

Watch Your Mind

Swami Vivekananda said, ‘Ninety per cent of thought force is wasted by the ordinary human being, and therefore he is constantly committing blunders; the trained man or mind never makes a mistake.’

We are thinking and feeling day and night throughout our life, almost without respite. Even in sleep we think, which is called ‘dream’. We do not know if we have any thought during deep sleep. That may be the only exception. All human action, all learning, discoveries and inventions, all plans and their implementation, all human relations come from thinking. And mind is the instrument for thinking.

Thinking takes various forms: doubting, questioning, analysing, decision-making, etc. are all done by what we call our intellect. Determination, resolve, praying, etc. have some will-force behind them. Happiness, love, hate, etc. are feelings, called emotion. All these are various functions of the mind. When the mind works well, we perform properly. When not working so, it harms us.

If we look back, we shall find that we have normally not been very wakeful to this fact. When we do not do anything specific, we just float with the waves of thought that come and go on their own. Often we are too unmindful of the activities of our mind. Suppose you get down from a train and somebody asks you of what you have been thinking for the last one hour, sitting alone in the train. More often you will not remember. So, you may have spent a lot of energy in thinking of things not worth remembering.

When we get angry or excited, when we go crazy for something, we exhaust just a huge amount of energy. And thus we let the mind run wild, allowing it to go more and more out of control. That is why Swamiji cautioned us against wastage of mental energy. If we can conserve this energy, it can be used for very constructive purposes and for making our life worth living. How do we do it? Let us listen to Swamiji again:

‘We hear “Be good”, and “Be good”, and “Be good”, taught all over the world. There is hardly a child, born in any country in the world, who has not been told, “Do not steal”, “Do not tell a lie”, but nobody tells the child how he can help doing them. Talking will not help him. Why should he not become a thief? We do not teach him how not to steal; we simply tell him, “Do not steal.” Only when we teach him to control his mind do we really help him. All actions, internal and external, occur when the mind joins itself to certain centres [of the brain], called the organs. Willingly or unwillingly it is drawn to join itself to the centres, and that is why people do foolish deeds and feel miserable, which, if the mind were under control, they would not do. What would be the result of controlling the mind? It then would not join itself to the centres of perception, and, naturally, feeling and willing would be under control. It is clear so far. Is it possible? It is perfectly possible.’

‘The first lesson, then, is to sit for some time and let the mind run on. The mind is bubbling up all the time. It is like that monkey jumping about. Let the monkey jump as much as he can; you simply wait and watch. Knowledge is power, says the proverb, and that is true. Until you know what the mind is doing you cannot control it. Give it the rein; many hideous thoughts may come into it; you will be astonished that it was possible for you to think such thoughts. But you will find that each day the mind’s vagaries are becoming less and less violent, that each day it is becoming calmer. In the first few months you will find that the mind will have a great many thoughts, later you will find that they have somewhat decreased, and in a few more months they will be fewer and fewer, until at last the mind will be under perfect control; but we must patiently practice every day.... It is a tremendous work, not to be done in a day. Only after a patient, continuous struggle for years can we succeed.’

As the mind becomes calm after some days of practice, the next step is to concentrate it, to hold it on some object we choose. But watching the mind is not for mental concentration only. It helps us to understand our mind, its functions, its scattered state, and how the mind's energy is wasted. As our practice progresses, the scattering and wastage of mental energy become less and less and our daily life changes. Our mental strength increases, the mind slowly comes to a state where we feel homely with it.

If we have the habit of looking inward and watching the mind, we can catch the mind the moment it tries to go astray. Suppose I am getting angry. At the time I am in the process of becoming angry. But now I shall be able to come out of the process and watch the mind in a state of anger. I shall be like a witness. Immediately I can control myself, at least better than before. Why? Because all functions of the mind depend on my self-identification with these functions. The moment I can detach myself from it, stand apart, and see that a wave of anger is rising up in the mind, that wave will lose its force and subside, especially if I can do it early, just as the wave is beginning to form. No force can be lost, but it can be transformed. So, we should intentionally give rise to an opposite thought-wave, a positive one, to give the mind a better turn. We can replace hatred and anger with waves of love, weakness with thoughts of strength, and so on.

This practice should not be taken up in isolation, but along with the complete set of methods suggested by the Mahamandal for life building. Then this ability to watch the mind would help us to control the mind in our everyday life and in self-evaluation. Thus it will help us to change our habits and to acquire good qualities. Good qualities are what make for a good character.