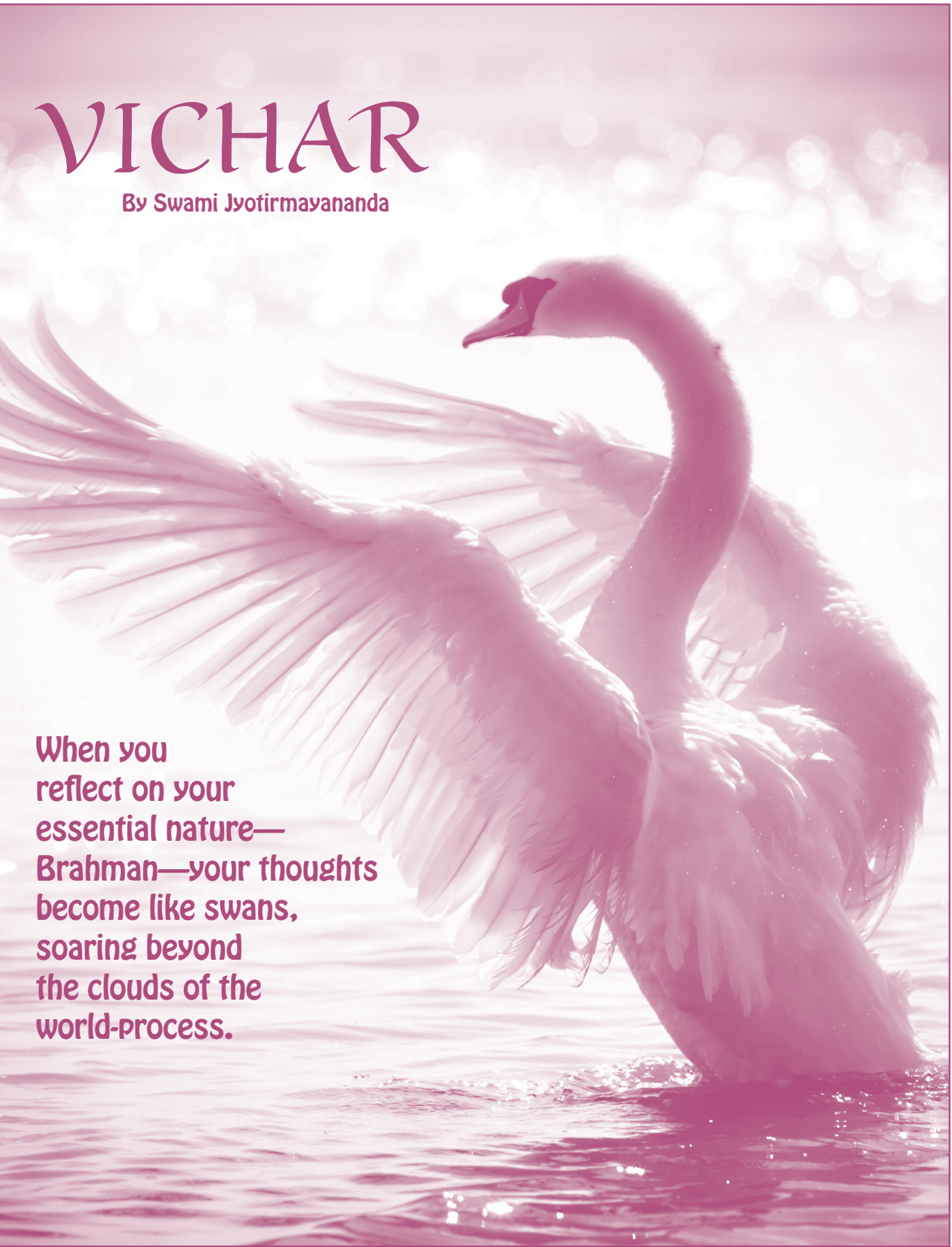


# VICHAR

By Swami Jyotirmayananda



**When you  
reflect on your  
essential nature—  
Brahman—your thoughts  
become like swans,  
soaring beyond  
the clouds of the  
world-process.**

**K**atha Upanishads says that Brahma (the Creator) fashioned the mind and senses in such a manner that they flow outwards by their very nature. Therefore, one does not behold the *Atman*. The majority of people thus possess this externalized mind, or *vahirmukhi vritti*. There are some special souls, however, who, with their mental strength, direct that outward flow to the *Atman* within. That inward flow, called *antarmukhi vritti*, allows the mind to be centered on the root of the objects of the senses instead of being distracted by superficial names and forms. It is in this internalized mind that *vichar* or enquiry into the nature of the Self can be learned and practiced.

So, in Vedanta, when it is said that the mind has two processes, internal and external, they are being used in a special sense, not to be confused with the psychological terms, extrovert and introvert. A psychologically introverted person will be socially withdrawn, and an extrovert will be outgoing. One could, however, be quite an introvert socially—appearing to others to be internalized—and yet possess quite a distracted and externalized mind from a spiritual point of view. On the other hand, one could be engaged in many activities and thus be extroverted in nature, and yet may possess *antarmukhi vritti*, an inner flow of feeling towards the Divine Self at all times. One may be looking outwards, yet be internalized. Similarly, one may keep his eyes closed, yet be externalized.

## PREPARING YOUR MIND FOR VICHAR

True *antarmukhi vritti* must be promoted in order to practice reflection, or enquiry into “Who am I?” In order to promote this type of mind, a mental environment conducive to the practice of *vichar* must be created.

**Satsanga:** To build this environment, you first need to promote *satsanga* (good association), which allows your mind to be filled with positive impressions. If you are constantly in *rajasic* (distracting) association, hours pass

talking about nothing, and the mind becomes laden with useless data and gossip—one person cooked a particular type of soup, and somewhere a pumpkin grew that was shaped like a banana! One talks for hours over ridiculous things. Even things that seem quite purposeful and fantastically interesting are, from an advanced point of view, useless. Anything that keeps your mind distracted and unable to practice enquiry is useless. So, it is necessary to simplify your life; if it is too complex, you cannot practice enquiry.

**Selfless Service:** Further, in order to be successful in *vichar*, *mala* and *vikshepa* must be removed. *Mala* refers to such gross impurities as anger, greed, passion and hatred. These cause mental agitations, and are removed by the practice of selfless service. *Mala* has to be treated every day, just as everyday you wash dishes or bathe your body. No one should sit contented, thinking “I have done sufficient Karma Yoga; now I can devote my entire life to enquiry.” The moment you do, you have made a mistake. You must always have a project of selfless service, even though you may think you have attained a high degree of purity.

**Meditation:** Similarly, *vikshepa* or distraction must be removed. This is done by another daily practice known as *upasana*, or meditation. Meditation can be practiced in either a devotional manner or by just focusing the mind upon some object, concept or idea. The Upanishads have given many techniques of *upasana*, most of which are symbolic. That is, you can meditate on *Brahman* (the Divine Self) as the moon, the sun, the ocean, the Himalayas, a flower, or on Deities such as Krishna or Rama. The practice of such devout meditation is very effective in removing distraction.

To understand this effectiveness of *upasana* in stilling the mind for reflection, consider the following example. Suppose a lamp is burning in a place where there are gusty winds. Though the lamp is still burning, the light is affected and cannot perfectly illumine the contents of the

room. As the winds decrease, the light burns more serenely and things that were obscured are now illumined. Similarly, as you practice *upasana* you are reducing the distraction of your mind. The wind of distraction diminishes, the lamp of pure reason shines brighter and you begin to understand the secrets of your own being. You begin to understand that your physical body is not your Self. The senses, the *pranas*, the mind, the intellect, and the ego are not you; you are the Eternal Reality. You are not involved in the three states of consciousness—waking, dream and deep sleep. You are not confined to time and space. You are beyond these. This form of awareness develops when distractions diminish and reason begins to shine brighter. That rational movement is the nature of enquiry, the nature of *vichar*.

**Balance Your Personality:** Although this world has produced numerous rational philosophical systems, the reasoning upon which they are based does not always reflect a healthy mental environment. For example, there are people who have not lived a balanced life and have thus been disillusioned time after time. Such experiences have brought them to a state of pessimism. To them, everything is doomed to a black destiny, and nothing can be done about it. Many books and logical arguments support their philosophy, and the moment you read such books, their logical brilliance and argumentation forces you to share the author's intense frustration. Although their arguments are given with a brilliance of intellect, it is not a positive brilliance. A truly brilliant intellect is free of distraction and arises only in a healthy, balanced personality.

A balanced personality, therefore, is very important for a healthy understanding of philosophy. Without it, you become sidetracked by so many speculative philosophical systems. Years can be spent just in learning all the philosophical terms, only to discover that not two philosophers use the same terms with the exact same meaning. Further, you realize that many bright philosophers never

come to grips with the Reality, the Self; they simply fabricate a philosophy based on their own personalities. Their error—turning the intellect loose without balancing the personality—has to be avoided by a spiritual aspirant.

A balanced personality is gained when you are guided by scriptural revelation, by the experiences of the Sages. Under such influence, your intellect can relax, and therefore it can gain the sensitivity to move towards an intuitive enfoldment. If, however, your intellect is guided only by your ego, it remains an ordinary intellect. True philosophical enquiry, or *vichar*, is a movement in which internalization leads to intuition, and balancing one's personality is a crucial factor in that movement.

## HOW TO PRACTICE VICHAR

In the beginning stages, you can practice reflection in order to discover your defects—anger, greed, hate, and other negative qualities—and to remove them. As you advance, you can reflect on the teachings of the scriptures and their reference to the Divine roots of your personality. As you further advance in your enquiry into “Who am I?” reflection is directed towards *Brahman*, and you are guided by the Mahavakyas, or Great Utterances such as, “I am *Brahman*” and “Thou art That.”

As you begin to practice *vichar*, you will notice that your flow of reflection comes and goes. The mind may reflect a little, and then suddenly becomes clouded again. But as *upasana* is repeatedly practiced and distraction is further removed, you will find *vichar* asserts itself more and more, becoming clear, intense and precise.

You should understand the difference between reflection and meditation. When you meditate, your mind focuses on one object or concept; when you practice *vichar*, you open your intellect in an effort to understand. The fact is, both go together in a strange manner: you never know when *upasana* stops and *vichar* begins, or when *vichar* stops and *upasana* continues. It is like saying, “When the

wind stops, the lamp shines forth,” or “When the lamp shines forth, the wind stops.” Therefore, reflection and meditation are interrelated and should be blended in practice.

When you are seated in meditation and your mind becomes *satwic*, you may find yourself easily enter into reflection. Continue that practice of reflection until you see that the mind cannot flow in that direction any longer, and the moment you see your reflection has become verbal or mechanical, just let your mind relax.

When your mind is not inclined toward *vichar*, you should practice other things like meditation, *japa* (repetition of mantra or the Divine Name), Karma Yoga, and Hatha Yoga or physical exercises such as walking or running. This is why so many different disciplines have been enjoined by the Sages.

If you persist day by day, however, your reflective power increases and *vichar* extends itself into your daily life. Then even though you are working and doing various things, *vichar* continues internally. When you have gathered a great deal of *sattwa* and your whole personality has become highly integrated, *vichar* becomes your second nature. *Vichar* becomes spontaneous and you continue to reflect no matter where you are, no matter what you are doing.

## THE GLORY OF VICHAR

The process of *vichar* is most inspiring. The scriptures say that you may visit so many pilgrimage centers and perform so many good deeds, but you can gain all that merit and more by just a few moments of perfect *vichar*. *Vichar* brings you close to *Brahman*. The moment you enquire properly and the reflective process dawns in your mind, you become aware that you are not the body nor the mind, but the Universal Self. The instant you glimpse this fact, you have plunged yourself in mystic, sacred waters. A moment's bath in that mystic water of knowledge purifies your soul.

Not only does it give you the greatest merit, but also innumerable negative karmas are removed in a split second.

As you practice reflection, you develop the art of thinking most profoundly. Dynamic thoughts arise out of a mental process that flows towards *Brahman*. Such a mind is like a mighty mountain. Just as so many streams flow from a mighty mountain peak, many profound thoughts flow from the height of *Brahma-vichar*. Such dynamic thoughts of compassion, goodness and Cosmic Love uplift the culture of humanity. So when you reflect on the nature of *Brahman*, your mind becomes extremely elevated, and thoughts that once lingered on little things now become Divine. Thoughts that were like vultures running after filthy objects now become like swans, soaring beyond the clouds of the world-process.

If the highest level of the human personality—the intellect or the *vijnanamaya kosha*—is allowed to be nourished and to blossom, there is the greatest fulfillment for a human being, a fulfillment in understanding. You understand the world, yourself and your relationship with the Self, and this understanding removes ignorance.

*Vichar* leads you to the glorious attainment of living in the light of knowledge. It enables you to realize the amazing power of your intellect and the truth that there is nothing in the world that cannot be tackled, no problem that cannot be solved by exercising that power of pure intellect.

## THE POWER OF INTELLECT

One of Aesop's fables affords a simple illustration of the power of intellect. Once, in a forest, all the animals decided to come to terms with the lion, who used to pounce upon them abruptly and eat them. They formed a conference and presented a proposal to the lion, suggesting that every day they themselves would choose one among them who would go to the lion to become his meal. The lion accepted the plan and stopped harassing the animals. Each day he simply waited and his meal would arrive. Sometimes it was an elephant,

sometimes a camel, sometimes a giraffe. It would be big or small, depending upon the lion's karma that day.

One day it was the rabbit's turn. His life was very dear to him, so when he heard that it was his turn to go, he thought, "I must do something about this. Why should I let myself be killed by that lion?"

So he plotted and planned, and in the process delayed his fateful meeting with the lion. The lion felt miserable, because he was so hungry. When he saw the rabbit approach and observed how little this creature was, he burst into anger, saying "How dare you come so late—you who are such a tiny meal!"

The rabbit said, "What could I do? I was hopping along with a plump friend of mine when another lion jumped out and threatened me, asserting that the whole forest belonged to him. He said that I should pay obeisance to him rather than to you."

This lion then roared and said, "How can there be another lion? I am the only one here." "Well," said the rabbit, "Let me prove it to you. Follow me, and I will show you where he is." And so, the rabbit led the lion to a well. There he said, "Look! He is inside here. That is where he lives." The lion looked and inside the well saw his own reflection, but it appeared to him as if there was another lion seated with a rabbit. And in the reflection the rabbit looked plump, so the lion was convinced that the rabbit was telling the truth. Immediately and with tremendous anger, the lion plunged into the well to fight that intruder and was killed. Thus, the clever rabbit brought about the end of the lion just by using his intellect, and in so doing, eliminated fear from the forest.

Similarly, the spirit in every human being is like that rabbit. Identified with the body, everyone acts like an animal sentenced to the lion of death. One day or

the other, everyone must go. The vast majority of people allow themselves to be devoured by death, but an aspirant, like the rabbit, can think, plot, and open up the well of intuitive knowledge. His mind becomes pure and clear as the steady reflection in the calm well water. He leads death there and asks it to look into the water. The moment death does so, it vanishes. You open within yourself the vista of transcendence, and the moment that death, which has been frightening you day by day, sees that vastness of Self-realization, it is destroyed.

If you attain Enlightenment, you are no longer the body. Therefore, you no longer have the fear of birth, death or embodiment. *Vichar* leads you to immortality, to Self-realization, and that is the greatest attainment of this life.

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