

What is austerity? Most people think of austerity as adopting some discipline that is uncomfortable for the body for a spiritual purpose. In the name of religion and devotion, people all over the world practice austerities. You have heard of nuns and monks beating themselves with whips. In the Himalayas, you will see some people seated in the Ganges River at three o'clock in the morning trying to endure the icy cold water. Then there are people who gaze without winking for hours and hours and people who fast for a long time. Some people take up the vow of not speaking (*mauna*) when they are teenagers and do not speak a word until they are advanced in years!

Many observers are amazed by these practices and consider them something quite extraordinary. People say, "How great a Saint this person is; he has been practicing austerity for such a long time." But from an advanced point of view, these external things should not delude you.

Real austerity has a Divine purpose. Austerity is a mystical process that enables you to purify your mind and brings you closer to God—that is real austerity. Austerity must make your body and mind fit for a higher purpose. If, instead, austerity makes your body crippled and your mind stunted, that austerity has no meaning—although it may be quite dazzling to the masses.

Austerity Makes You the Master of Yourself

Practicing austerity implies adopting a life of healthy discipline. Learn to wake up at a certain time, perform your duties without being sluggish, and develop promptness and punctuality. All these are austerities. In the beginning, an austerity may seem bitter. Your ego may complain terribly. But gradually as you persist, you begin to enjoy it.

For example, when you first begin rising in the morning at four o'clock for meditation and Yoga exercises, you may have difficulty adjusting to your new pattern for awhile because you are not accustomed to it. If anyone awakens you to help you keep your vow, you may get angry with that person. But as you begin to pursue this new discipline, you begin to enjoy it. Now you expect people to wake you up, and if they do not wake you up, you become angry with them!

When you begin to enjoy a disciplined life, it is no longer discipline. Austerity should not fill you with a sense of pathos. You should not feel that you are renouncing something, or practicing something painfully difficult. Rather, austerity should be considered a Divine luxury for an aspirant because it allows you to be a master of yourself, not a slave.

When you lack austerity, you become a slave. A



AUSTERITY

THE MYSTIC PATH OF INCREASING JOY

slave may be given all types of rewards, and have wonderful robes and ornaments, yet he still lives a life of dependence. Similarly, though you may have a lot of things, if you lack austerity and discipline in your personality, you remain dependent on the circumstances in the world around you for your happiness. This process of austerity enables you to become a master of yourself.

In the Gita, Lord Krishna speaks of three types of austerity: *satwic*, *rajasic*, and *tamasic*. *Tamasic* austerity is a gross form of austerity that is characterized by inflicting pain on oneself or on others.

Suppose, for example, a person feels intense hatred towards another. Somewhere he reads that a particular mantra will destroy the enemy, and that if he were to repeat that mantra while standing in the cold Ganges for hours at a stretch the mantra will be quickly effective. So, early in the morning he enters into the Ganges and stands there repeating the mantra. People observing him think he is a wonderful ascetic, but all the while his mind is building up terrible negativity: “Now the mantra is going to gain power, and when the mantra is effective I will throw off my enemy and crush him!” That is *tamasic* austerity.

Rajasic austerity is characterized by show, ostentatiousness. A person who is hypocritical may externally show himself practicing great austerity, but internally, in his private life, there is no real practice of self-restraint. For example, a person on the spiritual path may assert, whenever he is in the company of others, “I do not like any sweets; I am rigid in my diet.” But when he is alone he runs to his home, opens the refrigerator and starts eating ice cream and cake. That is *rajasic* austerity. *Rajasic* austerity is done for receiving honor and admiration, even though there may not be any basis for it, and it is selfish in nature.

Satwic austerity is the austerity that an aspirant must understand and practice. In the seventeenth chapter of the Gita, Lord Krishna gives a comprehensive outline of such austerity, indicating that it is of three types—physical, vocal and mental. You practice austerity with your body, with your speech and with your mind.

THE THREE ASPECTS OF SATWIC AUSTERITY

PHYSICAL AUSTERITY

One aspect of physical austerity implies serving saintly personalities, spiritual preceptors, and men of wisdom. Such people have a mission designed to help humanity, so as you serve and adore them, your personality also is utilized for serving humanity. Your body becomes a disciplined tool for serving a greater cause, and you learn

the art of using your energy for the good of others. Thus through *satsanga* (good association), as well as obedience to Guru and a spirit of selfless service, one practices this aspect of *satwic* physical austerity.

The next aspect of physical austerity is *arjawa* or simplicity. *Arjawa* implies allowing your body to be simple. Through your body, you should exude simplicity, not ostentatiousness. Do not put on airs as you interact with people. Rather, an aspirant who desires Liberation must discipline his body, his manner, his movements so that he is ever ready to bow down in humility before the Self in all.

When there is conceit within your mind, it reflects in your very bones. When you keep your head held high for every reason, naturally calcification develops in the spine. But when there is flexibility and adaptability in your personality, it allows the *prana* (life-force) to flow in the body more freely.

In the early stage of spiritual practice, when you bow down before a Deity or before great personalities, your mind may not be ready for it; but as you physically begin to bow down your mind becomes inclined to do so. Your mental state reflects in your body; in turn your physical state influences the mind. Therefore, you begin your austerity with the physical body and it affects the mind.

There is an interesting story that gives insight into this quality of simplicity. There was once a great Saint whose fame was spreading everywhere. Living at the same time was a learned scholar who was also devoted to scriptures and was quite well known, but who was not as advanced as the Saint. The scholar developed a sense of jealousy towards the Saint, and in his heart he began to wonder, “Could I ever be considered important by this Saint? Could the Saint ever touch my feet? Everyone bows down to me, but if the Saint were to bow down to me, that would be something great. But how can that happen? It is impossible.”

Overwhelmed with this obsession, the scholar made a plan. Feigning great honor and devotion, he approached the Saint and invited him to his home for dinner. Cheerfully the Saint agreed.

On the day that the Saint was to arrive, the scholar set his scheme into motion. At the entrance to his home there was a low and narrow door that caused people to duck their head down as they entered. From the top of the door, he hung his sandals by a string, so that as the Saint entered and ducked down, his head would strike against the sandals and he would fall down at the feet of the scholar!

When the Saint arrived, his head did strike against the sandals, just as the scholar, in his attempt to belittle the great man, had planned. However, the Saint clasped the sandals to his head, and he said: “How kind you are. I have pain in my back so it is difficult for me to bow down. But now

you made it easy. I could touch your feet with my head.” Hearing that, the scholar was amazed. Instead of being hit hard by the insult, the Saint simply revealed his powerful humility and simplicity. He radiated the fragrance of true *arjawa* (simplicity and purity of nature). Of course the scholar, deeply touched by the Saint’s humility, fell at the feet of the Saint and resolved to follow the path of true saintliness.

Another aspect of physical austerity is *ahimsa*—non-violence towards others. If, in a certain situation you are provoked and there is an urge to express your anger physically, do not do so.

Still another aspect of physical austerity is *shaucham* or purity. Develop the habit of healthy living. Promote cleanliness in your clothes and surroundings, cleanliness in your body and a deeper cleanliness in your *pranas* by taking recourse to the right type of food and exercise to keep the body free of toxic substances.

VOCAL AUSTERITY

The next aspect of austerity is vocal austerity or discipline of speech. This is of greater importance than physical austerity because speech plays a tremendous role in human life. Through words you can prosper, and through the misuse of words you can degrade yourself. One great source of prosperity and progress is mastery over speech.

**True
austerity is a
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purpose.**

Lord Krishna teaches that austerity of speech consists in not speaking words that cause agitation in others. Do not misuse the great gift of speech by making other people upset or angry. It also consists in telling the truth. Your words should communicate that which is true and not false. When you speak the truth, however, it should be to help others. If you are going to hurt others by speaking the truth, it is better not to speak. There is a saying: “*Satyam Vada Priyam Vada, Na vada Satyam Apriyam*” It means, “Speak the truth, but speak that which is gentle. Do not speak the truth that hurts others.” If your words hurt others, you simply create reactions and bitterness.

You may recall the incident in the Mahabharata in which Draupadi laughed at Duryodhana. As he was touring a palace that had been recently built, he noticed that things had been constructed in such a way that where there was solid ground, it looked like shimmering water, and where there was water, it looked like the ground. As a result, he became confused. What seemed to be a wall would turn out to be thin air, and what seemed to be nothing but empty space would turn out to be a hard wall. Thus, he banged himself against those “transparent” walls as he walked around. He would even lift his garment thinking that the ground below was really water.

Draupadi was watching all this in an amused way, and finally she broke out laughing, saying, “Look at the son of the blind man.” The words “son of the blind man” were true. He was indeed the son of a blind man, King Dhritarashtra. Nevertheless, Draupadi’s intention was simply to hurt his feelings. He was so hurt that he made up his mind to revenge himself on Draupadi—and that helped bring about the Mahabharata War, in which thousands upon thousands of people were killed. There were many other causes for the war, but Draupadi’s misuse of speech was one of the triggering points.

So, one must be extremely cautious when speaking, because speech is a powerful gift from God. The blessings of speech are immense. Only when you watch people who do not have the gift of speech and compare yourself to them can you realize what a wonderful gift you have.

Through the discipline of speech you can sing the praises of God and help other people. You can also learn scriptures such as the Upanishads and Vedas, which were written to be recited.

In brief it is important for you to note the importance of not using words that are intentionally meant to hurt other people’s feelings. This is the main point to remember when practicing austerity of speech.

MENTAL AUSTERITY

Lord Krishna says, “*Manah Prasadah* (cheerfulness and serenity), *Saumyatwam* (gentleness), *Maunam* (silence), *Atmavinigraha* (control of senses), and *Bhava Samshudhi* (elevated feeling of the heart)—these are called the austerity of the mind.” (Gita 17:16)

Manah Prasadah

In order for you to control your speech, your mind must first be controlled. Therefore, a set of practices has been enjoined to bring this about. The first aspect of austerity of the mind is *manah prasadah*—allowing the mind to be joyous. People who have been accustomed to think of austerity as something crude will be surprised. “How can austerity be joyous?” they might ask. In Yoga philosophy, austerity is not supposed to give you pain, but discipline you so that the spirit flows in a healthy, unobstructed way through your personality. Thus, the effort to maintain cheerfulness of the mind is a dynamic aspect of austerity.

Many people have developed the habit of allowing their minds to become negative. You can often tell such people by the way they droop their heads. You must watch your own mind very carefully. Try to develop the philosophy that the world is an expression of the Divine creation. There is intelligence and a guiding purpose behind the world; you have nothing to worry about. There should be no room for grief, dejection, and sorrow in your life.

Always think of the positive things that you have acquired and accomplished. By thinking of the blessings God has given you, you will have so many reasons for being cheerful. More than anything else, understand that the Divine Hand is sustaining your personality at every moment. The awareness that Divinity is with you can fill your mind with joy.

By adopting this philosophy of loving God at all times, you allow your mind to be serene and joyous. Do not develop negative thoughts. When they do arise, simply be a witness to them.

When you keep your mind in a negative state, you will be steadily generating negative impressions, and your mind will be forced to stay negative by the weight of the impressions. Due to the weight of the impressions of sadness and sorrow, you will not be happy even when you find yourself in a wonderful situation—a situation you have been craving for a long time.

This is so because your experiences of joy and sorrow are intimately related to the impressions of your unconscious. Therefore, an important part of austerity is not to

let your mind be negative. Hold your head high, and let your mind be joyful.

Saumyatwam

The next aspect of austerity is *saumyatwam* (gentleness). When you confront a situation that provokes your mind into becoming agitated or inactive, simply look at it without building up ill will towards anyone. Let your mind stay gentle, composed, and detached. You will discover a spiritual strength within yourself.

Otherwise, by reacting to external situations, you allow your mind to become agitated. An agitated mind creates negative impressions in your unconscious. Gradually a habit builds up. Your mind constantly reacts to things no matter how they are. If you are looking for absolute perfection according to the concepts of your ego, you will never find it; there will always be something to irritate your mind.

If you are vulnerable to negative influences, or if you are already predisposed to react to something negative, then all you need is just a pretext. A leaf might fall on your head, and it would be enough to put you into a state of agitation, figuratively speaking.

Saumyatwam implies that the mind becomes serene, calm, and unaffected—just like the face of Buddha. When you watch a movie, you are always aware of the fact that all the happenings on the screen are mere appearances. Therefore, though you feel sorrow at the tragic developments, you are not deeply affected in your heart. Similarly, be a spectator to your mind and its changes, and know that faith in God will ultimately make you truly gentle.

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Mauna

The next practice relating to the mind is *mauna* (silence). If you watch your mind, you will notice that a great many thoughts enter it constantly. After a while, it is as if a lively discussion is going on deep in your mind. The world may be quiet around you, yet your mind might be as noisy as a marketplace. This should not be.

When you are engaged in various actions, watch your mind. Do not entertain conflicting thoughts and do not allow the mind to be agitated. Rather try to relax your mind.

You should be like a swan as it enters the lake and sports with the waters, but the moment the sport is over the swan shakes off the water particles. Much in the same manner, perform your duties well in the world, but the moment you retire, shake off all your tensions and worry and relax in the arms of God, in the arms of Divinity within.

The thoughts of the mind should be as still as a lake without waves. You can do this by turning your mind to God and practicing *japa* (repetition of Divine Name). Mentally repeat the Name as you allow the feeling of Divine Presence to develop. Gradually your mind will become calm. Calming the mind is a constant project for an aspirant.

Bhava Samshuddhi

The next austerity of the mind is *bhava samshuddhi*. *Bhava* means feeling. All human experiences are based upon the feelings that you have. When you see a dear relative, a certain feeling develops. Within society, the feelings that exist between different people play a great role. The same human being that gives you great joy today can give you great sorrow tomorrow if the feeling changes. Therefore, you must learn to watch your feelings and observe the types of feelings you hold within your heart.

Develop the quality of grasping what is positive in others so that your feeling is always magnanimous. Do not draw to yourself the negative qualities of others. If you have built up a bitter mind, each time you see the faces of people you will find, "Oh, here is a crooked nose." "There the ear is twisted." In other words, you will feel that everyone has a particular type of error, and you will conclude, "This world is filled with useless people. What is going to happen to the world?"

You must understand how much you are hurting yourself when your mind continuously focuses on the negative in others. As time goes by you realize how much negativity you have stored in your unconscious. Why not change your attitude so that you go on filtering that which is the best? Look at any person and realize that God is shining through his eyes, and that the Divine *prana* (life-force) is pulsating through him.

All people make mistakes. However, despite those mistakes there is always something in everyone that you can admire. If, at the moment, you can perceive no such admirable quality in the other person, then just keep your mind detached. But do not go on looking for defects and keeping your mind filled with negative feelings.

In trying to remove the impurities of your personality, hold before you the ideal of these three types of austerity. In a provocative situation, people tend to commit three errors: physical involvement, bitter words and ill will. In the plan of Yogic austerity, first learn to restrain the body, no matter how agitated you may be. Then strive to control the speech, and finally you will succeed in controlling the ill will of your mind.

For example, the root of *ahimsa* or nonviolence lies in your mind. In your mind itself there should not arise any thought of injuring others. But when you are trying to control your mind, and trying to remove an impurity, you begin with your physical body. If, in a certain situation you are provoked and there is an urge to express your anger physically, do not do so. At this stage, when you are not yet evolved enough to attack the mental root of your impurity, let the anger be confined to your mind. Restrain your body, because if you do not do so, you will become involved in many complications.

Then the second thing you should restrain is your speech. When you restrain the body, your speech may take over and compensate for physical restraint! Although, relatively speaking, it is better that you are just speaking and not physically doing any harm, you must learn to restrain your speech as well as your body. Even though your thoughts may continue to run wild, if you are able to restrain the body and the speech, you are in a better position to attack your thoughts.

If you are truly practicing austerity of the body, speech and mind, the impurities of your personality will be destroyed. The potentiality of your spirit will shine forth, just as gold shines when it is melted. And that is the purpose of austerity—to purify the unconscious, which will then enable you to enter into higher levels of spiritual experience. Whoever practices this plan of austerity becomes a blessing for himself and for humanity. All that is good, beautiful and Divine is possible through austerity alone.

**May you
shine with the radiant
power of austerity!**