

VII. DHYANA OR MEDITATION

Meditation is learnt while meditating. The teachings on meditation help in the approach and throw some light on dealing with obstacles as looking within does not involve our normal ways of perception and understanding. We will cover one method or approach to meditation here which involves the use of a mantra. Let us try to look into some of the fundamentals of meditation in three parts.

1. The first will deal with understanding by looking into some of the principles and a little theory but quickly get into practice as well. Getting into practice right along with theory will reduce concepts from forming and give rise to pertinent questions that need further clarification.
2. The second will build on the first and be a sort of guided meditation with the focus on practice. Here, we will meditate, using the theory from the first as a framework for looking within.
3. The third will build on the practice of the second and try to throw some light on dealing with distractions and obstacles.

Naturally, this means there will be redundancy and overlap but these may be quite useful in going from understanding to experience.

MEDITATION PART I: UNDERSTANDING

The Objective and Approach

It seems contradictory to use terms like 'objective' and 'approach' in yoga as yoga is the discovery of the existing unity or the subject in all things—experiencing itself as itself. But, we have to use the words of language which are based on subject-object relationships. Dissecting any writing is an easy task but does not accomplish anything as the words are never the substance indicated. I hope we can together look at what these words point to instead of stopping at the words used.

The objective of yoga and meditation in particular, is direct perception of one's true nature. For this, thought and the thinker of thought (or the ego), have to be included in the field of observation. You may feel that you are the thinker of thought but most of the time, thought is thinking itself and consciousness or being identifies with them as they reflect what and how we have felt or may still feel.

For ease of understanding, let us consider meditation in three steps:

- 1. Stabilization:** where by looking within, we realize our distinctness from thought and can continue in practice and life without getting mixed up in rising and falling thoughts.
- 2. Mastery of Mind:** where we begin inquiry into the mantra to understand its content by direct experience. Understanding one thought is understanding all thought and the mind.
- 3. Self-Inquiry:** where that inner intelligence which has inquired into and thoroughly comprehended thought, is turned on itself in direct self-inquiry.

1. Stabilization

Understanding

We are distinct from thought as we are aware of them. Thought is habit and identifying with thought is also a habit. Each time we identify with thought, they strengthen their hold on consciousness. Yoga and meditation in particular, seeks to discover being or just who we are by direct observation.

What is called practice is only because for whatever reason, we were not able to experience a full experience of quest of self-knowledge. Practice is not disconnected from life or its objective, neither is it a preliminary step or series of steps. Everything you do must be done consciously as every moment is an opportunity to discover the truth of who we are and the true nature of things—and hence, every action is practice.

In the early stages of meditation, we first learn how to look within, to be aware of the rise and fall of thought and our distinctness from thought. We realize that we are distinct from thought by this direct observation. We then find a way to rest in this realization and continue meditation without the interference of thought.

What we call distractions are other thoughts that rise and will fall on their own if not interfered or identified with, without any suppression at all. Old thoughts still have residual energy or energy infused in them earlier by our likes and dislikes—they have gained strength by constant use and will exhaust themselves *on their own* by disuse.

Direct perception to direct action uses the inner intelligence which is beyond thought as it is aware of thought. Empowering the inner intelligence, weakens the hold of thought on consciousness or awareness. Continuing to meditate without interference of thought, stabilizes or restores the natural relationship between consciousness and thought.

Having found a way to perceive and act without the interference of thought on the mat, we must continue to do so in life. A good portion of the day is spent in relationships and activity and we must learn to interact and act, doing what needs to be done without interference of thought, habit or preference. This challenge awakens the inner intelligence as all thought must be observed. If one's day and all its activity has this background of 'living meditation'—what is generally known as seated meditation will come about without struggle. If however, one's day is without living meditation or ongoing vigilance—attempts to meditate in the quiet of the room will be a struggle at best.

Practice

If possible, it is good to meditate in a space set aside for meditation and at the same time as well. Keeping the meditation area clean, neat and uncluttered will encourage the same inner mood as you get started. Early morning hours and before retiring to sleep are good for meditation. Keep at least an hour after a light meal and about two hours after a heavier meal or you may encounter drowsiness. Wear simple, comfortable and non-restrictive clothing. Do not allow any communication devices in the meditation space, even having them by your side may give rise to thoughts of communicating. Initially, the period of meditation should be about 15-18 minutes and the use of a timer is highly recommended.

Sit in any cross-legged posture, the use of a cushion will raise the buttocks and remove the strain from the knees and hips while bringing about flexibility gradually. It is important to keep the back and neck straight and the head facing forward naturally without bending down. If you cannot sit cross-legged on the floor, sit on a chair but keep your legs uncrossed to preclude the urge to switch the legs over and keep the feet flat on the floor with your back straight.

Light a candle and or incense in your prayer area and offer some prayers from the heart. Set the timer for 15-18 minutes and close your eyes while you recite the mantra 'Om' three times. With each 'Om', feel that you have let go of all concerns—social and family; work and profession; and; all personal as well as spiritual concerns. You should not have any expectation from meditation itself while still meditating with all your being.

In the steps that follow, pause briefly during each of the 'become aware or realize' mentioned, to make sure you have actual awareness or realization before moving on the next.

Become aware (or realize) that you are seated for meditation. Note that becoming aware does not involve thought. To realize is to make real by direct knowledge—meditation is sustained by direct experience. Your attention will come to the activity of meditation.

Become aware of the space you are seated in, the attention will now tighten from the activity to the room or general space you are seated in. Become aware of the footprint of the body, this is the space your body has contact with the floor or floor and chair. The attention will narrow from the general space to the precise footprint and you should be able to feel this footprint at one stroke.

Become aware of the act of breathing. The awareness now shifts from the footprint of the body to within and starts to investigate the breathing. It will dovetail or follow the breathing through inhalation and exhalation. If your attention is keen, you will feel the warmth and humidity of your breath.

Introduce the mantra to the rhythm of your breathing, repeating it mentally once while inhaling and once while exhaling. You can choose any ishta-mantra or shorter mantras like 'Om Namah Shivaya' or 'Om Namo Narayanaya' as per your preference but do not change your mantra once chosen. If you have a personal deity, it is good to select the ishta-mantra that of the deity. Do not alter your breathing, instead, stretch the mantra so it aligns to the natural rhythm of your breathing. In the initial stages, the mantra helps by stabilizing the relationship between thought and consciousness.

Introduce the image of your chosen deity or any other object such as flowers or a candle flame in the center of your chest—this is recommended as a visual image will aid stability. The attention is on repeating the mantra and listening to the mantra mentally, the image held within will substantially reduce visual distractions. If you feel you can carry on with just repeating and listening to the mantra, feel free to do so but progress is better if you can hold an image within you.

If you have difficulty holding the image, practice some tratak or gazing separately which involves staring at the image selected for about 6-8 minutes each sitting or till the eyes get slightly watery. This will accelerate the power of concentration by gathering the rays of the mind into single focus.

Soon, other thoughts will rise and you will be aware of them naturally. Let them rise as they do and fall as they will do as well. Your attention is on repeating the listening to the mantra mentally and the mantra will start getting more clearly audible if you are repeating it clearly. Just as the inner intelligence investigated your breathing by following it in and out, it will start to investigate the mantra to know what it is made of and where it is being heard within you.

It is important not to create any space in terms of 'I am the intelligence here' and 'the mantra is repeating over there someplace' as there is no spatial separation within—where all this is taking place. All this is happening within—in the indivisible mind and you have to awaken the inner intelligence which is not localized but present in every cell your being. Thought requires subject and object or space and hence there is movement. Direct awareness does not have spatial separation and does not involve movement and therefore one should be completely relaxed and free of any inner stress.

When the timer goes off, repeat the mantra 'Om' three times and gently open your eyes. It is good to say some prayers immediately following meditation. Sit for a while before getting up and leave the area gracefully.

Back to Understanding

Stay at this step till you feel you can continue without being distracted for the most part. Do not see these steps as milestones of achievement as that is the domain of the ego. Be slow but walk with careful strides and you will attain some level of mastery in every sitting.

Sincere interest in the object of meditation (the mantra here) will keep the attention fresh and this will offset other thoughts or distractions. The rise and fall of distractions is not the problem, being distracted is.

If needed, here is a good exercise to sharpen the attention which can be done separately. Sit just as you did in the earlier steps till you bring your attention to the act of breathing. Follow the inhalation and try to pinpoint the moment and if possible the location where inhalation itself turns to exhalation. You can use a verbal 'now in, in, in...' till you detect the change and then reverse it to 'now out, out, out...' to pin down the time and location of change. This is very beneficial if done at least twice a day.

2. Mastery of Mind

When you have been able to continue your session without being distracted for the most part, you should flow into the second step. Let us continue where we left off.

Your attention has been steady on repeating and listening to the mantra mentally within you. Let this string of inquiry arise just once when the attention is steady, "What is this mantra, what is it made of and where is it being heard in me?"

You must know the actual content of the mantra—just what the mantra is made off by direct experience. In other words, the inner intelligence has to contact the mantra, touch the mantra being repeated mentally—the inner intelligence has to contact thought directly. Intellectually,

you may know the mantra is made of thought but wipe that out of your mind and challenge the inner intelligence to know by direct experience.

So far, we have not used thought but introduce one string to direct the inner intelligence to inquire into the mantra directly. Do not keep repeating the question thinking it will aid your inquiry—it will not. On the contrary, the ego will start intellectual gymnastics and give you all kinds of fantastic exits off the highway of inquiry.

Sit still and let your full attention be on articulating and hearing the sound of the mantra clearly each time. Interest is key to awakening the intelligence and inquiry. Becoming simultaneously aware of the precise moment of the rise of other thoughts without losing attention on the sound of the mantra will further sharpen the intelligence.

This step requires your most sincere commitment as it is in this step that you awaken and empower the inner intelligence and disengage thought as the medium of perception, action and experience. Follow the same sequence of ending meditation when the timer goes off as with the first step.

3. Self-Inquiry

It is advisable to take to this third step after you have succeeded in your direct inquiry and realization of the substance of the mantra. So far, the inquiry has been in the nature of 'what', this step changes the nature of inquiry to 'who' which is the most subtle inquiry. Mastery of mind is also complete empowerment of the inner intelligence which must now inquire into its own nature.

We have used a string of thought to give direction to the inner intelligence when inquiring into the mantra. Now, let this string of thought arise naturally within just once, "Am I the repeater of the mantra or the listener of the mantra?" Alternatively, you can also inquire, "Who am I?" I recommend the former for the most part as one can get side-tracked in an open inquiry of 'Who am I?' unless one is very well established in dispassion and the heart is free of desires completely. The former, gives some structure for inquiry without involving thought and this keeps one from drifting or drowsiness.

Closing Thoughts

Next, let us go through the sequence of meditation together, using the mantra to stabilize and inquire. Remember, the mat or field of practice includes all life. Be diligent in your practice.