

# Keeping a Spiritual Diary

*by Swami Chinmayananda*

Even after following all the prescribed spiritual practices faithfully, you may run into obstructions in your efforts at meditation. In almost all cases where a seeker complains of lack of progress, it is because his subtle body has grown grosser. Do not be misled into thinking that your lack of progress is because of "destiny" or "a bad day" or the withdrawal of God's or your guru's grace! During an unconscious moment of relaxation, the sensuous world has invaded your inner world through the sense organs and brought forth from your subconscious mind the lower tendencies. The only way out is to gather up your strength and fight out the battle with your baser tendencies. In order to protect the growing spiritual wealth in you and not suffer the sorrow of setbacks, it may help to post twenty "soldiers" around you, in the form of twenty questions to put to yourself at the end of each day's activities. Keep track of the questions and answers in the form of a spiritual diary that you keep strictly and continuously for three months, but never for more than six months at a stretch. You must not let yourself become habituated to diary-writing. At any time that you feel a setback in your spiritual growth, take up the diary again for a week. It is the experience of many masters and thousands of seekers that this diary keeping is the sovereign remedy for spiritual fervor turned into sour skepticism.

## The Twenty Questions

The following are the twenty items that constitute your diary. The list is compiled to suit all temperaments. Select fifteen items out of the twenty and pursue them diligently. Enter the items as heads for fifteen columns, and indicate each day your report on yourself under each category. At the end of the month, study the chart you have made to determine the schedule of your progress or decline for that month.

1. How many hours did I sleep? Normally six hours of sleep are sufficient for a quiet-living spiritual seeker.
2. When did I get up from bed? You should be out of bed between 4:30 and 6:00 a.m. The early morning's quiet will assist you in your spiritual evolution. The great masters have found, from their own personal experience, that this part of the day is most beneficial for spiritual practice. In the early stages, you may need an alarm clock to awaken you. If you find yourself being too sleepy after getting up, let a brisk shower freshen you up.
3. How long did I practice concentration? Begin with small doses, and increase the period of concentration slowly and steadily.
4. What religious books am I now reading? Reading the lives of the great masters and their declarations of Truth in a spirit of inquiry will greatly help you in thinking intelligently. In reading such books, do not be content with their story content alone. All such stories have deep symbolic and philosophic significance, and your aim should be to unravel the deeper meanings.
5. For how long was I in companionship with the good (satsanga)? Satsanga here does not mean merely attending prayer meetings and religious discourses. Once you have developed the spirit of inquiry, you will automatically seek out friends interested in discussing religious topics with you. Where such friends are not available, good books will serve as good company; discover companionship with them.
6. For how long did I engage myself in selfless service (karma yoga)? Any act of service, performed in a spirit of detachment, will further the growth of the noble qualities of love, tolerance, mercy, and so on. Learn to serve Him through the people you are helping.
7. How many mala (rosaries) of japa did I perform? One mala consists of 108 beads, with a mantra chanted at the turning of each bead. In order to do japa effectively, you must strive as far as possible to exclude all extraneous thoughts from the mind during the period of japa practice.
8. How many Upanishad mantras did I read? Read only a little each day, but digest what you have read and allow your mind to reflect over the great truths behind the words of

the mantras.

9. How many mantras did I write? Mantra writing is the easiest way of fixing your concentration. Keep a separate notebook for this purpose, and regularly write about a page of your chosen mantra. While writing the mantra, do not speak or look around, nor move away from the work until the allotted amount is finished. This exercise will aid your concentration immensely, since you soak your mind with the ideal suggested by the mantra as you whisper and write: the hand is writing the mantra, the eyes are seeing the mantra, the mouth is softly chanting the mantra, and the ears are listening to the mantra. The mind thus becomes easily single-pointed.
10. How many hours did I observe silence? Keeping silence does not mean expressing all your thoughts in relation to the outside world by making signs. If you do so, your mind will be entertaining thoughts that relate to the objective world. The aim is to withdraw one's attention to the inner world of the spirit.
11. How many days did I fast? Fasting here does not mean abstaining from food continuously for long periods of time, such as 21 or 41 days. Fast regularly—once a month, once a week, or once a fortnight.
12. What did I give away in charity? Giving here means giving in thought, cash, or kind.
13. How many lies did I tell and with what self-punishment? A lie is something uttered against your conscience with a view of obtaining some advantage for yourself. During the act of lying, you will all the time be conscious of uttering something against your natural inclinations in order to surmount a real or imagined difficulty. Such conflicts will haunt you after the lie has been told and will become a stone wall in your spiritual practice. Do not allow yourself to console yourself by saying that the lie was small and did not affect anyone detrimentally. In all events, lying disturbs your mental poise. If you tell a lie, give yourself severe punishment, such as fasting or increasing the period of daily silence.
14. How many times was I angry, and how long did each attack of anger last? Anger arises out of nonfulfillment of your desires. Array the forces of tolerance, mercy, sympathy, and understanding of the weakness in yourself and in others in order to win a victory over anger.
15. How many hours did I spend in useless company? In all spiritual practices you should attempt to see yourself as a child who desires to come home after having stayed away for a time, charmed by some pleasant attraction elsewhere. In spiritual practice, this coming home is possible only if you scrupulously avoid useless company, thus creating a proper atmosphere for your inner work.
16. How many times did I fail in brahmacharya? Remember brahmacharya means self-control in all areas—eating, talking, sex, and any other indulgences. Self-control within bounds is the safest rule.
17. What virtues am I developing consciously? For a month at a time, take to the cultivation of a single noble quality, such as love, tolerance, or kindness.
18. What evil quality am I trying to eradicate? Become conscious of thoughts that hold you down and slow your spiritual progress. Negative qualities are like a millstone tied around your neck while you are trying to swim. You have to snap the cord, let the weight sink, rise to the surface of the water, and swim to the shore. You must diagnose your own malady and find its proper cure.
19. How many times did I fail in controlling an evil habit, and with what punishment? Punishment here may be dealt out similarly as in paragraph 13, above.
20. When did I go to bed? Simply enter the time of retiring.