

Three obstacles to spiritual path

Swami Maheshwarananda Puri explains to **R.C. Ganjoo** some of the finest and sensitive facets of *yoga* which help individuals to explore the path of "Light" within and beyond.



There are three "diseases" that frequently afflict the *Antahkarna* hindering our spiritual development. These are *MALA* (not to be confused with Mala -prayer beads), *VIKSHEPA* AND *AVARANA*.

- *MALA* means impurity, physical as well as mental
- *VIKSHEPA* are internal and external disturbances that plague us
- *AVARNA* is the curtain of " not

knowing" that clouds our consciousness

There is an allegory for this : A coin lies on the bottom of a bowl filled with water. If the water is dirty (*Mala*), also turbulent (*Vikshepa*) and on the top of that, is covered by a cloth (*Avarna*), we cannot see the coin at the bottom of the vessel.

Steps taken in isolation do not help. If we only remove the cloth, our vision will still be obstructed by the waves. And even if the waves subside, we are still unable to discern the coin because water is polluted and cloudy. Then, what to do ? All three obstacles must be

removed .

Firstly, we must take the cloth away, then filter and purify the water and lastly quieten the waves. Then the coin can be seen clearly.

MALA are our impure thoughts. They obscure and darken our mind. We are mistaken if we think that no-one can read our thoughts. We know exactly what we are thinking.

"Freedom of thought' is our birthright, but we should not forget that every thought, as well as every action, comes back to us as *Karma*.

External dirt is simple to remove, but inner impurities stick in the depths of our consciousness and

are not so easily disposed of. To purify our body we need, perhaps, just under one hour, but we may require several lifetimes to purify our consciousness.

VIKSHEPA are disturbances that can stem either from the outer world or our inner world. We can protect ourselves and take precautions against external disturbances like noise, heat or cold; but attacks from inside, such as fears and complexes, are only prevented with difficulty. Nervousness, worry and annoyance are internal disturbances that churn up our mind and obstruct us until we are able to get to their root cause.

AVARANA is the curtain of ignorance that dulls the mind. This veil is the reason for us not recognising who we really are, as the following story illustrates:

A young lion was abandoned by its mother in the wilderness and taken in by a herd of goats. It got goat's milk to drink and lived within them in the same stall. So, naturally, it thought it was also a goat. It bleated like them and also ate grass like them.

One day wild lion came that wanted to have a goat for breakfast. All the goats, including the young lion that truly believed itself to be a goat, took to their heels. The lion was very surprised that there was an animal of the same species as himself that behaved like goat and so decided to take a closer look. He caught the little lion and it began to bleat pitifully: "Don't do me any harm. I am just a poor, weak goat."

The big lion replied: "Why do you speak such nonsense? You are not a goat but a lion like me.

But the little lion did not believe a word of this and continued wailing incessantly. Finally, the big lion snatched the little one by scruff of the neck and carried it to watering hole and said: "Look at your reflection and tell me whether you look like me or like a goat"

Here the little lion finally realised his mistake and from that time on behaved like a proper lion and no longer like a goat.

This parable shows that often we

great poverty, were in the habit of wandering through the woods every day to gather firewood. One day Lord Shiva and Parvati were also walking in this region. When Parvati saw the pitiable pair she was seized by deep compassion. Her mother's heart hurt with the sight of them and she became angry with Shiva because he allowed no help to come to these pious and thoroughly decent people.

Reproachfully, she said to him: "Truly, I do not understand you! You throw gold after bad people,

even when they disown and ridicule you. And these two who are pious and devoted remain destitute. Give them something so they do not continue to live in want and are able to spend a peaceful old age.

"You do not understand," answered Shiva. "I really would like to give them everything but they would not accept it."

Unbelievably,

Parvati shook her head, but Shiva said he could prove it to her right now and lay a pile of gold coins on the path that both of the old people would take. He then hid with Paravati behind a bush to observe further events.

While walking the old people chatted with one another about this and that. Suddenly the old woman asked: "How does a blind person actually find his way around the woods? One day it could really happen that we are also blind. Let us try it once to see how it would be.

"Good, count me in," said the man.

"We can blindfold ourselves with



not only don't recognise the false self-image we have of our true nature but even deny it. Our *Atma* (the Self) is itself God. But in the West we believe that God is a long way away and that we are weak, sinful creatures. To discover our true Self we need only look in the inner mirror of our soul. But many are too afraid and deliberately close their eyes.

It is our destiny to claim our divine inheritance. Instead we prefer to eke out a poor and wretched existence. There is another story that illustrates this clearly:

An elderly couple, who lived in

cloth. I'll take a stick to find the way. You place your hand on my shoulder and follow me."

No sooner said than done. Now as they both came towards the gold they naturally did not see it and painfully kicked their feet against it. "Blast it !" they shouted. "What stupid and thoughtless person put stones in the middle of the path without considering that blind people also walk and could injure themselves!"

Sighting , Shiva turned towards Parvati and asked : "Do you believe me now ? It has happened repeatedly in this way until I abandoned trying to give anything to these two."

How often does God offer us a valuable opportunity directly " at our feet"-but we are not aware of it. Sometimes we are struck completely by blindness and so miss best opportunity of our life. This is what is meant by *Avarana* here: to look away at precisely the wrong moment, or to give up just one step away from fulfilment.

Avarna is also our doubts and fears, the inner feelings of loneliness and hopelessness, as well as prejudice, intolerance, intellectual bias and much more. *Avarana* has many facets that all have one thing in common -- they prevent the vision of the one reality, God.

But how can we get rid of the three stumbling stones of *MALA*, *VIKSHEPA* and *AVARANA*?

- Mental impurities (*MALA*) are purified through Satsang (spiritual society and gatherings)
- Inner disturbances (*VIKSHEPA*) are counteracted with a positive mental attitude ,through relaxation, concentration and meditation.
- The veil of ignorance (*AVARANA*) is penetrated with faith and trust as we follow the words of the Master and the Holy

Scriptures, breaking down the inner barriers and prejudices and opening to new experiences.

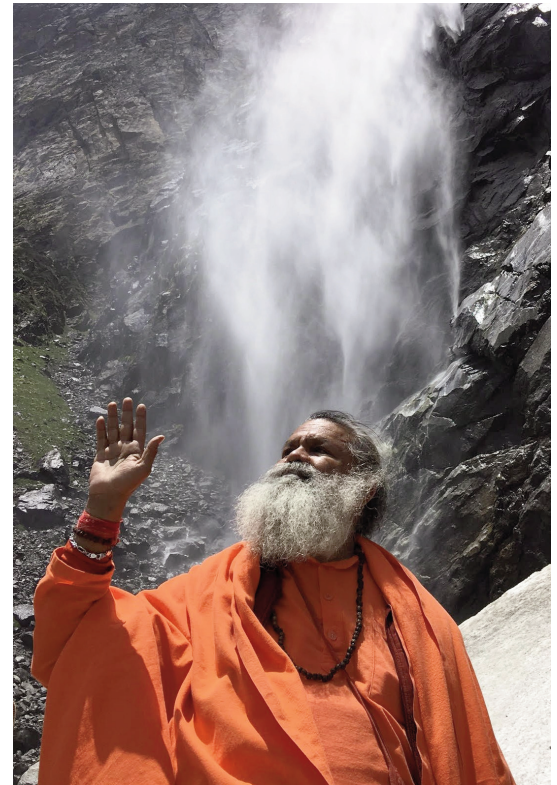
A simple and extremely effective spiritual practices that frees us from *MALA*, *VIKSHEPA* and *AVARANA* can be practised very easily by anyone in everyday life. This is *ANUPASANA*.

ANU is a tiny little part, "and atomic particle"; *UPASANA* means to follow , to perform, to practise , to start on something .

ANUPASANA is a "small resolve" that barely costs any time or expenditure, but with regular practice brings invaluable benefits. It promotes spiritual development, develops willpower and self-confidence, purifies our "inner field" and protects against internal and external disturbances.

Practise something that you would like to do that is of benefit to yourself or another every day. It doesn't need to be some great undertaking , begin with little steps.

- For example , change an unhealthy habit. Drink fewer cups of coffee or eat fewer sweets.
 - Begin to build up good spiritual habits; for example, saying you *mantra* five times when you get up, before each meal and before sleeping.
 - Do something for nature and animals. Feed birds and woodland creatures whenever the opportunity presents itself.
 - Within your family be willingly to do one extra thing that you have previously avoided.
 - Turn towards your fellow humans with more love. Create a little joy for a colleague you have not previously paid any attention to, or similar acts of kindness.
- There are thousands of



possibilities for delighting others and ourselves through small, loving gestures. Accomplish these with the thought:

" I am not the doer. It is God who is doing through me. God alone is the doer."

Even the smallest endeavour bears rich fruit through the grace of God.

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