

Answers to Basic Spiritual Questions of Sadhaks



Swami Shantananda Puri

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ॐ श्री गणेशाय नमः

Q.1. On which symbol or God should I meditate? Or which God should I choose for worship?

A. Ultimately there is only one God who is the Self (Atman) of all and is formless. As His powers are infinite, He can also assume any form (say of Ram, Christ, Krishna, Siva, etc.) on which the devotee conceives of Him. Those forms of God are as real as the seeker. The Guru is the best judge to choose which God you should meditate on, based on your condition and your spiritual constitution inherited from the past. In whatever form (or formless) you worship, consider that He is your own Self and is the highest unlimited Supreme being who only takes and manifests in all the other forms of Gods. A rough formula for choice could be in the following priority :

1. Self (Atman) or the Supreme Conscious Being

2. An Infinite God without form and without attributes (NIRAKARA & NIRGUNA)
 3. A Supreme formless God with all attributes of love, kindness, compassion etc. (as in Christianity) (NIRAKARA but SAGUNA)
 4. Any Personal God with form (SIVA, VISHNU etc) and all attributes, according to one's own preference.
- Any one of these will lead ultimately to GOD-REALISATION.

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Q.2: What is the difference between Self-realisation (Atma Sakshatkara), God-realisation and Mukti or Moksha (liberation)?

A. There is no difference at all. These are all different terminologies used to denote one and the same experience. By knowing the Self or God, one puts an end to the ignorance (Avidya) which is the cause of one's sufferings, sorrows and unhappiness in this world and finds oneself in a state of perennial Bliss. This state is called MUKTI or MOKSHA. The definition and concept of Mukti is different in different religions and systems of philosophy (viz. Jainism, Buddhism etc.).

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Q.3. What is Ignorance and how does it cause sorrows, sufferings, lack of peace of mind, unhappiness etc.? How can we remove it?

A. Due to past conditioning, each individual identifies himself with his body-mind complex. Even though he himself is the immortal Supreme Consciousness of the nature of Bliss unlimited by Time, Space, Objects and Causation and not limited by a body, he superimposes on himself all the characteristics and limitations of the body-mind complex—viz., mortality or death, ageing, unhappiness, relationship with others etc., and becomes unhappy. This state of wrong identification of the Self with the body is called ignorance. By knowing the Real Self i.e. who we really are, we dispel the ignorance.

For example, in a room where there are different bulbs of different voltage—zero watt, 60 watt, 200 watt & 1000 watt, the bulbs are different in colour, age, capacity and are vulnerable to breakage (death).

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But all these bulbs are fed with only one electric energy coming through a single set of wires but due to different conditioning (resistance) of each bulb, its manifestation becomes more or less. It is only one continuous electric energy which pervades all bulbs. If the electricity in each bulb which is indestructible were to identify itself with the bulb and consider each one as separate from the other, the zero watt will become jealous of the 1000 watt, the bulb which is older in age may dislike younger bulb, all of them will think that they will also die on the day the bulb breaks or fuses and the bulbs of indigenous origin will dislike the bulbs of imported origin etc. Thus as a result of the ignorance of its real nature, the electricity in the bulbs undergoes miseries and sorrows. The same holds good for human beings identifying with their bodies.

Meditation on the Lord is the most efficacious method for removing ignorance.

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Q.4. Is a Guru necessary? Can we not proceed on this path on our own with the help of books etc.?

A. When this question was put to Ramana Maharshi, he quipped – “Is a mother necessary for a child?” He himself clarified elsewhere as follows:

The real Guru is God or your own Self, who resides in the heart. Except aspirants in a very high stage of evolution (who also may have had Gurus in their past lives), most of the aspirants will not be able to take guidance from the internal Guru, the Self. So God, in His Grace takes pity on the loving devotee and manifests Himself as a Guru in a human form according to the devotees’ standards. Even though the external Guru is God or Self-incarnate who works from within, the devotee thinks initially that he is a man. Each individual has got different conditioning and

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requires different handling and guidance in sadhana suited to his constitution which a book cannot give. On the contrary, the books, our scriptures, if not properly interpreted in the light of real experience could result in chaos and confusion.

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Q.5. How shall I find a proper Guru who will guide me? Can I change my Guru if the first one dies or if I find a more brilliant and acceptable Guru subsequently? If I find that my Guru is a hypocrite or a rogue indulging in sex and fraud, can I abandon him?

A. When once we increase our longing for God to a volcanic extent and pray to God to provide us with a Guru, we will definitely get the proper Guru. In addition we may also go for Satsangs and find out among the Mahatmas we come across whether there is anybody who is well-versed in scriptures, desireless and selfless, lacking in ego, humble, shunning money, sex, name and fame, with an equal vision and other qualifications as described in VIVEKA CHUDAMANI by ADI SANKARA. When our longing for God becomes deep and intense, the Guru will walk into our life.

As the Sadguru in external form is verily the Self, the guidance will continue to pour even

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after the external Guru ceases to exist in his body. No Guru can be expected to live as long as we live.

As the Guru chosen once is verily the God-incarnate and he is not the human body, the question of abandoning him at any stage and for any reason whatsoever, does not arise. Even if he turns out to be a bad person, so long as he has given you a path or a Mantra (sacred syllable) recognised in scriptures, you may continue to go on the path directed and all guidance will flow from within. Further, it is said that one gets the Guru one deserves. If the Guru is a sinful man, he may perhaps go to hell but the disciple need not be concerned about it.

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Q.6. I have some vague inclination towards God. It is all lukewarm. I do not feel inclined to read any books on religion or spirituality as I find them confusing and sometimes mutually contradictory. How should I proceed?

A. You have to increase your longing for God till it becomes an agony and a torture. For that purpose you should go often for Satsang i.e. seek the company of evolved souls, holy men and devotees of a high order. The Satsang could be in the form of bhajans, nama smaranam (taking loudly the name of the Lord), discourses, questions and answers etc., and sometime the Mahatma may simply be sitting quiet in silence, mutely radiating his vibrations. In case you do not get such a holy company, you may read books of non-controversial saints (their talks and gospel and not books originally written by their disciples) like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Bhagavan Ramana, Yogi Aurobindo, Ma Anandamayee etc., books containing their biographies and autobiographies, books relating to the devotees of yore like

Kabir Das, Tulsi Das and Meera; Bhakta Vijayam, and also Srimad Bhagavatam, Ram Charit Manas of Tulsi Das etc. These will also be considered as Satsang. In your spare time, you can also do some selfless social service like helping the blind, old patients in hospitals and old age homes, collecting and distributing old clothes and bread to the poor in slum areas etc. This will purify the heart so that further path will become clearer to you in due course.

Q.7. Why do we need God? Where does He reside? How can we get Him?

A. Everybody wants to have unlimited happiness and to eliminate all sorrows, miseries, sufferings etc., from his life. God is the Super Bazar where alone you get genuine happiness.

As we have stated in an earlier answer, all these sorrows etc., are as a result of not knowing our own Self i.e. who we are in reality. Self is the key to our happiness and that Self is called God. Due to our wrong identification with the body, a common man cannot easily be convinced that he is the Immortal Infinite Self, the very existence, who is all Bliss while he is experiencing old age, diseases, death and sufferings in his everyday life. So the Self is conceived by him as a God external to him residing in some unseen Divine regions, who will help and release him from his miseries. Those who are not able to conceive of and search for their own self and who continue to consider the world as separate from their own self have to take recourse to the God who is the

controller and protector of the world (as every system working in an organised manner should have a controller). As it is the all-powerful and all-pervading Self which is imagining itself as a separate God, the Self is capable of taking those forms also as conceived by the devotees. Finally, by seeking God, the man seeks his own Self and gets God-realisation.

The personal gods with form and attributes, being the manifestations of the very Self, should not be considered as a concession to the ignorant because they are also ultimately as real as the formless. According to Sri Ramakrishna, they are the two sides of the same coin.

The regions like Kailash or Vaikunta where the personal gods are supposed to reside are all as real as this world and can be seen in different planes of consciousness.

To realise God or Self, there are infinite paths. Meditation, Prayers, Devotion and Self-enquiry are some of the more common devices to get God-realisation.

Q.8. What is meditation and how does it differ from prayers? How should I do meditation?

A. According to a Mahatma, when you talk to the Lord and He listens, it is prayer. When He talks and you listen in silence, it is Meditation.

There are readymade prayers as in the Shanti Mantras of Upanishads and various Stotras (hymns of praises) in Puranas and those composed by saints of repute like Adi Sankara. One could also talk to God and praise Him in one's own words.

Meditation is defined in various ways by different masters. Continuously fixing the attention of the mind on a single thing, say God, and holding on to that thought without breaking the continuity is meditation¹. It is called Dhyanā in Sanskrit. It is the art of raising the intensity of our inward consciousness so as to merge with

¹ VĪ aē` HSMZVm Ū` nZ§

the ultimate Absolute Divinity. There are numerous established ways of doing meditation, apart from those being devised newly by the modern masters. Even Japa and sincere prayers done with an emotional upsurge leads to meditation and finally to Samadhi (the Super-conscious state). One may take any symbol like 'OM' and concentrate on that sound. One may imagine the form of one's favourite personal God and concentrate on each part of His body starting from the nails and toes of the Lord's feet and going up to the hairs on His head (known as षाट्शिकेशं एतत्) and finally on His entire form. There are methods of concentrating on the Lord in the form of the entire universe (Sun and the Moon being his eyes etc.) known as विश्वेषु एतत् (meditation on the cosmic form). It is the Guru who should guide you in the type of meditation suitable for you.

Q.9. What is Diksha or Initiation? How does it help?

A. In the traditional way, whenever a Guru is approached by a seeker or aspirant, the former gives him a Mantra (sacred syllables) relating to the latter's favourite (Ishta) personal God or impersonal (rarely). This process is called diksha or initiation. In this process there is a subtle transference of power to the disciple and the Mantra becomes a link through which the Guru begins to look after his spiritual welfare. Actually speaking, if the disciple continues to do the Japa (repeated recitation or chanting), his own dormant spiritual powers begin to be awakened. There are also various other kinds of Dikshas, through the eye, through touch etc.

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Q.10. What actually is a Mantra and how is its Japa to be done? How does it help in the spiritual progress?

A. Sages (Rishis) of yore, after a lot of sadhana and purification of their mind, used to get certain sacred syllables (say OM NAMAH SIVĀYA) through inspiration from God. They continued to recite them for years from morning to night, keeping their mind concentrated on them and considering the Mantras as the very manifestation of God as sound energy and finally got the direct vision of their respective gods, ultimately leading to Self-realisation. These Mantras are considered as secret and are contained in texts (like MANTRAMAHOADHI) which form part of Mantra Sasra (scriptures relating to Mantras), in Tantric texts and in Puranas also. Each Mantra is to be accompanied by certain specific purificatory and preparatory rites called Anganyasa, Karanyasa, Chanting of Rishi, Chandas, Devata etc. These Mantras become effective only when they are communicated through the mouth of a Guru (Gurumukha) and not if practised by reading

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them from a book or text. The continuous Japa can lead to meditation, cessation of the mind and even up to the Samadhi stage which results in God-realisation.

For Japa purposes, certain sects in Christianity use "Jesus, have mercy on us," as a mantra. Similarly, hymns from 'Jap Ji' of GURU NANAK DEV are also used by some as Mantras. If done with Faith, these are all effective.

From each syllable of a Mantra, a particular energy emanates each of which is capable of eliminating a particular type of vasana and purifying the mind. For instance Kleem (some pronounce it as Kleeng) is called KAMA BEEJA and is capable of granting all righteous desires and finally destroying all the vasanas of desires including sexual passion and lust.

In modern days, many of the Ashrams are in the habit of manufacturing new mantras based on the name of the respective Gurus who founded the Ashrams (normally after the death of the Guru), through which disciples are initiated. There are also Gurus

who are not aware of Mantra Sastras but simply make up some mantras on their own (with impure and wrong pronunciation of words) or by reading some way-side popular book series giving some mantras (existing and non-existing) with a lot of grammatical mistakes.

There are a number of rules relating to the process of doing Japa which the Guru reveals at the time of initiation.

Q.11. What is 'NAMASMARANAM'?

A. Constant remembrance of God is the key to God-realisation. All people irrespective of caste, creed or sex (including those who have not been initiated by any Guru) can go on reciting mentally or loudly the name or series of names of God e.g.

- (1) RAM
- (2) HARE KRISHNA HARE KRISHNA
KRISHNA KRISHNA HARE HARE
- (3) HARI OM
- (4) SRI RAM JAI RAM JAI JAI RAM

This is NAMA SMARANAM.

While Japas are governed by a set of rules and cannot be done anywhere and everywhere, taking the name of the Lord can be done while travelling in buses, while walking and even in toilet or bathroom. Here also from the syllables forming the names, Divine energies emanate which help in eliminating our conditioning (vasanas) and

in raising our level of consciousness. If done with dedication and intense devotion Namasmaranam is considered to be as effective as Japa or meditation. Even for taking the name, if it is given by a Guru, it can be more effective.

There are also scriptural texts containing 108 or 300 or 1000 names of each God e.g. SIYA ASHTOTTARAM, LALITA TRISHATI, VISHNU SAHASRA NAMA STOTRAM etc. The regular recitation of these hymns of God's names can also be categorised under namasmaranam or prayers. In the case of certain Stotras (hymns) like Vishnu Sahasra Nama, they are also treated as Japa if done with all the preparatory Nyasa, Sakti, Keelakam etc.

Q.12. What are prayers?

A. Prayers are in effect talking to God. Prayers can take any one of the following forms:

Praise of God and His glories or seeking material favours like promotion, getting a job or a son or money etc. or seeking spiritual favours like pure devotion, destruction of wrong conditioning (Vasanas) etc. Here again, one may recite set prayers written in the Vedas, Bible, Puranas or Stotras (hymns) written by great saints like Adi Sankara, Vedanta Desika, Valmiki, etc. or talk to the Lord spontaneously in one's own words about one's own problems in family, daily life, office or in meditation and other spiritual aspects.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Paramhansa Yogananda, etc., used to talk to God daily. The book "Letters from Brother Lawrence" or "Practising the presence of God" used to be recommended by Swami Vivekananda.

Prayers can be done as a separate sadhana but if they are done in combination with

Japa, Namasmaran and Swādhyāya (study of scriptures and allied texts) they will be more effective.

Those who are constitutionally more emotional and those who find themselves unable to sit in Japa or meditation will find prayers as an easy method to keep the mind engaged in God and to develop concentration.

Q.13. During meditation or Japa, my mind never remains still even for a moment. As many times as I resolve to bring the mind back to God and concentrate, it slips away and is busy with various thoughts relating to worldly affairs. What shall I do to control the mind so that it can concentrate on God?

A. This is a problem which is common to 99% of the Sadhaks (seekers or aspirants). In Bhagavad Gita also, this very question is put to Sri Krishna by Arjuna.

For births and births most of us have been engaged all our life in worldly affairs, in running a family life, profession or business, the social life, politics etc. Even in this life, after having come to know of the spiritual path, out of 24 hours in a day, even retired people spend barely 1 to 2 hours for God while rest of the time is spent in seeing T. V., in looking after the health of self and family members, attending social functions, reading newspapers, sports, politics, going to club etc. When all our life is engaged in worldly matters it is but natural that even

when you sit for meditation, the mind continues to revolve around worldly matters.

As per Gita, "The mind of those people who are engaged in continuous activities and wallowing or engaged in riches and enjoyment of sense objects can never be made to remain quiescent."²

According to Lord Krishna, the only means to control the mind are 'repeated practice' (Abhyasa) and "Dispasion" i.e. complete detachment from all worldly objects (Vairagya). There is no other short cut. We have to develop an all-consuming and unwavering love and devotion towards God (for which we have to pray to God regularly and sincerely) and a complete indifference and lack of interest or attraction towards all worldly objects viz. accumulation of money,

² मज्जे इमं विदुः श्रेयसोऽपि निवृत्तमिति विदुः
तद्गमिन्महिष्ठो गमिन्विद्यते
(Gita II - 44)

name and fame, attachment to wife, son and family, indulgence in sex, interest in sports, political affairs, social activities etc. Secondly, whether the mind gets concentrated or not, one should not leave off meditation or Japa. Any number of times the mind goes wandering, one should bring it back to Japa, God etc., patiently again and again. It could take years or even births before we could succeed but we have to pursue this path untiringly. One day Lord's Grace would descend and Samadhi would result, leading one to God-Realisation ultimately.

Q.14. Even though I have had initiation from a Guru and am practising Japa, meditation and Vairagya, I continue to be assailed by sexual thoughts and impulses of passion and lust from time to time. Sometimes I have to indulge in sex and even otherwise I like to be in the company of young women. How can I get over this?

A.

KĀMA VASANA i.e. sexual attraction is extremely difficult to be quelled and even saints and sages have fallen a prey to it during their Sadhana days. It is the grace of God and Guru alone which can completely annihilate this vasana. The following methods could be used:

1. Intensify Japa and meditation.
2. Daily weep before God in private and pray to Him sincerely for His grace.
3. Avoid reading all newspapers, magazines, fiction and books of sensational stories relating to sex.
4. Avoid the company of those people who indulge in sexual talks.

5. Avoid the company of the opposite sex especially when alone even if they are good devotees of God doing sadhana and get out of such company with some excuse.
6. Try to go to Satsangs, participate in Bhajans and cultivate the company of holy men who are highly evolved.
7. Talk to your Guru (if he is a mature and evolved soul) and some of them could help you with a special Mantra or a Bijakshara (a single syllable) which is specific for this vasana.
8. Read the autobiographies and biographies of old and latest saints like Tuka Ram, Jhaneswar, Purandara Das, Nam Dev, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Bhagavan Ramana, etc. daily.
9. Many suggest that one should look at the other sex as one's own mother or father as the case may be. In most cases, in practice, this theoretical advice fails.

- Continuous and regular prayer to God to rid one of this vasana is the best but it should be combined with the rest of the methods suggested above.
10. According to some, the daily reading of LALITA SAHASRANAMA STOTRA and VISHNU SAHASRANAMA STOTRA also (if possible) has been found extremely beneficial.
 11. As early as possible or soon after the sexual thoughts have subsided each time, sit quietly and look at the mere fact that your mind was fully engaged in sexual thoughts. Just look at the fact for a few minutes daily as a witness, without any criticism or judgement as to how bad it was, without any self-accusation or guilt feeling, retrospectively. If done regularly after each time, this method would prove to be very effective.

Q.15. What is PRARABDHA or destiny on account of past actions? Is our entire life predestined including God-realisation? What is the role of self effort and free will? How does Prarabdha differ from Vasanas (past latent tendencies)?

A. Even scientifically, every action must have a reaction (Newton's law of motion). In the same way if we do any bad action in this birth, we cannot get away with it. The punishment for the past bad action or the reward for the past good action will be meted out by the Lord in the next birth and we have to experience them. The punishment in the form of disease, cancer, bereavement, loss of property or reputation etc., give us sorrows while the rewards like being born in an affluent family, getting unexpected fortunes etc., give us joy. This process of reaping the result of past actions is called Prarabdha and it cannot be avoided even though its severity can be mitigated by prayers, grace of a Mahatma etc. In each life, a portion is only destined which comes in the form of events and happenings. In

respect of the balance portion, fresh and new actions are performed (theoretically through a free will) which become the Prarabdha for the next birth and so on so that a continuous chain of births and deaths is forged.

Apart from the reaction it creates in the form of Prarabdha or destiny, every action has another secondary effect. Every action (say going to temples, stealing somebody's money, going to horse-race or casino) leaves an impression in our sub-conscious mind. This impression is called vasana or conditioning. This impression creates a tendency to repeat the action again and again and thus tries to influence our action. The more the number of times an action (say praying to God) is repeated, stronger that particular vasana becomes. The mind along with all the vasanas embedded goes alongwith the subtle body to the body of the subsequent births. Whenever we decide to do a particular action, the various vasanas intrude and try to influence our mind towards either doing it or not doing it or doing some other alternative action. There

will be a conflict of vasanas and the stronger one whose impression is deeper due to more repetition will win the day and we will act as dictated by that vasana. Vasanas may be bad e.g. greed, anger, lust, desire to murder or steal etc., or vasanas may be good e.g. helping others, forgiveness, giving charity etc. By succumbing to these vasanas without using our reason and knowledge we become weak. So even though we have a free will, we do not use it but we feel a prey to the compelling vasanas. Vasanas are mere advisers and theoretically we may use our own free will without heeding the advice of the vasanas. We are like those Governors of States who, in their weakness are completely guided by their advisers and are not prepared to assert their own free will. These vasanas are not unavoidable. Unlike the Prarabdha, the vasanas can be uprooted and self-efforts made to go on the spiritual path. An actor's every action and dialogue in a drama or cinema are completely predestined according to the script of the story but while acting on the stage as per the script, he has every freedom or free will to

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keep his mind on his house and think of his wife and children. Similarly, even while life is patterned on pre-destiny, there is nothing to prevent us from keeping our mind on God and mentally meditate on Him and pray to Him. It only requires our self effort to direct our mind to God.

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Q.16. How can we remove the bad vasanas?

A. Theoretically it can be done by superimposing good vasanas but in practice it becomes impossible more often.

Guru's grace is capable of removing all the bad vasanas. Similarly prayers to God are equally effective.

Each time a bad vasana propels your mind to do a bad action—say playing cards for stakes or playing dice, fight against it. Delay or postpone that action and try to do some other action. Finally, despite all your efforts, you may succumb to your vasanas. It does not matter. If you continue to fight against your bad vasanas every time, inspite of successive failures, each time your free will gets strengthened little by little so that a day will ultimately dawn when you will be able to exercise your free will unimpeded overcoming the vasanas.

Occasional fasting, resorting to silence for a day every week or for a few hours everyday and breathing exercises called Pranayama are all very helpful.

The method of looking at the vasanas, soon after succumbing to them, impartially without judgement or criticism as detailed in method 11 of answer to question 14 regarding quelling of sexual thoughts and impulses holds good in this case too.

Q.17. How can we know whether we have got God or Self-realisation?

A. In the case of an individual who is Self-realised, the limited I or ego identifying with a particular body no longer remains as it has merged in the Supreme Cosmic Consciousness covering the entire cosmos and beyond. He has no body-sense left even though an onlooker looks at him as a form with a body. As the Self or Atman is self aware and as it is always ever liberated (NITYA MUKTA) and ever enlightened (NITYA BUDDHA), the idea that I am Self-realised or I am not Self-realised never arises in him who is no longer linked to this body. These questions arise only to an ignorant mind. Anyone who thinks that he is Self-realised cannot be a realised soul. Many of the sadhaks, at various stages of sadhana, fall into a delusion that they are Self-realised and others also get deluded by them. If you go and ask a rope which was mistaken in the dusk for a snake and subsequently found to be a rope whether it has now realised its nature (Swaroopa) and got out of the

delusion, it will only laugh and exclaim "What are you talking? I had always been a rope. Where is the question of realisation?" So, one has to go on with his sadhana indefinitely till all body-sense disappears completely and the Atman becomes manifest in its Self-awareness.

Q.18. What is Ego or 'I' and how does it harm us? How can it be removed?

A. Whenever an individual says “I have taken my lunch” or “I gave a talk”, he identifies himself with his body-mind complex. Actually every individual consists of two units of opposite characteristics – one the soul or the Self which is unattached, immortal and changeless and the other the body which is subject to birth and death, decay and all other changes. While the bodies are different, the Self is only one and pervades all beings. Due to the wrong identification with the body, the joys, sorrows, diseases, birth and death and all changes are superimposed on the self which is thus subject to all sufferings and miseries. The individual begins to think that he is the doer of all actions and that he experiences their results—good or bad—leading to joy or sorrow. In a workshop where there are different machines, it is the one electricity which activates all the machines to do their respective jobs and the machines have no right to consider themselves as the doers.

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Further, when the one Self reflected in different bodies identifies itself with the body, then it begins to consider each body or things as different from himself resulting in likes and dislikes and concepts of friends and foes and consequent calamities.

If once we realise that we are not the doers and it is the one God or Self who is activating all, we have no right to the results of actions. Then neither virtue (Punya) nor sin (Papa) will accrue to us from these actions. There will be no likes or dislikes, no temptation or attachment and no conflicts with other people. This is the stage of complete surrender to God, where the ego is eliminated. The ego also gets completely annihilated by constant Self-enquiry as to “Who am I?” as advocated by Ramana Maharshi.

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Q.19. According to Buddhists, ultimately there is no Self or Soul or God and it is all a void, a nothing (Soonya). Why can't we accept it?

A. Only those who have experienced or seen themselves whether there is a God or not and whether it is all void have a right to assert that fact. Nobody could say 'I have seen—it is all void' because so long as the seer (one who has seen) exists how could there be a void? The seer was there. A witness once told a judge in a court that at the time of the murder nobody was present in that room. The judge shot back a question—“How do you know that nobody was there unless you were yourself present in that place?” The same is the case here. On the contrary, ever so many Hindu and Christian saints had personal experience of God or Self. The scriptures as also so many books are replete with such instances. Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Bhagawan Ramana are instances of recent past of people who have had God-experience.

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Even Buddha is stated to have refused to comment either way when he was specifically asked whether there was a Soul or God, as it is not something to be taken for granted on the authority of somebody's confirmation but has to be affirmed by one's own experience after sadhana.

Even in our scriptures like 'Devi Kalottaram' there is mention of void (Soonya or Mahasoonya). That only represents a particular higher stage of consciousness where all the things known to us including the entire world ceases to exist in the form known to us, which has been termed as 'Void'.

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Q.20. Some people say that merely reading or reciting blindly the Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, Guru Bani (of Sikhs) etc. is of no use, unless we understand the meaning and adopt them in practice.

A. Any sadhana done with faith and devotion will lead us to God ultimately. It is the faith (sraddha) which really counts. In all the scriptures like Srimad Bhagavatam, Vishnu Sahasranama Stotram etc., it is clearly mentioned that all those who read or hear even a very small part of it (even a part of a stanza) get untold benefits both in their material and spiritual life. If we understand the meaning also, no doubt its effectiveness will be more (वीर्यं शक्तिं). Because of the vibrations emanating from the words, each syllable of which is an energy capsule, the readers and listeners will be raised, in due course, to a higher level of consciousness. Even in the west, in the churches, all the masses and prayers used to be conducted in the Latin language which was not known to many and similarly, in India,

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most of the poojas (worship) and prayers are conducted in Sanskrit language.

Further, the level of consciousness and our fitness for higher spiritual experiences increase only when our body and mind has a preponderance of satwa guna (light, harmony and love). Our body is made up of five basic elements viz. earth, water, fire etc., which are all of either Tamo Guna or Rajo Guna except Space (Akasa) which alone is of Satwa Guna. Just as earth has the quality of smell, water of taste, fire of form etc., the essential quality of space is sound (शब्दगुणस्पर्शगुण). Hence the more the sound of such holy and religious texts goes in and is absorbed by the body, the Akasa constituent in the body increases resulting in increase of Satwa Guna. So long as while reading or hearing these texts the mind is engaged in thoughts of God, one has to evolve to higher stages. Constant remembrance of God is the key to God-realisation and anything which helps in it is an effective sadhana.

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Q.21. Is renouncing the family and worldly life and becoming a sannyasi (monk) essential for God-Realisation?

A. While in family and worldly life, if one can do intense sadhana under the guidance of an evolved Guru, one can definitely reach a very high level of spiritual progress. There are many such instances of householders-saints e.g. Tuka Ram. What is essential is doing all our actions in life without attachment, remaining established in absolute celibacy (Brahmacharya Nishtha) and without any desires or attachment for any worldly object including the family. He should be bereft of likes and dislikes and should have no reactions to any happenings or events whatsoever. He should look upon all beings alike as his own Self. Absolute dispassion (vairagya) is a must. He should have an insatiable love for God. When the vairagya is only lukewarm and not complete, to abandon the family and other worldly duties and running away from them can never be justified.

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However, at the last mature stage, according to Adi Sankara, taking up formal sannyasa is a must for attaining God-realisation. Even the Christians like the Catholics, Buddhists, Sufis, Jains etc. firmly believe that becoming a monk and doing sadhana subject to the prescribed discipline is essential for God-Realisation or liberation (Nirvana). At that mature stage when an individual has reached the highest stage of vairagya to the extent of ignoring his own body needs, he has no duties other than God-realisation.

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Q.22. Can't we attain God by Karma alone, i.e. by doing service to the poor and the needy, to patients suffering from diseases, building schools, hospitals and temples, looking after the animals etc.?

A. The scriptures declare that liberation (on account of God-realisation) can result from Self-knowledge (Jnana) alone (ज्ञानेन कैवल्यं). Adi Sankara has declared unilaterally that while Karma is useful for purification of the mind it cannot be considered as a direct means for Self-realisation even in conjunction with or as supplementing Jnana. As we are all ever realised and as our ignorance is due to the veiling of our divine nature by the inexplicable power of God called 'Maya', it is only the true knowledge and right perception which can lead to Self-realisation and no Karma has any relation to it. Ramana Maharshi also has emphasised and reiterated these views at the very start of his book- "Upadesa Saram".

The sadhana for God-realisation has two parts. The first part is purification of the

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mind (Chitta Suddhi) and the latter part is inviting God to manifest Himself by removing the veil. Meditation, prayers and self-enquiry etc. even though they belong to the latter part, are by themselves capable of doing the purification of mind also.

For people with pre-ponderance of Rajo Guna given to a lot of dynamic activity like Arjuna in Bhagavad Gita and also for people whose faith in God and scriptures is not strong or is lacking, doing selfless service with humility and compassion towards fellow-beings is excellent for purification of the mind and is a must. This is also good for waking up people full of Tamo Guna and given to sloth, laziness and slumbering. Till such time as exclusive love for the Lord, intense desire for Self-realisation or liberation and absolute vairagya towards worldly objects are not awakened in our hearts, we have to start with Karma Yoga. But we should remember the words of Vivekananda "It is good to be born in a church and not to die there". We should know when to get out of Karma yoga and

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move into the path of devotion or Jnana. Devotion or Bhakti automatically leads one to Jnana and vice versa. We come to know fully of the one whom we love. So also we begin to love the one whom we know as perfect.

Q.23. Many Sadhaks claim to have had visions of God, of divine light, of a blue pearl or heard various sounds like that of a flute or a veena (a stringed instrument) etc. Are they signs of God-realisation or at least do they signify substantial progress in the spiritual path?

A. After doing some persistent sadhana one may get such experiences of God-vision, light, sound etc., but they disappear also after some time. They are all mile-stones in our spiritual journey. They give us encouragement by affirming that we are on the right path. As a mile-stone does not travel with us, after some time these experiences disappear. As God is the only reality, any other experiences arising during the sadhana are all in the realm of unreality. We have to ignore them and go ahead with our sadhana. If we begin to get attached to these visions and thus get involved, our further progress may be impeded. As we cannot quantify as to how much of sadhana is required for God-realisation, we cannot say that these experiences signify a specific

percentage of progress. Many advanced sadhaks may not have had any of these visions or other experiences in their entire lifetime. It is not therefore essential at all that one should experience these visions etc. at one stage or the other of one's sadhana. Such experiences depend on various factors like the type of sadhana, their lurking desires and samskaras (conditioning) of their previous births etc.

Q.24. Some people do some actions claiming that they were spontaneous and attributable to inspiration from God and that the command had come from God from inside. Is it correct?

A. Only when the mind gets completely purified and is rid of likes and dislikes (raga and dwesha), desires and attachment, the voice of God can be heard. Till that purification process is complete, any claim to inspiration from God may not be acceptable. So called inspired ideas or thoughts can only be attributed to the vasanas (conditioning) of the mind and one may fall into the error of believing them as God-inspired. When the opportunity for going to America presented itself first to Vivekananda, he was not prepared to believe that it was the mission which God had designed for him till he tested its validity in various ways and got convinced.

Q.25. Is ability to perform miracles like materialising objects or possession of mystic powers like divining the mind, predicting future events, healing diseases etc., a sign of Realised-Souls? How can we develop such powers?

A. While doing sadhanas by certain methods like Pranayamas of various kinds, Tantric Path, Kundalini Yoga and other yogic practices, one develops certain mystical powers. Even while doing meditation, prayers etc., in the scriptural way, one sometimes develops certain powers like divining the mind of other persons, immediate materialisation of desires etc. Some practise Trataka and other methods of hypnotism and mesmerism in order to be able to influence the devotees as they want. Cultivation of such powers is considered in the scriptures as an obstacle to spiritual progress. Sadhaks are always advised not to indulge in their demonstration but to ignore them and go ahead with their sadhana. These are not signs of God-Realisation.

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There are, however, some Siddhas (perfect masters) who inherit these powers as a result of sadhana in their previous birth. In respect of Realised-souls like Ramana Maharshi, even though they disclaimed to use any mystical powers, miracles have happened in their presence when some sincere devotees had approached them with some complaints or problems in their life. Some great souls like Jesus Christ, Shirdi Sai Baba have deliberately used their powers to heal the blind and the lame or to help people in their distress, presumably with a view to induce faith in God in people. They are exceptions.

There are instances of people getting into deep trouble by going to some unscrupulous miracle-mongers. For a sadhak it is wiser not to cultivate such powers and to ignore them if they develop. They should also abstain from going to people who demonstrate their powers with a selfish motive to earn money, name, fame, or for sexual interests.

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Q.26. What is Samadhi state? How to reach it?

A. Samadhi state is the last stage of super-consciousness where one gets merged in the Supreme Self who is the Self of all. At that stage one is not aware of one's body. There are various types of Samadhis but the more important ones are (1) Savikalpa Samadhi and (2) Nirvikalpa Samadhi. In the former, one has a vision of one's personal God while the second is the undifferentiated state where the Supreme Self alone remains and the individuality is lost. In meditation, the body-sense continues to remain while in the Nirvikalpa Samadhi it is completely lost and the mind ceases to function. By being established in the Nirvikalpa Samadhi by repetitions one reaches the natural or Sahaja state where one remains in one's own nature as the Absolute Brahman (or Supreme God) at all times while walking, talking, eating, sleeping etc. In the Samadhi state, there is annihilation of the mind which ceases to work. Even those who reach the Savikalpa stage will finally reach in due course the Nirvikalpa Samadhi automatically.

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Q.27. How can I know whether a person is a realised- soul so that I could adopt him as my Guru?

A. As all the characteristics of a liberated soul delineated in the scriptures e.g., being alike to censure and praise, not giving offence to anybody are all objective qualities, it is very difficult to give an acid test for distinguishing a liberated soul. But the following broad lines can be used with advantage:

He will not be attached to any possessions. He will be naturally humble, shunning all publicity and will not be after earning money, name and fame. He will not be involved in any activities personally e.g. in building Ashrams, temples, running schools, colleges, hospitals, acquiring land and buildings, running industries for manufacturing incense sticks or ayurvedic medicines, running magazines, giving T.V. interviews etc. He will be mostly silent like Ramana Maharshi or if at all he talks he will talk of nothing but God and spiritual

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sadhana like Ramakrishna Paramahansa. He will never criticise anybody nor will he argue on any issue. He will treat all with equal vision irrespective of caste, creed, status, money, education etc. He likes to hear from books on God or devotees, Bhajans or Namasankirtana (Chanting the names of God).

Q.28. Can music (through cassettes or by singing oneself), hearing Bhajans and Dance help in God- realisation?

A. When this question relating to music was put to Bhagavan Ramana, simultaneously pointing out to musician-saints like St. Thyagaraja, St. Purandara Dasa, Surdas, Meera etc., Ramana Maharshi answered, "They all sang what they attained in God-realisation and they did not attain God by singing." While hearing Bhajans may help in early stages, they also come under worldly objects of attraction and one's interest may be diverted from God to the particular tune or Raga or the mellifluous sweetness of the music or the singer. In due course, the cassette may be singing while the sadhak's attention could be elsewhere. If one were to sing Bhajans with emotion keeping his mind continuously on God, it can be helpful initially in concentration. Finally God has to be obtained in silence, in stillness. "Be still and know God."

Q.29. Why should God give sufferings, miseries and sorrows to people?

A. God never gives sufferings to anybody. All the sorrows and sufferings are of our own making, the result of our own past actions. For the river of life to flow, it requires two banks opposite to each other—Joy and Sorrow. When a Master was negotiating a boat in a river, his disciple asked him this very question. The Master gave the disciple a paddle and directed him to run the boat. The boat was only circling around and did not move. Then the Master told him “Just as this boat requires two paddles, we require both joy and sufferings to run this boat of life.”

Every suffering is a ladder to approach God. It awakens a slumbering man from his indifference to his spiritual weal. It is only in suffering that many people begin to think of God and praying to Him.

Q.30. How long will it take a Sadhak to achieve his goal of Self-realisation? Is it possible to assess one's progress from time to time?

A. Nowhere it is laid down that after doing so much Japa or so many hours of sadhana God-realisation will take place. Further we do not know how much of sadhana had already been done in previous births. So we should continue to do sadhana with infinite patience, surrendering ourselves completely in God's hands but with such zeal and enthusiasm as if the goal is near at hand. It is God's grace alone which is the most important factor in getting God-realization.

As the entire progress takes place inside on a subtle plane, it is not possible for anybody to assess his own progress on this path. We have to go with the firm faith that with every sadhana we do we are forging ahead.

ANSWERS TO BASIC SPIRITUAL QUESTIONS OF SADHAKS -
a book Containing questions put by sincere sadhaks and
enlightening replies by Revered **Sri Swami Shantananda Puri**

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Samarpana

This Book is dedicated with veneration to
the Lotus Feet of my revered Guru
Swami Purushottamanandaji
of Vasishtha Gufa, Uttaranchal, Himalayas
whose spontaneous grace and compassion
have inebriated and inspired me to
venture into writing this book.

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INTRODUCTION

Lord Krishna's injunction¹ is that one should approach a wise person well established in the knowledge of Final Truth and learn by questioning him thoroughly but in all humility in all matters relating to spiritual practice and the ultimate truth. The Scriptural injunction² to the teachers is that one should never speak voluntarily on spiritual things unless questioned specifically.

It is also a fact that there will be no end to all the doubts until and unless one gets God-Realisation.³ It cannot also be gainsaid that in

1. तद्विद्धि प्रणिपातेन परिप्रश्नेन सेवया ।
उपदेक्ष्यान्ति ते ज्ञानं ज्ञानिनस्तत्त्वदर्शिनः ॥ (B.Gita 4-34)
2. नापुष्टः कस्यचिद् ब्रूयात्
भिक्षाते हृदयग्रन्थिः छिद्यन्ते सर्वसंशयाः
3. क्षीयन्ते चास्य कर्माणि तस्मिन् दृष्टे परावरे

(Mundakopanishad II - 8)

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the present days when people involved deeply in worldly life desire to do Spiritual Sadhana they are beset with so many doubts and unless such basic doubts are got clarified to their satisfaction they find themselves unable to proceed on the spiritual path. This book could be of some use to such seekers.

One night, when I was locked inside the Mown Mandir at Ambaji in Gujarat for 47 days, all these 30 questions mentioned in the book were brimming up in my mind one after the other in a sequence again and again compulsorily so that I was obliged to get up and note them down on a sheet of paper, when only I could go to sleep. The answers were then attempted based on the knowledge gleaned from my own Guru, other saints and Scriptures. Actually many of these questions had been repeated so often to me during my days of wandering over many places.

Ideally, a perfect answer to any spiritual question can only be in perfect silence. About

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Lord Dakshinamurthy who is the pioneer of the tradition of Gurus, it is told:

गुरोस्तु मौनं व्याख्यानं शिष्यास्तु छिन्नसंशयाः ।

(दक्षिणामूर्ति स्तोत्रम्)

‘The Guru explained in the eloquence of silence and all the doubts of his disciples were set at rest.’ In order to reach that stage of understanding in silence, it is essential in earlier stages that one should get some guidance through verbal communication. The answers have been made precise, compact and self-sufficient to the extent possible. It is hoped that the book will not only be of use to many a fresh seeker but also to many advanced seekers too whose basic knowledge about God and His relationship with man remains incomplete.

Swami Shantananda Puri