

# Ātmavinigrahaḥ

mastery over the mind

## Ātmavinigrahaḥ

**Ātmavinigraha** means mastery over the mind. The Sanskrit word **ātmā** basically is the name for whatever is referred to by the first person singular 'I'. In this capacity, **ātman** indicates many things which, depending upon the frame of reference, have the sense of 'I'.

**Ātman** can be used for the physical body or it can refer to the vital functions of the body. Mind can be called **ātman** or sometimes **ātman** stands for the 'ego' sense of the mind, the **ahaṅkāra**. **Ātman** also is **saccidānanda**, the timeless, limitless awareness that is the truth of 'I'.

Here **ātman** refers to the mind, **antaḥkaraṇa**. **Vinigraha** means 'restraint' or 'curbing' which, in order to avoid any connotation of coercion or repression, is translated with reference to this value as 'mastery'.

## WHAT IS MASTERY OF THE MIND?

Is it checking or controlling the grey matter, the cells of the brain?

No, that which must be mastered is not the brain; **what must be mastered is our ways of thinking**. The mind is a colourful kaleidoscope of fanciful thoughts that come and go.

Never constant, rarely still, subject to sudden starts and turns, capricious notions, the mind is whimsical by nature.

However, I, the thinker, need not fulfil the fancies or yield to the caprices. Fancies and notions are many; that is the mind.

But I am the sanctioning authority.

Even in relative terms the mind is not a definable entity, being only a collection of changing thoughts shaped by my ways of thinking.

## WAYS OF THINKING

In general, the ways of thinking are of three types, **impulsive**, in which unexamined instinctive thoughts dominate, **mechanical**, in which prior conditioning is the dictator and thirdly, **deliberate**, wherein the evaluating function of my mind, **buddhi**, consciously examines the thoughts, accepts or dismisses them in accordance with my value structure.

There is a fourth way of thinking, **spontaneous**, in which my thoughts, without deliberation, conform to the highest universal values.

Spontaneous thinking of this kind manifests at an absolute level only in one who has self-knowledge.

At a relative level, spontaneous thinking reflects the degree to which universal values have become my personal and assimilated values. In essence, spontaneous thinking is complete **ātmavinigraha**.

However, as a preparation for self-knowledge, initially we need to achieve relative mastery.

## ĀTMAVINIGRAHA MASTERY OVER MY WAYS OF THINKING

**Ātmavinigraha**, mastery over my ways of thinking, can be only relative since complete mastery requires knowledge of the self. It is only knowledge of the self that can completely destroy the hold of the likes and dislikes that compel and condition my ways of thinking.

Thus, when Lord Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that **ātmavinigraha** is part of **jñāna**, preparatory for self-knowledge, this qualification must be taken as relative.

## WHAT IS RELATIVE MASTERY?

Complete mastery is characterised by spontaneity. If I am impulsive or conditioned, I am not a master. If I am deliberate, I am not a complete master. By being deliberate, I can be a relative master. **Relative mastery is characterised by being alert and deliberate**.

I have **relative mastery** over my ways of thinking when I rationally examine my thoughts and either consciously accept or dismiss them. **Relative mastery** means both submitting all impulses to rational scrutiny and breaking any habit of lapsing into mechanical behaviour.

## ĀTMAVINIGRAHA

**Śama**, **dama**, and **samādhāna** are Sanskrit terms often used to indicate different aspects of **ātmavinigraha**.

**Śama** is discipline over thinking at the level where the thoughts arise, whereas, **dama** indicates choice exercised over thoughts and actions expressed at the level of the sense organ or organs of action. **Samādhāna** indicates single pointedness of the mind, a way to describe the capacity of the mind to stay with a given line of thinking, a certain steadiness of thought of the mind.

The exercise of choice at the level of **śama** and **dama** establishes an abiding mind capable of **samādhāna**.

The art of **samādhāna** can then be learnt by beginning to apply the mind with a sharpened vigilance for distraction.

## ĀTMAVINIGRAHA IS A MATTER OF ALERTNESS AND AWARENESS

If I am **alert** and **conscious** of what my mind is doing, I always have a choice over my ways of thinking. With choice, I can change. I can conform my behaviour to values. With choice, I can learn from mistakes. With choice, I can hold to commitments in the face of distraction.

Choice requires alertness that makes possible relative mastery over my ways of thinking.