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Means to Spiritual Perfection

by Swami Tejomayananda

When we want to achieve any goal, we must have a means or method for reaching that goal. This necessity of a “means” is true in the material as well as in the spiritual world. To reach anywhere, there must be a way of getting there. Means in itself, however, does not guarantee the reaching of a desired goal. Success lies in how the person uses the means. Right use of appropriate means presupposes intelligence. In spiritual pursuits, the means themselves are inert (*jaḍa*), and it is the aspirant who is endowed with the power of intelligence. Intelligent use of correct means for achieving a desired goal brings success. The goal is called *sādhya*; the spiritual aspirant or one who desires to reach the *sādhya* is called the *sādhaka*; and the process or means by which the *sādhya* is reached is called *sādhanā*.

Two Types of Spiritual Practice

“Practice makes perfect” is a common statement. However, when we apply it to the spiritual goal, these words are not entirely true. What exactly is meant by, “Practice makes perfect?” Practice of any action at the physical level leads to a mechanical behavior. Even though precision may be achieved the behavior remains mechanical. In order to know the deeper significance of any action there must be correct understanding of its purpose. To have this kind of understanding is quite rare. In terms of material achievement, mere mechanical action may be adequate

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to meet a desired end. But when we examine spiritual goals, it is essential that we have correct understanding as to why we do certain things. In spiritual practice (*sādhana*), the effort must be conscious and calculated, and not mechanical. Spiritual *sādhana* are of two types: a) Those practices that are used to gain a purified inner equipment *antaḥkaraṇa śuddhi*, and (b) those that are used to remove ignorance or *avidyā*, about the true nature of the Self.

In order to gain the Higher, we need to develop pure *sāttvika* qualities. Therefore we must undertake various forms of spiritual practices that will bring about purification. The first type of *sādhana* explains the various forms of practices that will bring about purification at the mental and intellectual levels (physical purity is already taken for granted). Practices such as repeating the Lord's name (*japa yoga*), austerities (*tapas*), pilgrimages (*yātrā*), worship (*pūjā*), and other activities such as charity (*dāna*) and dedicated selfless work, are all performed to purify the mind and intellect. As we stated earlier, mere mechanical action is fruitless. It is the right use and understanding of the means that is essential if success is to be achieved. For example, when worshiping an idol, we must see the Ideal in the idol, see it only as the "Truth" it represents, and not as a piece of stone. If our mind is not centered on the Lord with devotion then no matter how beautiful the flowers, the incense, or the rituals, it will not lead to purification of the mind.

The second type of *sādhana*, which, when correctly undertaken brings about the removal of ignorance of the Self, is basically of three types: *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nidhidhyāsana*.

Śravaṇa is listening to the *śruti* (scripture) from a guru. This is not merely the hearing of words, but rather attentive and single-pointed listening to the true meaning of the guru's words. Real listening is putting the mind behind the ears, and not dissipating it into any other field of thought. This true *śravaṇa* must have a degree of *antaḥkaraṇa śuddhi* or purity of mind as a prerequisite. The mind must be calm and non-dissipating to some

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extent before such attentive listening is possible. Hence we see the need for *antaḥkaraṇa śuddhi*.

Mananam is literally, “reflection upon what has been heard.” *Manana* is the process of making concrete what the teacher has taught. Making the knowledge one’s own is a prerequisite before the third *sāadhanā* of *nidhidhyāsana*, can be undertaken.

Nidhidhyāsana is meditation or contemplation, that is, coming to “know” for oneself through direct experience, what has been discussed in the scriptures. This process is the conversion of intellectual knowledge (the theory) to subjective experience.

Spiritual Perfection

We now come to the question of spiritual perfection. What exactly is spiritual perfection? The goal to be reached is by nature already perfect, while the means, the *sāadhanā* for reaching that goal, are imperfect. All actions, due to their very nature, are imperfect. There appears to be a paradox here: the goal is perfect; yet *sāadhanā*, the means, is imperfect!

We can resolve this confusion by examining the nature of ignorance *avidyā*, and the goal, the Self. The Self is already perfect. Whatever *sāadhanā* we have undertaken does not “make the Self more perfect” for the Self is already *Sat* (existence) *Cit* (awareness/knowledge) and *Ānanda* (perfect/bliss). Actions are imperfect by nature. *Sāadhanā* helps to purify the mind and prepares it for the revelation of the Self that is already there in all Its perfection. Let me give some examples: *Avidyā* may be regarded as a veil of ignorance. It is like dust on a mirror. When we dust off the dirt from the mirror’s surface (through *sāadhanā*) the essential nature of the clear mirror is revealed. The dusting itself did not endow the reflective capacity to the mirror, as the reflective capacity is the very nature of the mirror. It is like clouds covering the rays of the sun. The sun is always shining fully, but we think the sun is not there and we see only darkness.

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Swami Vivekananda gave another example of this removal of the veil of ignorance and revelation of the Self. When a statue or a picture is about to be unveiled at a first public showing, the statue or the picture is already behind the covering. If we make a small hole in the cloth we can see a small area of the picture and as we cut the hole to a larger size, (that is through more and more *sāadhanā*) more and more of the picture is revealed to us. We do not create the picture as it is already there and only the veil prevents our direct vision of it.

Correct understanding and single-pointedness of effort are necessary in order to achieve any end. But essentially all that is required is devotion. True devotion brings real success. Devotion is defined as love at the supreme level for the work undertaken, love for a higher ideal. Devotion is the key to spiritual *sāadhanā*. In this attitude of reverent devotion, the seeker carries out his work as *karma yoga* with all fruits of actions dedicated to the Lord of his heart. As the result comes, he gladly and humbly accepts it in an attitude of *prasāda-buddhi*, taking all result as *prasādam* or blessing from the Lord. Hence we see that the means to spiritual perfection is *sāadhanā* for (a) purification of the inner equipment and (b) removal of ignorance, as the basis. When impurity and ignorance are removed, the Self reveals itself in all its perfection and the seeker surrenders to the Lord in all devotion. This is the means to spiritual perfection.

