

Q&A on Meditation

Q: How can I surrender to God?

Mark: The ability to surrender to God is a gift from God. You must seek that gift with all your heart. Surrender is profound, and, from what I can tell, one of God's favorite subjects. He/She takes it very seriously. Surrender is not a path to be taken lightly because it eventually consumes everything. If you want to surrender, place God in your heart and see where it leads you. Go there fearlessly. It is easy to say and hard to do.

Q: I've been wondering about devotion—bhakti. In looking at paths that are oriented towards devotion such as chanting the names of God, I wonder if I'm missing something by focusing only on meditation.

Mark: I know what you mean about chanting. There's nothing like great devotional music. The heart burns with fire in an instant. Chanting the names of God is an incredible way of bringing God into the hearts of people and can be done at any time in any place.

But the idea of bhakti (devotion) runs deeper than that. It is essentially the means of losing one's identity in the universal identity of God. However that is done, it is bhakti. It can be done through esoteric practices such as recitation of mantras, chanting, or meditation. It also can be done in the silent and potent form of surrender—namely, the willingness to drop one's self-identity and one's self-importance in every situation and serve God at any time in any place. The Sufis call this resignation. The turning over of one's life to the life of spirit is a very intense decision that everyone makes in their own heart on their own terms.

For this reason, the idea of externalization of devotion is not necessary. In fact, frequently there are subtle dynamics other than devotion going on during the externalization of one's devotional feeling. There's a time and place for such externalization, but the serious issue of devotion to God is not emotional. In situations that systematically bring out emotionality, you're dealing with something a little bit different than just devotion. Once you have traveled the path for some time, and the decision to surrender has been made, then you learn how to provide whatever service is required with clarity, love and skill. Emotion has become a deep burning ember within the depths of the soul that informs and awakens the mind.

So, my answer to you would be, first, look deep within for the expression of devotion before expressing it outwardly. Let it build, feel it, come to some experience of it. The external expression will then come naturally.

And if you feel like saying or chanting the names of God, by all means do so. Devotion is broadly expressed.

Q: I'm able to meditate when I'm with you, but when I'm at home I feel frightened because I didn't know that meditating would generate so much energy. It's bringing up a lot of fear that I'll disappear, or that it's just too much for me. What do I do with this experience?

Mark: Don't be afraid. The only thing that will disappear is the false "I." There is a lot of energy in meditation, and it begins to subvert the island of the false identity. We have formed an attachment to the false ego-based "I", and as this begins to go away we feel that we are dying. It's not true. This is a trick of the ego. When the mediation starts to bite into the egocentric identity, a critical point in spiritual life is reached. This is one of the first points where a person needs to realize what is actually shifting. The fear reflex is related to the survival component of the ego. It is not that the ego is going to be annihilated since there will still be a sense of self.

The psychic apparatus is supposed to be just an organ like your ears or other senses. It is supposed to provide a simple identity and listing capacity so we can separate the sky from earth, move through our lives, and do our work. It is not supposed to rule our lives. As identity shifts, there will be pangs of fear but the fear is irrational. All that will happen is the true Self will become ever-increasingly dominant. Your identity will change. You'll see parts of yourself that at one time you held very dearly in a new light and say, "Oh, my god, that's awful. I need to change that."

When we enter meditation with sheer abandon, there is so much work that happens. A single powerful mediation wipes away emotional fog and all the subtle forms of obstacles inside one's system. As these obstructions are wiped away, the basic material forming our identity is shifted. We have altered the fundamental database. Nirvana means "to extinguish." What is it that's extinguished? It is the separate identity, the sense of separate existence. This leaves you, dissolves, and doesn't come back. So, you have to come up with a different worldview. You are drawing more and more on the true Self, the true identity. This is an enriching and empowering component of life. It is what gives life meaning.

Very powerful mediations are like visitations from God. You start to tremble; that presence is unnerving. The ego does not survive.

Q: I've been thinking that there was me and there was grace; and grace would happen to me. Frequently there would be a merging of grace and me, and I noticed that thoughts would start manifesting into results immediately. As I watched this, I noticed that I was in a place that was not separate from me. Could you comment on this?

Mark: That's the progression. The separation, the interval is imagined by the mind and is a lot of what the purification of karma is. A lot of the mental activity is the firing of samskara inside one's system. As it starts to wear down and dissolve, the dynamic that seems to generate the churning of the mind stops. The mind slows way down and stops. What becomes present is the grace that was always there. All activity becomes more and more grace-filled; the difference between grace and activity goes away. The life force and grace merge. The process of aligning with grace is mysterious and is the essence of spiritual life.

Q: Sometimes I get confused as to how much of this process is a doing and how much is an allowing?

Mark: This can be confusing. Spiritual practices open a door and introduce your attention to a reflex of consciousness that is going on inside you. Practice helps you gain the knowledge and experience of this reflex. The practice has a series of stages and steps that brings you into contact with a profound truth that is ALREADY HAPPENING inside you but the practice is not causing anything. A practice is like opening a window to enter a place where you can touch something that is already there.

In quantum physics it is said that a dynamic occurs between the observer and the observed phenomena and that this dynamic produces an effect. That is true. Getting to the point where you can reach inside yourself, find the coiled serpent, pay attention to it, and intend it to rise produces a very dramatic event. The kundalini will rise; you will have the experience of enormous energy surging through your system, moving up into the brain, changing the chemical balance of the brain, and producing a cosmic spiritual event in your existence.

You will feel the presence of God. You will feel the falling away of your own identity. You will feel the merging of the self in the divine presence. These are all intangible experiences, impossible to describe. Yet, when you have these experiences, you feel them to be amongst the most meaningful experiences you have had in any lifetime.

Your intelligence has to be very subtle. If you observe closely, you will see that it is the Self that seeks the Self. The self of the individual at one level turns itself into a pretzel, wraps around a pole seven times, looks inside itself, and sees the Self. There is something very powerful there. The act of seeking the Self draws the Self towards you with great force. It was already there. You sought it, so it comes towards you. As It comes towards you, you experience the impact of Its striking you. The seeker that sought the Self has the impact of having found the Self and is thus changed again.

It's a play of consciousness; so it is both a doing and an allowing. All things arise simultaneously. If you remember that, it makes everything easier. Once you truly get it, it's like a Zen koan, "Everything arises simultaneously. Everything arises spontaneously". It keeps changing. That's the koan nature of it.

You have put your finger directly on a profound principle about simultaneous and spontaneous arising. If you think about it some more, your ability to perform all these practices will go from 50 to 5,000 in the very next breath. The practices themselves are like moves in Tai Chi; they are something in themselves but it is what you do with them that counts. Practices are means. They are expressions of something; expressions of what, you have to determine and understand.

Meditation is like an express train to the Self.