become a real karma yogi. The work will no longer bind you.” “Man by himself has no power to do the Lord’s work. What good work you see done is the manifestation of the Divine power, it expresses the glory of Mother’s power, beyond thought’s compass. Be strong in the strength of God and engage yourself in work as an instrument in His hands. That will bring peace and joy.” “Think of the Lord before whatever work you may undertake to perform; and try to do it as an instrument, depending upon Him. Always keep in mind that the Lord is the doer of good, and no evil can befall if one depends upon Him. I also bless you that through the grace of Sri Ramakrishna you may perform all work as worship and only in order to please him. Let there be no other motive behind any of your work.”⁷⁵

Swami Ramakrishnananda (1863-1911) a monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna

recommended that a devotee should strive to surrender himself or herself to Brahman-God and depend entirely on Him. “Man is too often afraid to surrender. He thinks he will lose something; but he is never a loser when he gives himself absolutely to the Lord. Only when he is guided by God does he cease to blunder, because then God works through his hands, sees through his eyes, speaks with his tongue, and he becomes a perfect instrument in the hands of God. He is directed by God in everything.” “The man who acts on his own responsibility is sure to make mistakes, but the man who surrenders everything to God always acts wisely.” “Only when he sits down and becomes perfectly surrendered does he begin to be drawn upward. Then he says with full conviction, ‘I can do nothing. Lord, do Thou act.’ At once the Higher Power begins to exert its influence. That man who can throw himself at the feet of the Lord and say: ‘All this is Thine. This body, mind, and soul all belong to Thee; of myself I am utterly helpless; do Thou take me’—the Lord takes that man and makes his hands, his feet, his eyes and ears, His instruments. He speaks through his mouth; He works through His hands; He walks with his feet; and the man becomes a living representative of God. This is salvation.”⁷⁶

As Swami Abhedananda put it a true lover of the Lord, “feels that nothing in the world can happen without God’s Will. He surrenders his individual will to the Universal Will. Resigning himself entirely to the all-knowing Will, he welcomes most heartily everything good or bad that comes his way. If a disease comes he says: ‘My Beloved has sent me His guest. I must take care of him and serve him.’ He thinks himself extremely blessed at every moment of this life, and welcomes death as he would his most beloved sister, saying, ‘Come, sister Death, come and take the offering of my body.’ How can such a soul be afraid of death? This type of a true love of God is still to be found in India. Absolute self-surrender and self-resignation take away all fear. This is the state when a man can say from the very bottom of his soul and with perfect assurance, ‘Let Thy Will be done and not mine.’”⁷⁷ You must feel the presence of Divinity in you; you must realize that you are the Spirit, and are related to the Universal Soul. You should realize that your body and mind are only the instruments, through which the higher Spirit, with all the Divine energy, is working and manifesting its powers. As you are an instrument, you will be uplifted by this, instead of being discouraged.”⁷⁸

Ramakrishna taught that the Lord is the doer and First Cause. Due to “universal egoism” we think we are the doer. The goal of religion is to realize this. This is a thoroughly practical idea, since only by submitting to the will of Brahman-God can one attain lasting happiness.

Thomas Aquinas specified that religious devotion is “the will to give oneself readily to things concerning the service of God.... devotion is an act of the will whereby a man offers himself for the service of God Who is the last end.... Meditation must need be the cause of devotion, in so far as through meditation man conceives the thought of surrendering himself to God’s service.... the movement of the will in surrendering itself to God, and the direct result of this consideration is joy.”⁷⁹ “The goodness of the will depends on the intention of the end. Now the last end of the human will is the Sovereign Good, namely God, as stated above. Therefore the goodness of the human will require it to be ordered to the Sovereign Good, that is, to God.... whoever has a will in opposition to the Divine Will, has an evil will.”⁸⁰

To quote the German Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327), “As long as you are capable of acting contrary to the will of God, the love of God is not in you, however you may deceive the world. The person who lives in God’s love and by God’s will takes his pleasure in what God prefers and refrains from any act contrary to his wishes.” “The entire perfection of man consists in being conformed to the Divine Will, by willing what God wills and in the way God wills it; especially as everything that is good, is good because God wills it.” “To that man who commits himself to God and diligently seeks his will, whatever God gives is best and must, of necessity, be best, and there could be no other way which could be better, although something else might appear to be better, or even be better, yet it would not be so good for you because God wishes it that way and not otherwise. And whether it be ill-health or poverty, or hunger, or whatever it may be—whatever God permits to be done or happen in your case, or does not permit—this is best, whether it be devotion or inner delight, or whatever you have or have not.”⁸¹ “It often happens that what seems trivial to us is greater in God’s sight than what looms large in our eyes. Therefore we should accept all things equally from God, not ever looking and wondering which is greater, or higher, or better.”⁸²

It was Thomas A’ Kempis who articulated, “Were you to possess everything in the world except Me [Christ], it could not satisfy you; so neither can anything you give Me be acceptable without the gift of yourself. Offer yourself to Me, and give yourself wholly to God; so shall your offering be acceptable.... A free offering of yourself into the hands of God must therefore precede all your doings if you desire to obtain freedom and grace. The reason why so few receive inward light and freedom is that they cannot wholly renounce self.”⁸³ Your offering is incomplete if

you do not offer yourself to the Divine Will. “As soon as you shall yield yourself to God with all your heart, and seek nothing for your own will and pleasure, but place yourself without reserve at His disposal, you shall find yourself united to Him, and at peace. Nothing will afford you more joy and satisfaction than the perfect fulfilling of God’s will.”⁸⁴

Martin Luther (1483-1546) stressed that being pious means to subject oneself to God’s righteousness and to be united with Him. God works in and through us and therefore, we should not take the credit for what goes well.⁸⁵ “He who has not been brought low, reduced to nothing through the cross and suffering, takes credit for works and wisdom and does not give credit to God. He thus misuses and defiles the gifts of God. He, however, who has emptied himself through suffering no longer does works, but knows that God works and does all things in him. For this reason, whether God does work or not, it is all the same to him. He neither boasts if he does good works, nor is he disturbed if God does not do good works through him.”⁸⁶

On this subject the French Fénelon (1651-1715) realized, “Lord, I know not what to ask of thee. Thou only knowest what I need. Thou lovest me better than I know how to love myself. Father, give to thy child that which he himself knows not how to ask. Smite or heal, depress me or raise me up: I adore all thy purposes without knowing them. I am silent; I offer myself up in a sacrifice; I yield myself to Thee; I would have no other desire than to accomplish thy will. Teach me to pray. Pray Thyself in me.”⁸⁷

Philip Clayton of the Claremont School of Theology in California wrote, “Imagine that Jesus uniquely expressed the state of setting aside his individual will to allow God to use his thoughts and person for the Divine purposes. Indeed, imagine that he did this perfectly. Then we might say that all who similarly allow God to act through them in this manner ‘have the mind of Christ,’ as Paul puts it in Philippians. ‘The mind of Christ’ now refers to that perfect fusion of finite human will and Divine will that the earthly Jesus manifested and that represents, in the Christian tradition, the highest goal for humanity.”⁸⁸

Sri Ramakrishna’s statement that “Only God is the Doer” is supported by the French priest and philosopher Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715). According to his philosophical theory of “Occasionalism” all actions including those of the body, mind, and nature are caused directly by God. Bodies and minds act neither on themselves nor on each other; God alone brings about all the events of nature.

Created things only provide "occasions" for Divine activity. Changes occurring in created things exhibit regularities only because God imposes order on them. The primary concern of the Occasionalists was to emphasize God's omnipotence because all creatures depend entirely on Him. Malebranche believed there is no necessary causal connection between bodily states or between bodily and mental states, or among mental states. But, there is a necessary causal connection between the volitions of an omnipotent agent and its actions. Our sensory states are not caused by motions in our brain, but rather God produces them on the occasion of the presence of such motions. Only the Divine Mind has the power to forge a necessary connection between that which It wills and the effect the will produces.

The argument that cause and effect share no necessary connection between them was taught by the Muslim al-Ghazali (c.1056–1111) and later by David Hume (1711-76) in the West. The idea that no invariable unconditional necessary causal relation can be established by perception was taught earlier by the Indian Carvaka (Materialist, c. seventh century) school of philosophy. When observing what appears to be a necessary causal interaction, one sees a succession of events but not an actual causality underlying the interaction.⁸⁹

Sri Ramakrishna said Brahman-God is the doer not humans. When we meditate we think we are the doer struggling to realize the Lord. Another way to mediate is to think that the Lord is the doer who is bringing this about. Though Its own Divine initiative and self-communication It is making us meditate and it is our job to receive it by cooperating with the grace and not to resist it.

If our will is congruent with the Divine Will, it becomes free because Brahman-God's will is free. By eliminating self-will and desiring only what the Lord wishes for us, we will receive whatever we aspire for, and what happens to us will be what we desire to occur, because it is caused by the Lord. A person who practices self-surrender to the will of Brahman-God will be under Divine influence. In following Brahman-God we are open to the will of the totality, in following our own desires to the will of a limited being. People's lives are not apt to go well if what they desire is not in tune with the higher Will that determines what is going to occur. From an Indian standpoint self-surrender to the Lord is sattvic (illuminating), applying self-effort and realizing that we are the makers of our own destiny is rajasic (active), and fatalism is tamasic (lethargic).

There are three levels of renunciation. First is externally denying oneself of an object we desire. Second is mentally not desiring or thinking about the object. Third

and most difficult is self-surrender, which means denying our self-will and accepting the Divine Will. The person who practices self-surrender is guided by the invisible hand of Brahman-God and realizes all is His/Her will. “We know that in everything, God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). We can think of ourself as a puppet, robot, or animated character under the control of Brahman-God.

6. Read the Scriptures

Indian: “This true wisdom I have taught will lead you to immortality. The faithful practice it with devotion, taking me as their highest aim” (BG 12:20). “Let the scripture be your authority in determining what ought to be done and what ought not to be done. Having learnt the injunctions of the scriptures, you should do your work in the world” (BG 16:24; cf. 16:1). “I [Arjuna] will act according to your word” (BG 18:73).

New Testament: “If a man loves me, he will keep my word” (Jn. 14:23). “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

Teach the scriptures. Indian: “He who, with supreme devotion to Me, teaches this deeply profound philosophy to those who are devoted to Me shall without question come to Me” (BG 18:68). New Testament: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:19-20; cf. Lk. 24:47; Acts 1:8; 2 Tim. 4:2, 5).

For Jiva Goswami inference and reason are valuable aids in interpreting the meaning of the scriptures. The *Puranas* particularly the *Bhagavatam* are on a par with the *Upanishads* and are better understood by the majority of people of this age. “The *Bhagavatam*, which describes the actions of Krishna is equal to the *Vedas*, and was composed by the sage Vyasa.” Bhagavat’s (God’s) actions [recorded in the Scriptures] “heard from the great self-realized devotees produce recollection of God in those deluded persons who have forgotten the nature of reality.” Studying the scriptures with supreme devotion produces attachment to the Lord and is conducive to spiritual progress. “Hearing of God’s names, forms, qualities and actions from His comrades in whose heart He dwells makes a person quickly experience God, although God-realization is generally the result of the study of Shastras [scriptures] and arduous and prolonged spiritual discipline.”⁹⁰

It was recommended by Sri Ramakrishna that a devotee, “Read books of devotion like the *Bhagavata* or the life of Chaitanya when you are alone and have nothing else to do.” “The *Gita* is the essence of all scriptures. A sannyasi may or may not keep with him another book, but he always carries a pocket *Gita*.” “In the scriptures you will find the way to realize God. But after getting all the information about the path, you must begin to work. Only then can you attain the goal.” “I love to hear the reading of sacred books such as the *Ramayana* and *Bhagavata*.” “It is God who manifests Himself, in one aspect, as the scriptures; therefore one should worship the sacred books such as the *Vedas*, the *Puranas*, and the *Tantras*.” “People do not see that science deals only with conditioned knowledge. It brings no message from the land of the Unconditioned. Such message has been brought by holy men who have seen and realised God, like the Rishis [who revealed the scriptures] of old. It is they alone that are competent to say, ‘God is of this nature.’”⁹¹

He continues, “Many think that the knowledge of God cannot be attained except through the study of books. But higher than reading is hearing, and even higher than hearing is seeing or realizing. The hearing of the truth from the lips of the preceptor makes a greater impression on the mind than the reading of books; but seeing makes the greater impression. Better than reading about Benares is hearing about the place from the lips of one who has actually visited it; but the best is to see Benares with one’s own eyes.”⁹² “Many things are recorded in the scriptures; but all these are useless without the direct realization of God, without devotion to His Lotus Feet, without purity of heart.”⁹³ “It is one thing to learn about God from the scriptures, and quite another to see Him. The scriptures only give hints.”⁹⁴ Without spiritual and moral discrimination, one achieves little by reading religious books.⁹⁵

According to a canon of the First Vatican Council (1817-18), “As knowledge progresses, it is sometimes possible for dogmas that have been proposed by the Church to receive a different meaning from the one which the Church understood and understands,” and the Second Vatican Council, “There is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down.” John A. Hardon, S.J. adds, “Revealed tradition is not static but dynamic. It ‘develops’ and ‘grows’, it ‘moves forward’ and it progresses ‘toward fullness’ until all mysteries will cease in the final vision of God.... Growth is the result of many converging elements in the Church: prayerful contemplation and theological analysis, personal awareness

through faith experience among believers, and the insights of Bishops (individually and collectively), whose Episcopal office gives special promise of perceiving spiritual truths.... The new insights of what some have called continuing revelation cannot, on Catholic principles, contradict anything that the Church has already been revealed.”⁹⁶ Many saints have received authentic private revelations from God. Some private revelations have been approved by the Church, such as many of the Marian apparition under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. These revelations have had some influence on the members of the Church, but they “do not, theologians are agreed, contain new doctrine” to be accepted as beliefs by the Catholic faith.⁹⁷

A high-ranking lay member of the Ramakrishna Order said he was just beginning to understand the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Meaning that the scriptures have different levels of significance and only advanced souls can comprehend the more advanced levels.

Practical existential knowledge through studying books, contemplation, attending lectures, and discussion are undertaken to increase ones conviction and faith in the religious teachings. This way one becomes a better devotee with lasting feeling and enthusiasm.

The words “*Bhagavad Gita*” literally mean the “Song of God,” which compares with the idea of the *Bible* being the “Word of God.” “Song of God” and “Word of God” are two different phrases with similar meaning, both being spoken and written down. Gita is probably a cognate of the Old Iranian word Gathas that also translates as “songs” and in addition is the oldest part of Zarathustra’s *Avesta*.

For more on this subject see: SVWT, Ch. XI. Religious Scripture and Revelation, Section 3. Interpreting the Scriptures.

7. Higher Knowledge is Hidden

Indian: “As fire is concealed by smoke, as a mirror by dust, as an unborn babe by the womb, so is Knowledge concealed by ignorance” (BG 3:38).

Old Testament: “Whence then comes wisdom? And where is the place of understanding? It is hid from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air” (Job 28:20-21).

Mistaking evil for good. Indian: “When the conscience is so thickly wrapped in ignorance that it mistakes wrong for right and sees everything distorted” (BG* 18:32, p. 165). Old Testament: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness” (Isa. 5:20)

Sorrow is the result of a false life style. Indian: “Enjoyments that arise from contact with objects are only sources of pain ... and the wise find no delight in them” (BG 5:22). Old Testament: “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death. Even in laughter the heart is sad, and the end of joy is grief” (Prov. 14:12-13).

Shankara (c. 688/788-720/820) articulated, “Erudition, well-articulated speech, a wealth of words, and skill in expounding the scriptures—these things give pleasure to the learned, but they do not bring liberation. Study of the scriptures is fruitless as long as Brahman has not been experienced. And when Brahman has been experienced, it is useless to read the scriptures. A network of words is like a dense forest which causes the mind to wander hither and thither. Therefore, those who know this truth should struggle hard to experience Brahman.... A buried treasure is not uncovered by merely uttering the words ‘come forth.’ You must follow the right directions, dig, remove the stones and earth from above it, and then make it your own. In the same way, the pure truth of the Atman, which is buried under Maya and the effects of Maya, can be reached by meditation, contemplation and other spiritual disciplines such as a knower of Brahman may prescribe—but never by subtle arguments.”⁹⁸

In his conversations Sri Ramakrishna cautioned, “What is the use of mere book-learning? The Pundits may be familiar with plenty of sacred texts and couplets. But what is the good of repeating them? One must realize in one’s life the truths embodied in the scriptures.... Can love of God be acquired by reading holy books? In the Hindu almanac, it is mentioned that on a particular day there will be twenty Adas (a unit of measure) of rainwater. But you will not be able to squeeze out of the almanac a single drop! So also many good sayings are to be found in holy books, but merely reading them will not make one religious. One must practice the virtues taught in such books in order to acquire love of God.... To explain God after merely reading the scriptures is like explaining to a person the city of Benares after seeing it on a map.”⁹⁹ “So long as a man disputes about doctrine and dogmas, he has not tasted the nectar of true faith.... once he approaches God, all arguments and discussions cease, and he gains a clear and vivid perception of the mysteries of God.”¹⁰⁰

The analogy was drawn by Swami Prabhavananda that an aspirant who reads the scriptures but does not live a holy life, is like a spoon in the soup that never tastes the soup. They never taste the sweetness of the scriptures or truly

comprehend their inner meaning. Giving intellectual assent to philosophical and theological doctrines, does not by itself transform a person's character and bring about an awakening of the soul, or bring inner peace and knowledge. Dogmas, beliefs and creeds are of value only if they create a longing to realize Brahman-God. Only an illumined soul can truly fathom the deeper hidden meaning of the scriptures. One of my brother disciples studied the scriptures for years thinking he understood their inner meaning. After living a spiritual life he came to realize that formerly, he did not understand the scriptures in their true light. This is partly because there are different levels of interpreting and comprehending the scriptures. Avatars and genuine holy men greatly surpass the words they speak, since their spiritual experiences cannot be stated adequately or fully in words.¹⁰¹

The Lord has given even the most intelligent of human's limited knowledge. Hence, in trying to understand Divine things there will always be unsolved paradoxes. So it is better to try to realize Brahman-God than to get bogged down in unsolvable theological problems.

Thomas A' Kempis revealed that to truly understand the principles of Jesus Christ, a seeker must conform their life to his. Those people who do not follow his teachings lack the spirit of Christ. "Lofty words do not make a man just or holy; but a good life makes him dear to God. I would far rather feel contrition than be able to define it. If you knew all of the words of the *Bible* by heart, and all the ideas of the philosophers, how would this help you without the grace and love of God?" "When you have read and mastered many subjects, always return to this fundamental truth: that I am He who teaches man knowledge, and who grants My children a clearer understanding than man can impart. He whom I teach will swiftly gain wisdom and advance far in the life of the spirit. But those who seek curious knowledge from men, and care nothing for My service, will discover only sorrow.... I am God, who enable the humble-minded to understand more of the ways of the everlasting Truth in a single moment than ten years of study in the Schools. I teach in silence, without the clamour of controversy, without ambition for honours, without confusion of argument.... For to some I speak on everyday affairs; to others on particular matters; to some I graciously reveal Myself in signs and symbols, while to those who are enlightened I reveal My mysteries. A book has but a single voice, but is not equally profitable to all who read it. I alone am the Teacher of truth, the Searcher of man's heart, the Discerner of his doings, and I give to each man as I judge right."¹⁰²

In the early twentieth century Evelyn Underhill discovered, “Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools. Hence, whilst the Absolute of the metaphysicians remains a diagram-impersonal and unattainable—the Absolute of the mystics is lovable, attainable, alive.... The mind which thinks it knows reality because it has made a diagram of Reality, is merely the dupe of its own categories.”¹⁰³ “In their hours of contemplation, they [the mystics] deliberately empty themselves of the false images of the intellect, neglect the cinematograph of sense. Then only are they capable of transcending the merely intellectual levels of consciousness, and perceiving that Reality which ‘hath no image’.... ‘Let no one suppose,’ says the *‘Theologica Germanica,’* ‘that we may attain to this true light and perfect knowledge ... by hearsay, or by reading and study, nor yet by high skill and great learning.’”¹⁰⁴

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) brought out the point, “If the *Bible* is the law of Protestantism, it should be possible for all who can read the *Bible* and interpret it objectively to write a systematic theology, even though they do not participate in the Christian faith. All they have to do is to understand the meaning of the words and sentences of the *Bible*. This was absolutely denied by the Pietisms, who said that there can be only a *theologia regenitorum*, a theology of those who are regenerated.... ‘You must be reborn with respect to everything in which you participate, in all that you talk about; you can be a theologian only if you have the experience of regeneration.’”¹⁰⁵ “Jesus is not the truth because His teachings are true. But His teachings are true because they express the truth which He Himself is. He is more than His words. And He is more than any word said about Him. The truth, which makes us free, is neither the teaching of Jesus nor the teaching about Jesus.... They point to the truth, but they are not a law of truth. Nor are the doctrines about Him the truth that liberates.... Doing the truth means living out of the reality which is He who is the truth, making His being the being of ourselves and of our world.”¹⁰⁶

The views of Thomas Merton (1915-68) the Catholic monastic, were expressed by Daniel J. Adams a Presbyterian theologian teaching in Korea, “The West is concerned with explanation while the East is concerned with experience, and so often the explanation is substituted for the experience itself. Merton’s contemplative life was his attempt to live as much as possible within the realm of experience rather than of explanation. Zen also attempts this and Merton found an

affinity between Zen and his own life. Merton writes, ‘Buddhist meditation, but above all that of Zen, seeks not to explain but to pay attention, to become aware, to be mindful, in other words to develop a certain kind of consciousness that is above and beyond deception by verbal formulas—or by emotional excitement’.... Reality is obscured and often superseded by the explanation of that reality. Merton points out that ‘for Zen, from the moment the fact is transferred to a statement it is falsified. One ceases to grasp the naked reality of experience and one grasps a form of words instead.’” To have a direct, concrete and existential experience of the higher reality is the goal, rather than to know it indirectly from dogmatic intellectual concepts.¹⁰⁷

Roman Catholics also emphasize the inability of humans to understand Divine things. They define “Sacred mysteries” as beliefs of religions that cannot be explained through rational or scientific means. In Divine Revelation there are contained dogmas of the faith that are mysteries, which cannot be clarified or demonstrated through reason since they exceed the natural knowing power of the human mind.¹⁰⁸

8. Counter-Karma and Samskaras

Indian: “Abandon all dharmas [duties] and come to Me alone for shelter. I will deliver you from all sins; do not grieve” (BG 18:66); “Reliance upon Krishna is far better than any such expiatory acts, as religious austerities, or the like. Let any one who repents of the sins of which he may have been culpable, have recourse to this best of all expiations, remembrance of Hari [God]” (VP 2:6.29-34); Repentance (LM 11: 228-31), prayer (RV 7:89.5; AV 6:51.3), not repeating the transgression (LM 11:231-33), confession (LM 11:228-29), study of the *Vedas* (LM 11:246-47), recitation of the *Vedas* (LM 11:46, 76, 227-28, 248-51, 259-60), performing a Vedic sacrifice (LM 11:75, 261), following prescribed caste duties (LM 11:236), giving money or property to the priests (LM 7:82-85; 11:4, 6, 39, 77, 128), chastity (LM 11:225), austerities (LM 11:228, 240), fasting (upavasa, anasaka) (LM 5:155; 6:20; 11:167, 204, 212-16, 260), avoiding liquor (LM 9:235; 11:55), standing all day (LM 11:225), and shaving off all of ones hair (LM 11:79), are recommended as forms of penance for both mortal (mahapataka) and venial sin (LM 11:240).¹⁰⁹

Old Testament: As an act of austerity and penance, fasting was practiced by the Israelites (Ex. 34:28; Neh. 9:1; Jer. 36:6). According to the vow of a Nazirite, a

person should avoid “wine and strong drink” and should not cut their hair during the days of the vow of separation (Num. 6:1-5). The Israelites fasted, read from the book of the law for a quarter of a day, and confessed their sins and worshiped the Lord for another fourth of a day (Neh. 9:1-3). New Testament: The followers of John the Baptist and the Pharisees often fasted (Mt. 9:14; Lk. 5:33; 18:11-12) and the apostles of Jesus rigorously combined fasting with prayer (Acts 13:2; 14:23). Practicing celibacy (Mt. 19:11-12; Lk. 18:29-30), fasting in private (Mt. 6:16-18) and renouncing worldly possessions (Lk. 14:33) and the desires of the flesh (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 5:16) are recommended.¹¹⁰

A Bengal Vaishnava follower of Sri Chaitanya, Rupa Goswami (1489-1564) concurred that, “The *Bhagavata* asserts that devotion destroys all demerits, vices, and afflictions completely. Listening to God’s name, chanting it, obeisance to Him and recollection of Him destroy all demerits which are ripe for bearing fruits. Penances, gifts, vows, etc., destroy all vices, but cannot destroy their seeds in the form of their potencies (*vasanas*), which are destroyed by devotion to God in the form of His worship.... Those who take refuge with God with all their heart get abiding peace and attain the supreme status. Those who abandon all considerations of virtue and vice, piety and impiety, and take refuge with God only are purified of all sins. Even persons of low birth and vile conduct are purified, and attain the supreme status by taking refuge with God. They become full of the Divine presence and get undisturbed abiding peace.”¹¹¹

Sri Ramakrishna gives an example of reducing the karmic burden, “According to somebody’s karma, his foot is supposed to be pierced by a plough, but as he started his journey chanting the name of Mother Durga, a blade of kusha grass entered his foot instead. This shows that he escaped major injury through the power of the Mother’s name. What do you think about it?”¹¹² “Sin begets its own result. This is God’s law. Won’t you burn your tongue if you chew a chili?” “The effect of karma wears away if one takes refuge in God. I prayed to the Divine Mother with flowers in my hand: ‘Here Mother, take Thy sin, here take Thy virtue. I don’t want either of these, give me only real bhakti.’” “No doubt a man experiences a little of the [karmic] effect; but much of it is cancelled by the power of God’s name.” “Those who have money should give it to the poor and needy.”¹¹³

In his commentary on Patanjali’s *Yoga Aphorisms* (c. 100 B.C.-300 A.D.), Swami Prabhavananda recommend to free oneself from the distress of negative and sinful thought waves, raise a contrary thought wave for the purpose of nullifying an

undesirable one. “To be free from thoughts that distract one from yoga, thoughts of an opposite kind must be cultivated” (YS 2:33). “First, we have to overcome the ‘painful’ [nonvirtuous] thought-waves by raising waves which are ‘not painful’ [virtuous]. To our thoughts of anger, desire and delusion we must oppose thoughts of love, generosity and truth.” In time the undesirable ways of thinking will become dormant, due to inactivity and will cease to actively function. Attaining spiritual enlightenment (samadhi) by the power of yoga is an even more effective technique for overcoming the negative consequences of sin. “Samadhi is achieved by raising one object, one great wave of concentration, in the mind, by which all other through-waves, all samskaras or past impressions, are swallowed up” (YS 1:51). The concentrated gigantic mental impressions produced by samadhi, annul all other contrary mental impressions and forces (samskaras). A single thought wave can overpower a large number of undesirable mental impressions such as egotism and self-centeredness. It is like a strong wind annihilating a tiny candle flame or fire instantaneously consuming a heap of cotton.¹¹⁴

The Indologist and Sanskrit scholar Pandurang V. Kane (1880-1972) cites many traditional Indian scriptures when discussing several ways of reducing bad karma and the consequences of sin. Confession and repentance (anutapa) by themselves are often not sufficient to absolve sin, but render a person fit to practice penances. They include: celibacy, sleeping on the ground, fasting, shaving ones hair, gift giving, serving the guru, traveling on religious pilgrimages to sacred places, and practicing truthfulness and nonviolence. These penances are often undertaken in conjunction with the performance of a religious ritual (homa) and the repeated utterance of the Lord's name and Vedic passages as prayer (japa).¹¹⁵

A monk of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Budhananda revealed the method to counter negative mental impressions. “Patanjali, the teacher of Raja-Yoga, calls this method pratipalcsa-bhavanam, or thinking contrary thoughts.... For instance, you notice that a big wave of anger is just rising in your mind, which will not only upset your peace of mind but cause you great harm. What should you do to neutralize the wave? You have to raise a contrary wave, a wave of love.... But contrary thoughts have to be raised at the very inception of inimical ones. There is a stage when your anger is just a bubble in your mind; and there is a stage when you are anger itself. Contrary thoughts should be raised when the first bubbles arise, otherwise the method will not work.... One of the ways of clearing the subconscious mind is to pour holy thoughts into our mind and allow them to go deep down within ourself. Holy thoughts are like pure water. Only we must not get

frightened when we find dark water coming out from within ourselves at a particular stage. If we persist in pouring in holy thoughts, a time will come when we shall find holy thoughts coming out from within. The subconscious mind can then be taken to have been cleared. Control of the conscious mind will not be difficult then.”¹¹⁶

Jewish Rabbinic teachers stress, “For each individual Israelite, bodily sufferings have atoning power, real poverty is mentioned more rarely. Fasting is also named, but no great or frequent stress is laid on it. Almsgiving, charity, deeds of love, are powerful piacula [forms of expiation]. Prayer, too, has atoning efficacy, and so has the study of the Law.... [In] the 51st Psalm forgiveness, or atonement, involved something much more than the letting off of punishment. The 'joy or gladness' of verse 8, 'the clean heart,' the presence of the 'holy spirit' in verses 10 and 11, surely go beyond the mere request that his 'transgressions may be blotted out.' He wants to be pure and clean, and to have the sense of God within him, quite apart from the letting off of punishment. He wants, in other words, atonement, not merely forgiveness.”¹¹⁷

It was emphasized by Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) from Spain and Egypt that a religious aspirant should follow the mitzvot (precepts, commandments), the practical injunctions of the *Torah* which are to: repent, fast, avoid idolatry, practice moral conduct in dealing with other people and in sexual life and almsgiving; follow the observances concerning the Sabbath, holy days, religious rites, ceremonies, and sacrifices; and to avoid forbidden food. “What is repentance? It is that the sinner should abandon his sin and remove it from his thoughts, resolving never to do it again ... And he should regret his past mistakes.” “There may be a single merit that outweighs many iniquities and there may be one iniquity that counterbalances many merits.”¹¹⁸

The Spanish Rabbi Menahem Meiri (1249-1306) laid down “four conditions are essential to repentance; lacking any one of them repentance is incomplete. These are: remorse for the sin committed; resolve not to commit it again; confession of the sin to God; with regard to offences against other people, restitution and righting of the wrong.... Before a man can sincerely repent he must be humble enough to admit his faults. The sinner must feel remorse for his sins. He must resolve never to repeat them. He must confess to God and, if they are sins against others, must make adequate restitution. He should pursue the good life and accustom himself to new habits of good conduct so as to create for himself a pure

heart and firm spirit. Although repentance is of value at any time the penitential season is especially appropriate for this purpose.”¹¹⁹

Expressing the contemporary Catholic position, John Hardon, S.J. wrote, “For the entire and perfect remission of these sins there are three acts required of the penitent, namely: ‘contrition, confession, and satisfaction.’” The sinner must be truly sorry for having offended God, tell his sins to the priest, and make reparation for the evil he committed. The technical term ‘attrition’ has come to be used to describe that sorrow for sins that is not motivated by the perfect love of God, and yet is sufficient for the remission of guilt provided the person also confesses to a priest. This kind of lesser contrition is “engendered the examination, consideration, and detestation of sins.... Sins can also be remitted by other means than sacramental absolution, e.g., attendance at mass, works of charity, earnest prayer, and the practice of virtues contrary to their sinful tendencies.”¹²⁰

Following the principle of creating counter-karma the best methods of penance are to refrain from repeating the sinful act, living a moral and religious life, prayer, and the performance of good deeds by helping other people. Highly recommended is to meditate since that is an ideal way to annihilate and overcome bad karmic vibrations. One might also be engaged in repentance, confession, fasting, and practicing austerities. For example, if one person does something that brings about anger in another, doing them a favor will mitigate their anger to varying degrees. Some offsetting characteristics of egocentrism and narcissism include: self-glorification (humility), fantasy (truthfulness), entitlement (giving), hedonism (self-control), hypercriticism (complementary), and paranoia (optimism).

Rather than feeling bitter and resentful when we are treated poorly, it is far better to realize it is a result of our karmic actions. The law of karma provides an explanation why things are not going the way we want them to. Working off the penalty of bad karma is in a sense redemptive, since the person has paid the price for their misdeeds.

For more on this subject see: SVWT, Ch. XIII. Reincarnation, the Pre-existence of the Soul, and the Law of Karma, Section 6. How to Produce Good Karma and Samskaras.

9. Future Life is Determined at the Moment of Death

Indian: “Whatever his thought at the moment of death ... leads the man to be

reborn in the world he merits” (Pr. Up.* 3:10, p. 49). “Just as far as his mental makeup extends when he passes away from this world, with precisely such a mental makeup he enters upon the other world after death” (SB, 10:6.3.1). “At the hour of death, when a man leaves his body, he must depart with his consciousness absorbed in me [Lord Krishna]. Then he will be united with me. Be certain of that. Whatever a man remembers at the last, when he is leaving the body, will be realized by him in the hereafter; because that will be what his mind has most constantly dwelt on, during this life” (BG* 8:5-6, p. 95; cf. 8:9-13; Ch. Up. 3:17.6).

Old Testament: “The last end of man will tell of him ... For by his latter end a man shall be known” (Sirach 11:22-30).

Sri Ramakrishna related, “The way to remember God in the hour of death is to prepare now, the repetition of His name and the chanting of His glories. If one keeps up this practice, then in the hour of death one will repeat the name of God.” “All sin vanishes if one remembers God. His name breaks the fetters of death.” “If a man practices spiritual discipline before his death and if gives up his body praying to God and mediating on Him, when will sin touch him?”¹²¹ “A man's rebirth is determined by what he has been thinking about just before death. Devotional practice are therefore very necessary. If by constant practice, one's mind is freed from all worldly ideas, then the thought of God, which fills the mind in their place, will not leave it even at the time of death.”¹²²

It was articulated by Swami Shivananda, “Even now we hear about the extraordinary deaths of some devotees. Such persons have superconscious visions they experience at the moment of their death. They pass on repeating the name of the Master [Sri Ramakrishna] and are united with him in his Divine realm.”¹²³

Swami Abhedananda discerned, “We read in the *Bhagavad Gita*, ‘Whatever idea is most predominant at the time of death, that determines our future (8:6).’ What we shall be after death, that depends on our thought and ideal. If we think of God, the Supreme Being, the highest Spirit, and hold that thought at the time of death, and pass out with it, we do not remain earthbound, but we are enlightened. We see the light, and we proceed on higher planes of consciousness, and we are no longer subject to rebirth.”¹²⁴

On this subject, Franklin Edgerton (1885-1963) of the University of Pennsylvania and Yale University and later at Benares Hindu University (1953-54) clarified that Hindus and members of other religions believe “that the soul's state

precisely at the moment of death has a dominant importance in deciding that matter [the state of life after death]. And this is clearly due to the feeling that when the soul faces the decisive moment, the moment when the course of his next existence is to be settled, he is in very essence what he is at the moment of death. For those two moments are practically one.” At the time of death the dominant recurring thoughts, feelings, and desires of one’s life become intensified. For this reason, pious Hindus often meditate on God and chant holy mantras when death is approaching. They believe that if a devotee has been devoted to God throughout their lifetime, they will think of Him at the moment of death. Dying at sacred locations like the holy city of Benares or on the Ganges River is considered to be auspicious for attaining liberation.¹²⁵ In other words this life, afterlife, and the person’s next earthly life are a continuous stream of events, and might even be thought of as a single life. What we do and think in this life guide the soul to its future destination.

Franklin Edgerton wrote that in Judaism when some one is dying, there is the practice of repeating the Divine name and confessing ones sins committed during their lifetime. Traditional Jewish rabbinical texts and some Russian orthodox pilgrims, regard it very desirable to die in the holy city of Jerusalem. Dying on the eve of the Sabbath is considered to be favorable by the Jewish Babylonian Talmud, and Orthodox Christians in Russia teach that it is propitious to die at Easter time.¹²⁶ “In Christianity, at least in popular Christian beliefs, there is a widespread and persistent idea that the frame of mind at the hour of death is of crucial importance in determining the fate of the soul after deaths. The classical or canonical authority for the efficacy of a ‘deathbed repentance’ is the story of the Penitent Thief at the Crucifixion; despite his evil life, Jesus assures him of Paradise because of his pious disposition at the end [Lk. 23:39-43].” For Catholics, “The attempt is made to induce a generally pious frame of mind in the patient. Particularly interesting, as a parallel to the Hindu doctrine that one must repeat the name of God in the last hour, is the frequency with which the Catholic service brings in the Divine name. It is repeated at many points in the ritual, but particularly at two points of crucial importance. First, as a condition to receiving the Apostolic benediction and plenary indulgence, the sick man must ‘with a contrite heart repeat the Most Holy Name of Jesus either once or several times.’ And finally, at the very moment of expiring the dying man, if he can, or a priest or another for him if he cannot, must repeat the name of Jesus three times in a clear voice. After which the priest or a bystander is to say something into his ears. The crucifix is also held before the eyes of the dying

man.”¹²⁷

Endnotes

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²⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 119, 122.

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³² RAWSH, p. 77.

³³ GSR, pp 113c, 657q.

³⁴ SSR, pp. 144-46; GSR, pp. 112c, 821f.

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