Speak Up

CAN CHANTING A MANTRA BE CALLED MEDITATION?

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This article juxtaposes two seemingly disparate domains: the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and the ancient practice of meditation, and tries to imagine a meditating AI. While AI has become an integral part of our daily lives, the question of whether it can ever attain consciousness remains unresolved. Despite popular phrases such as "digital consciousness" or "AI hallucinations," the distinction between human experience and machine processing is fundamental and unbridgeable.

The Origins of AI and Its Expansion

The discourse on AI began in 1949 with Alan Turing's famous imitation game, later known as the *Turing Test*. In this test, a human conversed with both another human and a computer, without being able to distinguish between the two.

From these beginnings, AI has evolved into real-time applications. For instance, a school in Kerala has employed robot teachers designed to interact empathetically with students. Meanwhile, virtual assistants such as Alexa and Siri have become household names, and driverless cars are real. Yet, at its core, much of AI's functioning remains a matter of data visualisation and pattern recognition, rather than genuine cognition.

Meditation without an Objective

A professor recently asked me how chanting helps, and whether repeating cocacola-cocacola-cocacola can be counted as chanting a mantra? Looking for an answer, I leafed through this text

called *The Lotus and the Robot* (1960) by Arthur Koestler that reflects on Zen meditation, a Buddhist practice, and highlights the paradox of meditation as both discipline and spontaneity. His observations throw light upon how chanting can serve as preparatory exercises, but they do not constitute the essence of meditation itself:

> Although the practice of Zazen – sitting motionless on the wooden platform of the meditation hall – plays a dominant part in monastic routine, Zen and meditation somehow do not seem to fit together. It is the practice of a mystic technique without mystic content; if there is no God, no Moral Law, no doctrine, no teaching, what is there left to meditate about – except repeating a-rose-isarose-isarose, as a means of self-hypnosis? (pp. 256-257)

This leads to a deeper understanding of the practice of meditation that involves spiritual awakening beyond physical training.

Meditation and Visualisation in Jain Texts

The *Jñānārṇava* (an 11th-century text by Śubhacandra) also discusses methods of meditation that emphasise visualisation and chanting. The practitioner is advised to visualise an object or alphabet and chant mantras. This prompts a crucial inquiry: Is the process supportive of meditation, or is it meditation per se?

At this point, the 10th-century Jain text *Tattvānuśāsana* by Acharya Ramsingh is worth looking at. It offers a distinctive perspective. Unlike other texts that classify meditation into auspicious/inauspicious or fourfold categories, it emphasises two forms: absolute and conventional meditation.

> *niścayād vyavahārācca dhyānaṁ dvividhamāgame |*
> *svarūpālambanaṁ pūrvaṁ parālambanamuttaram || 96 ||*

The text insists that a balance between these two is essential; without such equilibrium, the practice cannot succeed. The Prakrit text *Ṇāṇāsāra* by Muni Padmasingh (time unknown) echoes this sentiment, underscoring the futility of excessive elaboration when the essence of practice lies in balance and direct experience:

> *kiṁ bahuṇā sālaṁbaṁ jhāṇaṁ paramatthaṇaeṇa ṇāūṇaṁ |*
> *pariharaha kuṇaha pacchā jhāṇabbhāsaṁ nirālaṁbaṁ || 37 ||*

It proves that the concept of absolute and conventional meditation is not new and has been a part of meditation practice for a long time in Jainism.

Defining Meditation in Jainism

If we look at the most popular definition of meditation in the *Tattvārthasūtra*, we find a straightforward requirement:

uttamasaṁhananasyaikāgracintānirodhodhyānamantarmuhūrtāt || 9.27 ||
Essentially, it means restraining the mind on a single object for the duration of an intra-hour by a person with a strong body is meditation.

Moreover, according to the *Tattvānuśāsana*, the following four conditions are also critical for authentic meditation:

1. The right object – the soul (*ātman*) as the locus of meditation.
2. The able meditator – one whose karmic obstructions are minimal.
3. The right process – balancing absolute and conventional approaches.
4. The right outcome – the twin goals of *saṁvara* (inhibition of karmic influx) and *nirjarā* (eradication of karmic matter).

Therefore, if one chants mantras without aligning the above conditions, the practice risks becoming mechanical. To meditate without conscious engagement is no different from repeating meaningless syllables such as "a-rose-isarose-isarose" or "coca-cola-cocacola-cocacola." In such cases, meditation degenerates into rote repetition, devoid of transformative power, just as meditating AI.

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