

Japa Yoga

A User's Guide

Japa is the repetition of a mantra or name of God. What makes japa 'japa yoga' involves both repetition of the name of God and vigilance or unbroken inner awareness. A little later in the practice, direct inquiry into the substance and source of the mantra is introduced and japa blends into meditation.

Let us start right at the water's edge by understanding what a mantra is and the practice of its repetition. Then, let us look a little deeper at the yoga principles of this simple practice that takes japa to meditation, where japa drops by itself and meditation continues.

Mantra

Mantra means to organize the mind in such a way that one is freed from the clutches of rising thoughts and impulses. Any mantra can be selected for the practice of japa without the need for initiation.

Shorter mantras like 'Om Namah Shivaya', 'Om Namo Narayanaya' or 'Om Lord Jesus' are recommended for japa and not the longer mantras which are more prayer than mantra. It is good to select a mantra that represents your tutelary deity or ishta devata as it will include devoted feeling when repeating the mantra, without which, many will feel it difficult to keep the attention on the mantra for a longer period of time.

In these shorter mantras, the 'Om' indicates the Absolute which is the reality; 'Namah or Namo' means salutations to, and the last word is the name like 'Shivaya' is the friendlier name you have chosen to relate to the Absolute—God. To you, then, there is no difference between Absolute or the Name you have chosen as they are both interchangeable—the latter being your personal approach to the Impersonal Reality.

So, select a mantra of your choice on your own and do not change this, thinking that another mantra is more powerful or more result-producing than any other—it is not so.

Outer Basics

Place and time: It is good to practice in the same place and if possible, even at the same time each day. The inner intelligence organizes things very efficiently when it knows the activity to

be regular. At the same time, you have to be alert and vigilant so the activity is not mechanized or it will defeat the practice.

Sit in a clean, ventilated spot, either in your prayer area or a corner of the room set aside for daily practice. It is good to have a simple altar with a photo of your chosen deity and a candle symbolizing your aspiration.

Early morning and before going to sleep at night are the best times for japa. After morning practice, do not rush into the day's activities or the momentum gained by becoming aware of the mind will be lost. I recommend the practice of pranayama and some asanas after japa in the morning. This will help in that you will find a way to retain awareness with external activity. For the evening, try to wait at least one hour before beginning practice after your night's meal if you have eaten lightly, ... two hours if you have eaten a little more.

Clothing: Wear loose, comfortable clothing that does not restrict circulation in any way. When the attention is within, blood also moves within and one can feel cooler on the skin though it is quite comfortable outside. Wearing a light shawl over the shoulders keeps the back and shoulders warm which are often more sensitive than the chest since they have less muscle over the bone areas.

In the cooler months, dress warmer with a heavier shawl as needed. It is good to have some natural air circulation weather permitting or otherwise, the space not too heated or cooled. Keep the space clean and free of dust and clutter. Simple, neat and tidy is a good rule.

Posture: Sit cross-legged, comfortably if you can. You can use a cushion beneath the buttocks to elevate them a little, this will remove any strain from the knees and allow you to keep the spine straight which is important.



If you can sit without moving in the half-lotus or full-lotus it is fine, though not necessary. What is important is to sit without moving and to keep the spine straight.

If you cannot sit for 12-15 minutes without moving in any cross-legged posture, it is okay to sit on a chair as long as you can keep the spine straight and feet flat on the floor. If you cross your legs while sitting on a chair, you will be tempted to uncross them and change crossing or shake the feet, as that is what we normally do when sitting with legs crossed.

Keeping the spine straight increases alertness. Think about the moments when you are driving and conditions become adverse or you become tired, you instinctively sit up straight and feel

quite alert. Keep the spine, neck and head in a straight line without becoming unnatural or overly conscious. You will find the balance where you are alert and relaxed at the same time.

Tempo: The best tempo for recitation of the mantra is one that allows clear repetition and listening with normal breathing. Even though you recite the mantra mentally, you should articulate and hear it clearly. Since the mantra is continual, it will require continued attention, and thoughts that rise will weaken due to lack of new energy. A great yogic secret is to take a keen interest in the new and fresh so as to wean oneself from the old, and this involves no suppression at all.

Duration: In the beginning, try to sit for 12-15 minutes as it takes a few minutes to settle-in when getting started and the mind to come to terms with doing something where it is not needed.

Gradually, increase the duration to 15-18 minutes and then to 22-24 minutes. I have not suggested a longer here so time available can be used in other practices for a balanced approach. This will keep the attention of quality higher and keep from the ego-pitfall of specializing. These are not benchmarks to achieve; forget all about achievements or goals. There should not be any thought outside of the practice itself. If the mind wants to see something, let it see the practice that goes on without its involvement or need.

When you are able to sit for 12-15 minutes without physical adjustments or being distracted, you can extend the time of the practice. The rise of distraction is not a problem, being distracted is a problem. Learn to distinguish between these. Distractions are just other thoughts that are fueled by residual energy—old energy they have been charged with. Let them be and they will fall just as naturally as they arose. *Do not identify with them and do not reject them.* They are doing their own thing, let them—you continue doing what you have set out to do.

Mentally or with a mala: Japa can be done mentally or with a mala (beaded rosary). Try to select a simple and light mala with beads that are comfortable to roll and set not too closely together, which is how some malas are made, as this makes the beads harder to roll. In this case, you can restring the mala by tying a knot between each bead if necessary so you are not conscious of the mala or rolling. It does not make a difference when you start, as the mala will be found to be unnecessary at a given point in your practice naturally.

If you are new to the practice, I recommend starting with a mala or rosary. In the words of Swami Sivananda, "The japa mala is a whip to goad the mind". The mala becomes a sort of fence that nudges the mind to stay on the mantra without force or suppression. Japa is the activity, and by your taking an interest in the activity, the mind goes where the heart is. The key is for you to take a keen interest in the mantra itself, not in any mythological implications, but on the sound of the mantra that is being heard in you mentally or audibly.

If you use a mala or rosary, hold the mala in your right hand resting on your middle finger and roll the beads starting just past the center bead with your thumb. Place a small clean cloth or towel beneath the right knee on which the mala will rest.



It does not matter whether you start rolling the beads forward or backward first as long as you do not pass the center bead which usually has a small tassel attached to it. This will keep you attentive as the repetition could become mechanical and you may drift mentally, only to be awakened by the sound of the timer.

Timer or count: I recommend using a timer so the attention can be on the sound of the mantra. There are many inexpensive timers and some watches have an audible and/or vibrating alarm.

Aloud, whisper or mental: The mantra can be recited aloud, in a barely audible whisper or mentally—with or without a mala or rosary. This gives you many variations to take you from where you are at present, to the next step. Try to repeat the mantra mentally first and keep the attention on hearing it mentally as well.

If there is much distraction, change to a barely audible whisper where you are not really repeating the mantra aloud but barely moving your lips to create another fence for the mind, just as the japa mala is doing, and stay alert to the sound of the mantra.

If the mind gets turbulent, repeat the mantra aloud but not loudly—soft enough to help awareness return to the physical sound of the mantra, then back to the soft whisper and then back to the mental sound.

These variations of aloud, whisper and mental—with or without the mala are all aids to raise and sustain alertness. Use them as needed without getting stuck at any rung or being eager to go to the next.

We have covered some of the basics in getting started, now let us go through the sequence of practice and bring it all together. We will stop right where japa goes into meditation, as we will cover meditation separately with a small overlap of japa practice.

Inner Basics

You have to *want* to practice which means, there has to be great love for practice—your heart must practice and not be elsewhere. Turn off all cell phones, home phones and other electronic leashes and be completely free for the time of practice or you will be wasting your time completely. There should be nothing pressing to be attended to just after practice either in the earlier stages, as the mind will want to think on it.

In japa yoga, just as with the other practices of yoga, the mind is observed, and without this vigilance, the yoga element is absent and it is just a mere activity. The inner turbulence will increase as you practice as you first become aware of the distractions that already exist but those we have not been aware of. It is the first time you may be doing something *with all of your being, minus thought*, and the mind or thought has a hard time accepting this.

The mind or thought has been masquerading as the subject under the assumption of personality with which you identify. But you are *not* this personality as you are aware of it and when you take up japa practice, it is realizing or actualizing this fact. It is no use to realize it intellectually or conceptually—a waste of time. To move to realize, which means to 'make real' or 'actualize' which is 'to actually know this by direct experience'—is the basis for all spiritual practice.

This simple practice of japa yoga becomes the foundation for meditation, as the mantra becomes an aid to help you to become aware of the inner activity of the mind. Wanting to hear the sound of the mantra enables you to separate thought from activity—here, the repetition and listening to the mantra.

As you proceed, japa blends into meditation and thus begins a psychological weaning of awareness from thought. We will go deeper into this as we approach meditation. Having understood some of the basics and turned off all distractions, let us now begin the practice.

Japa Practice

Light a candle in your sitting area to symbolize your aspiration and say some prayers of your choice. Aside from prayer for inner spiritual strength, the prayer brings attention to heart and mind of what you are setting out to do.

Set the timer for 10-12 minutes or the desired time and close your eyes as the timer is set.



If you are using a japa mala or rosary, take it up and hold the mala in place over your right knee with a small cloth beneath it on which it will turn, as we have already discussed.

Repeat 'Om' three times and feel an inward letting go of 'all things', which is the hold your mind actually has on concepts and notions.

Realize that you are sitting for practice. Dwelling on this feeling for a few moments will gather the scattered rays of the mind and bring them to the adventure you are undertaking.

Become aware of the footprint of your body, which is the area your body has contact with the floor and cushion, or the floor and chair if you are sitting on a chair. This will bring the mind from the general idea of activity to a small physical location—the body's footprint.

Become aware of the act of breathing. The attention will start following your breathing; let it and encourage it. The attention will dove-tail your breathing or follow your breathing as far in as it goes and then turn right around and follow it as far out as it goes, and you will be quite amazed to discover that inhalation itself becomes exhalation in a seemingly perpetual cycle. If your awareness is keen, you will feel the warmth and humidity of your breathing. This will sharpen your awareness or attention.

Introduce the mantra to the rhythm of your breathing, repeating it once (mentally, in a whisper, or audibly as discussed earlier) with each inhalation and once with each exhalation. Do not alter your breathing. Instead, stretch the mantra to the normal length of your breathing just as naturally as you would pull on a comfortable t-shirt. The attention should be on repeating the mantra and listening to the mantra.

The two main sources of distraction—visual: something to see, or audible: something to hear, even if it be a thought. The sound of the mantra will offset the audible distractions, as taking an interest in the mantra will reduce awareness of other sounds. If the rise of different images increases, you may have to introduce the image of your chosen deity as a visualization within the chest space or the heart. For this, one must be able to visualize the picture and the separate practice of gazing on the picture or *trataka* for about 6-8 minutes becomes helpful. Some find it difficult to visualize the picture, though the practice is most helpful in thinning visual distractions, and instead find that locating the attention someplace within in the heart or between the eyebrows is useful. Some find the sound of the mantra is enough and they can do without the other practices. It does not matter; use what is helpful but don't get stuck there or get mechanical, and try to synchronize the sound of the mantra being repeated with each inhalation and exhalation. Aids are useful if used as and when needed.

Japa continues and you are repeating the mantra and hearing the mantra within you mentally, once with each inhalation and exhalation. Let your attention be completely on the sound of the mantra and it will begin flowing towards the mantra naturally.

As the timer sounds, repeat 'Om' three times and gently open your eyes and become aware of the space in which you find yourself.

Say some closing prayers and put the japa mala away (if you have used one), preferably wrapped in the same cloth it was rolling on.

Always sit for a few moments; never get up immediately, feeling as though the practice has now been done and there is something more important pending. Sit in the present and feel the present. Without rushing, get up gently and leave the sitting area.

Closing Thoughts

Gradually, the mantra will become automatically aligned to your breathing. When disturbances arise in the mind, the breathing will get agitated, as thought and breathing are interconnected, but your attention will at once revert to the mantra which has become aligned to your breathing. You will see the rise of thought and continue to do what needs to be done in the present without being distracted or reacting to these impulses.

We cannot see the ego in plain sight but we know when the ego is at play, as thoughts connected to it surge and pull our attention. The sincere and whole-hearted practice of japa will lead to direct insight: that thoughts are separate from activity or action. It is great joy to be able to do what needs to be done without the relentless interference of thought—ego's strongman.

This practice will lead to meditation where one learns how to disentangle awareness from thought. We will look into that later.

Practice is not *for* something, it is *the thing in itself*, but since we are not able to jump across the river in a single leap and actualize the truth—it is called practice. Practice diligently!

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Recommended Reading: Japa Yoga by Swami Sivananda, published by The Divine Life Society.

suryadevananda.org