



Eknath Easwaran describes the power and value of the mantram. This one tool can help us to realize our goals in profound and life-altering ways. How many of us facing time sensitive deadlines get frustrated and race ahead, making errors? How many feel resigned and dispirited when we learn that one more animal has senselessly died? How many of us are seeking better ways to collaborate with our teammates?

It may seem an odd place to turn, asking a little tool like the mantram to help us align our visions with our actions in kind and loving ways. Yet, this method of transformation has been here for centuries, helping us to come closer to the source where we can come into deeper relationship with our natural resources and move forward.

REPETITION OF A MANTRAM

On festival days in India you will often see a huge elephant, caparisoned in gold and gorgeous cloth, carrying an image of the Lord on its back through the village streets. Everyone enjoys the sight: the musicians with their drums and cymbals in front, then the beast slowly lumbering along and the devotees behind, all on their way to the temple.

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But there can be one difficulty. Stalls of fruits, vegetables, and sweets line the narrow, crooked streets, and the trunk of an elephant, as you may know, rarely stays still. It sways back and forth, up and down, constantly. So when the procession comes abreast of a fruit stall, the elephant seizes a shelled coconut or two, opens his cavernous mouth, and tosses them in. At another stall, the big fellow twists his trunk round a bunch of bananas suspended from the roof. The mouth opens again, the whole bunch goes in with a thud . . . you hear a gulp . . . and that's the end of it.

The humble people who own these stalls cannot afford this kind of loss, and to prevent it the man in charge, the mahout, asks the elephant to grasp a firm bamboo shaft in his trunk. Though not sure why, the elephant, out of love for his mahout, does as he is told. Now the procession can pass safely through the streets. The elephant steps right along with his stick held upright in a steady trunk, not tempted to feast on mangoes or melons, because he has something to hold on to.

The human mind is rather like the trunk of an elephant. It never rests. It goes here, there, ceaselessly moving through sensations, images, thoughts, hopes, regrets, impulses. Occasionally it does solve a problem or make necessary plans, but most of the time it wanders at large, simply because we do not know how to keep it quiet or profitably engaged.

But what should we give it to hold on to? For this purpose I recommend the systematic repetition of the mantram, which can steady the mind at any time and in any place.

WHAT IS A MANTRAM?

Of late, the ancient word mantram (or the familiar variant mantra) has had considerable exposure on talk shows and in the Sunday supplements. To many it may conjure up an exotic image of flowing robes, garlands, and incense. It may seem to be something impractical and otherworldly, perhaps a bit magical and mysterious. Actually, just the opposite holds true. The mantram—under other names, to be sure—has been known in the West for centuries, and there need not be anything secret or occult about it. The mantram stands open to all. And since it can calm our hearts and minds, it is about as practical as anything can be.

If you have preconceptions about using a mantram, let me ask you to put them aside and give it a personal trial. Why take someone else's word for it? Enter the laboratory of your mind and perform the experiment. Then you will be in a position to judge for yourself, and nothing can be as persuasive as that.

A mantram is a spiritual formula of enormous power that has been transmitted from age to age in a religious tradition. The users, wishing to draw upon this power that calms and heals, silently repeat the words as often as possible during the day, each repetition adding to their physical and spiritual well-being. In a sense, that is all there is to a mantram. In another sense, there is so much! Those who have tried it—saints, sages, and ordinary people too—know from their own experience its marvelous potency.

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We find a clue to the workings of the mantram in the popular etymology which links the word to the roots man, “the mind,” and tri, “to cross.” The mantram, repeated regularly for a long time, enables us to cross the sea of the mind.

An apt image, for the mind very much resembles a sea. Ever-changing, it is placid one day, turbulent the next. Awesome creatures lurk below in the unconscious—fears and animosities, desires and conflicts. Each of us drifts about on the surface, blown by typhoons and carried by currents, in a rudderless little boat called “I.” With such vast and treacherous waters before us, with no glimpse at all of the far shore, can we ever hope to make the crossing without some help?

The mantram is such help. The scriptures of all religions proclaim it to be a radiant symbol of ultimate existence, the supreme reality which, depending on our background, we call by various expressive names: God, Nature, the Divine Mother, the Clear Light, universal consciousness. What we call it matters little. What matters greatly is that we discover—experientially, not intellectually—that this supreme reality rests at the inmost center of our being. This discovery constitutes the goal of life, and the mantram stands as a perpetual reminder that such perfection is within all of us, waiting to flow through our thoughts, words, and deeds.

WHAT THE MANTRAM CAN DO

In the simple act of repeating the mantram we accomplish remarkable things. The tension in our bodies, the cause of specific complaints and general malaise, ebbs away, and we find delightfully that real health is more than just an absence of disease. We toughen our will, too, which signals the end of addictions that may have enslaved us for years. Internal divisions are healed and our purposes unified, so we become a beneficent force in life and not, as all of us may have been at times, something of a burden on the earth. We gain access to inner resources—courage, patience, compassion—which are presently locked up within. Then all our relationships flourish; we love and are loved. Gradually, if we repeat it often, the mantram permeates and utterly transforms our consciousness.

This is a strong claim. Can a mere word achieve all that? It is a natural question. I remember when I had to give a speech to my high school class; I was so nervous at the prospect that I was afraid my knees might not hold me up. My spiritual teacher said, “While you’re waiting for your turn, don’t sit there worrying about the audience; repeat the mantram.” I was skeptical, but because I loved her I did as she suggested. I remember saying to myself, “Rama, Rama, Rama . . . I hope it works.”

I got through the ordeal safely enough, so the next time I had to give a speech I tried the mantram again . . . and again. I soon found myself saying, “Rama, Rama . . . I think it works!” Now, after many years of practice, I know it works. As a medical friend once told me, until recently we didn’t know how aspirin works, but that didn’t keep it from relieving pain. Similarly, with the mantram, no explanation I can give can take the place of your own personal verification.

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In daily life we often credit even common words with immense power. Take advertising. Be it soup or soap, cereal or cigarettes, product makers understand the impact of words and spend millions yearly trying to lodge a jingle, slogan, or brand name in our minds. And the key element of the campaign is repetition. All that pounding away harms us because we are induced to buy things we don't need, things that may weaken our bodies. But why can't we use the obvious effectiveness of such repetition for our health and peace of mind? When we repeat a mantram, that is precisely what we do.

Repeating a mantram sounds so simple that most people cannot believe it works until they try it. For one thing, many consider it mere mechanical repetition—a job for any voice recorder. But I would say that a journey makes a better analogy. Each step on a journey superficially resembles the others, but each uniquely takes you into new territory and moves you closer to your destination. In just the same way, the repetitions of the mantram are superficially alike, but each takes you ever deeper into consciousness and closer to the goal of love and joyful awareness.

Mystics East and West have answered this objection. Mahatma Gandhi wrote:

The mantram becomes one's staff of life and carries one through every ordeal. It is not repeated for the sake of repetition, but for the sake of purification, as an aid to effort. It is no empty repetition. For each repetition has a new meaning, carrying you nearer and nearer to God.



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