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Publisher's Desk

Letting Go of Past and Future

A peaceful and effective life is waiting for those who undertake the not-so-easy work required to live in the eternal now

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Many individuals find that when they sit down to meditate their mind is constantly thinking about past and future events. They find that their mental power is seriously dispersed rather than being intensely focused. Though less obvious, this can also happen when we visit a temple. My guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, gives an insightful description of this phenomenon. "How many times have you gone to the temple without being fully there? Part of you was there, part of you was living in the past, part of you was trying to live in the future; and there you were, emoting over the things that happened that should never have happened, and fearful of things that might happen in the future, which probably won't happen unless you continue being fearful of their happening until you create them!"

Focusing the mind, controlling our thoughts, is clearly central to successful meditation. The fact that Patanjali chose this subject for the first sutra of his Yoga Sutras affirms its centrality to the meditative process: "Yoga is restraining the mind stuff from taking various forms." Beyond helping us be successful in meditation, a focused mind benefits us in other ways. With a focused mind, we will be more successful in our outer activities at work and at school. Another plus is that a focused mind is a peaceful, contented mind. From that peaceful platform we can turn within and more easily contact our intuition, our superconscious mind, the inner voice, and benefit from the wisdom and creativity it provides.

A good way to measure the level of mental distraction you are experiencing is to walk outdoors with young children. They will always notice many more details of the surroundings than you because their minds are not yet drawn to past and future concerns. Having established the goal--a focused mind, a mind that is not constantly wandering into the past and future--what are some specific techniques we can apply to harness our thoughts?

Keeping up to Date with the Past: Let's look first at how we can conquer unnecessary thoughts about the past. Often we think about past events because they are not resolved. They are events that we do not fully understand or accept. Reconciling the past gives freedom and clarity, as Patanjali explained: "As soon as all impurities have been removed by the practice of spiritual disciplines--the limbs of yoga--a man's spiritual vision opens to the light-giving knowledge of the Atman."

It is helpful to distinguish between recent unresolved events and those that happened some time ago. The subconscious mind will for some weeks throw up or present recent events to the conscious mind many times a day. This is a clear indication that an experience is unresolved. After a few weeks, the subconscious will stop its frequent reminders and suppress the experience. Suppressed experiences accumulate in the subconscious, creating an anxious, troubled nature.

It is good, therefore, to act to resolve each experience while this reminding process is going on rather than to simply wait it out and forget about the happening. It often works to seek a resolution to the matter by discussing it with those involved. If we have hurt the feelings of others, an apology may be appropriate. If our feelings have been hurt, then we may need to forgive others. In such ways, the emotional component of the experience can be defused and the matter resolved.

Unresolved experiences that happened some time ago will also come to mind, but less frequently than recent ones. It is usually no longer appropriate to apologize or seek apology, as the other parties would not understand why we are bringing up the matter after such a long time. A good alternative is to write down anything from your past that concerns you and burn the paper, holding the intent that the memory

will be neutralized. If you are successful with your subconscious journaling, you will still remember, but without the attending emotions.

Resolving the past may be more of a challenge than one expects. A common problem is an inability to forgive someone--such as an abusive father--for how they treated us. A helpful philosophical approach is to focus on the law of karma by affirming that Something we did in the past caused those experiences to come to us in the present. Our father was simply the means through which that karma was experienced. Rather than continuing the unproductive pattern of blaming him, we can inwardly thank him for providing us the opportunity to face our difficult karmas. It is amazing how a simple change in our attitude toward such a thing can transform our reaction to it.

Reining in the Future: How can we conquer unnecessary thoughts, especially negative anticipations, of the future? Many such thoughts fall into the category of worry. We are concerned that certain events may happen, sometimes to the extent of becoming fearful. A remedy that Gurudeva stressed is to employ a simple affirmation. When the mind starts to worry, say to yourself, "I'm all right, right now." Keep repeating this affirmation until you are convinced that everything is fine in the present moment.

Mulling over major decisions is another type of concern about the future. A common practice is to ponder the decision often but without thinking it through and reaching a conclusion, instead jumping each time to another topic. Hence, it becomes a source of worry. An effective way to dispatch the matter is to make a formal appointment with yourself at a time you are free to focus on it fully--for example, 10am on Saturday morning. If you find yourself mulling it over before then, discipline your mind by affirming, "I have an appointment on Saturday to decide this matter, and therefore there is no need to think about it right now."

These and other techniques can be used to focus the mind in the present rather than dwelling on the past or the future. Once the strong pulls of past and future have been subdued, we can concentrate on reducing the miscellaneous thoughts about current concerns, such as plans for the day or the news we saw on TV last night. These can be restrained by practicing pranayama, breath control. A simple, effective technique is to breathe in for nine counts, hold for one count, breathe out for nine counts and hold for one count. After breathing in this way for a few minutes, your thinking process will naturally calm down.

When we manage to center our mind in the present and quiet the cacophony of miscellaneous thoughts, we experience a higher state of consciousness. Gurudeva refers to this as the eternal now: "The mind lives in the past, and the mind tries to live in the future. But when you quiet your mind, you live in the present. You are living within your soul, or the higher state of your mind which is undisturbed by the things of time."

The Mountaintop Perspective: One of the abilities available to us once we have freed ourselves of vexations of past and future is to clearly see patterns in our life, and in the lives of others. It is the proverbial state of being able to see the forest instead of the trees. In his early teaching years Gurudeva cultivated this ability by taking his devotees on pilgrimage each month to the top of a nearby mountain from which they could look down on the cities below. This practice was helpful in developing the skill of perceiving the overview.

An example of a typical mental pattern that can be seen and then improved upon is the habit of making a decision to pursue a project but then giving it up when the first major obstacle is encountered. Once this tendency to quit is perceived, we can work to create a new habit of persevering in our endeavors even when faced with obstacles. A second example is the tendency to make resolves to increase our spiritual practices, sadhanas, but then relinquishing our commitment after spending time with nonreligious friends. This problem can be overcome by spending more time with spiritual friends and less time with naysayers.

Another benefit that comes from living in the eternal now is the ability to turn within and feel the spiritual power within the spine. There is a dynamic force there that, when experienced, gives us renewed inspiration and positiveness. When we are feeling a bit discouraged, we can find new energy and enthusiasm to meet the tasks at hand by quieting our thoughts and tuning in to this spiritual force felt along the spine.

Let me share a final insight from Gurudeva on experiencing the eternal now: "Can you visualize yourself, right at this instant, balanced on the top of a tall tree? If the tree were to bend too far forward, you would fall to the ground, or down into time and thought. If it were to bend too far back, you would again fall. Balanced on the top of this tree, you can look out over the countryside and enjoy everything you

see. But if you stop to think about one thing of the past, you would become so engrossed in what you are thinking about that you again fall to the ground. You find that you cannot live in a thinking consciousness balanced so high. Here you live in the eternal now, with great awareness of what is around you and within you, but with no thought on it."