

Meditation Is Not What You Think

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You want to attain a state of happiness that is free from all pains and miseries. Yet you constantly live with fears, concerns, strain, and struggle. Why? Because you do not live in the moment, you are not fully present and aware. Your inner and outer conflicts prevent you from dealing with the situations that come before you and living in harmony with those who are close to you. These conflicts keep you from accomplishing the tasks that you have placed before yourself.

Meditation is a definite process for resolving conflicts. It is the simple and exact process of becoming aware of who you are. It is learning to know yourself as you really are. Meditation is a practice of gently freeing yourself from the worries that gnaw at you, so that you can be free and respond to the needs of the moment, and experience the joy of being fully present. Meditation is not what you think, for it is beyond thinking. You do not meditate on your problems in order to solve them, but through meditation you see through the problems you have set up for yourself.

The World Within

Meditation is a practical means for calming yourself, for letting go of your biases and seeing what is, openly and clearly. It is a way of training the mind so that you are not distracted and caught up in its endless churning. Meditation teaches you to systematically explore your inner dimensions. It is a system of commitment, not commandment. You are committing to yourself, to your path, and to the goal of knowing yourself.

Meditation is not a ritual belonging to any particular religion, culture, or group. It is a method of knowing the one reality from which all religions spring. For example, the Bible clearly says, "Be still and know that I am God." Learning how to be still is the method of meditation. And if you meditate regularly you will find that you have become more calm, yet alert to what is needed in the present moment.

Most people associate calmness with passivity, but the peace that meditation brings releases energy. Worry and preoccupation dissipate your strength. Meditation frees the energy that has been bound in your mental discord so that you can apply yourself one-pointedly to whatever you decide to do. Meditation will lead your mind to become more concentrated, so that you can fully focus on whatever you choose. Because of this, those who meditate will learn almost anything more easily and more quickly.

From childhood onward, you are taught to examine and understand things in the external world, but nobody teaches you to look within and understand the mind and its various states. All of your training has been to know the outer world, and to become skillful at manipulating the external world for your own benefit. But unless you learn to know yourself, whatever you do in the external world will not produce the results you want. If a tire is out of balance, no matter how wonderfully it was designed in other respects, it will not function properly. Unless you achieve inner balance, no matter how much you know about performing in the outer world, you will fall short of your goals. Meditation is the means of achieving this inner balance.

Those who have examined the objects of the external world understand their transitory nature and know that life has more to give. Then they start searching within themselves and conducting "inner research." Meditation is a systematic technique of inner research. It is like a ladder with many rungs which finally leads to the roof, and from there one can see the vast horizon all around.

Meditation will lead you to a state of inner joy. You think that pleasure comes from your contact with the objects of the world, but there is an inner and finer joy that you have not yet tasted. Those who have been researchers in the external world, who have examined its pleasures and joys, discover that the highest of all joys is meditation, and this joy leads to that eternal joy called samadhi. Such great ones like to keep their eyes partially closed, looking into the innermost light that shines within this frame of life.

Meditation will give you a tranquil mind. Meditation will make you aware of the reality deep within. Meditation will make you fearless; meditation will make you calm; meditation will make you gentle; meditation will make you loving; meditation will give you freedom from fear; meditation will lead you to the state of inner joy. If you understand these goals and want to meditate, then it will help you, but if you are expecting to become rich through meditation, then don't do it.

Full Attention

Meditation is not a difficult task that you must force upon yourself; once you experience that inner joy you will spontaneously want to meditate as much as you now look forward to outer pleasures. Nevertheless, it is very helpful to establish a routine to your meditative practice. Just as you eat at certain times of the day, and look forward to eating as those times approach, so too, by developing the habit of meditating at the same time each day your whole being—your body, breath, and mind—will look forward to meditating at that time. You should sit down every day at exactly the same time. Establish a specific time for your practice and do your practice every day at that time.

The first thing you have to learn is to be still. This process begins with physical stillness. According to the tradition that we follow,

the asana, or meditative posture, is carefully selected according to your nature and capacity, and you are guided by a competent teacher to keep your head, neck, and trunk straight. After choosing a sitting posture, good students learn to become accomplished in it.

After accomplishing stillness with the help of the meditative posture, you will become aware of obstacles arising from muscle twitching, tremors occurring in various parts of the body, shaking, and itching. These obstacles arise because the body has never been trained to be still. We are trained to move in the external world faster and faster, but nobody trains us to remain still. To learn this stillness, you should form a regular habit, and to form this habit you should learn to be regular and punctual, practicing the same posture at the same time and at the same place every day until the body stops rebelling against the discipline given to it. This step, though basic, is important and should not be ignored. Otherwise, you will not be able to reap the fruits of meditation and your efforts will be wasted.

You should find a simple, uncluttered, quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Sit on the floor with a cushion under you or in a firm chair, with your back straight and your eyes closed. Then bring your awareness slowly down through your body, allowing all of the muscles to relax except those that are supporting your head, neck, and back. Take your time and enjoy the process of letting go of the tension in your body. Meditation is the art and science of letting go, and this letting go begins with the body and then progresses to thoughts.

Once the body is relaxed and at peace, bring your awareness to your breath. Notice which part of your lungs are being exercised as you breathe. If you are breathing primarily with your chest you will not be able to relax. Let your breathing come primarily through the movement of the diaphragm. Continue to observe your breath without trying to control it. At first the breath may be irregular, but gradually it will become smooth and even, without pauses and jerks.

Meditation is a process of giving your full attention to whatever object you have chosen. In this case you are choosing to be aware of the breath. Allow yourself to experience your breathing in an open and accepting way. Do not judge or attempt to control or change it. Open yourself so fully that eventually there is no distinction between you and the breathing. In this process many thoughts will arise in your mind: "Am I doing this right? When will this be over? My nostril is clogged—should I get up and blow my nose before I continue? Perhaps I should have closed the window. I forgot to make an important call. My neck hurts." Hundreds of thoughts may come before you and each thought will call forth some further response: a judgment, an action, an interest in pursuing the thought further, an attempt to get rid of the thought.

At this point, if you simply remain aware of this process instead of reacting to the thought, you will become aware of how restless your mind is. It tosses and turns like you do on a night when you cannot fall asleep. But that is only a problem when you identify with the mind and react to the various thoughts it throws at you. If you do, you will be caught in a never-ending whirlwind of restless activity. But if you simply attend to those thoughts when they arise, without reacting, or if you react and attend to the reaction, then they cannot really disturb you. Remember—it is not the thoughts that disturb you, but your reaction to them. It is not a sound that disturbs your meditation, but your reaction to it.

Meditation is very simple. It is simply attending. You can begin by attending to your breath, and then if a thought comes, attend to it, notice it, be open to it—and it will pass. Then you can come back to the breath. Your normal response is to react to all your thoughts, and this keeps you ever busy in a sea of confusion. Meditation teaches you to attend to what is taking place within without reacting, and this makes all the difference. It brings you freedom from the mind and its meandering. And in this freedom you begin to experience who you are, distinct from your mental turmoil. You experience inner joy and contentment, you experience relief and inner relaxation, and you find a respite from the tumult of your life. You have given yourself an inner vacation.

The Foundation For Peace

This inner vacation is not a retreat from the world but the foundation for finding inner peace. You must also learn to apply the principle of attending in your worldly activities so that you can apply yourself in the world more effectively. Through practicing meditation you can learn to be open to what comes before you in the world and give it your full attention.

Ordinarily, you react to the experiences that come before you in the world in much the same way that you react to your thoughts. If someone says something negative to you, you become upset or depressed. If you lose something, you react emotionally. Your mood depends on what comes before you and, as a result, your life is like a roller coaster ride. You react before you have fully experienced what you are reacting to; what you see or hear immediately pushes a button. You interpret that according to your expectations, fears, prejudices, or resistances. You short-circuit the experience, and thus you limit yourself to one or two conditioned responses. You give up your ability to respond to a situation openly and creatively.

But if you apply the principle of meditation to experiences that come before you, you can fully attend to what is taking place. You can attend to your initial reaction without reacting to your reaction: "Oh, look at how threatened I feel by that." You need not deny your reaction. Let yourself be open to experiencing it and it will move through you and allow other spontaneous responses to also come forward, so that you can select the one that is most helpful in that particular situation.

In this way meditation is very therapeutic. It not only leads to inner balance and stability, it also exposes your inner complexes, your immaturities, your unproductive reflexes and habits. Instead of living in these and acting them out, they are brought to your awareness and you can give them your full attention. Only then will they be cleared.

Patient Practice

Competent teachers instruct students in how to be free from external influences and how to follow the primary steps, so that the body, senses, and mind are prepared for meditative experiences. If the preliminaries are ignored, then students may waste years and years hallucinating and fantasizing, simply feeding their egos and not attaining any deeper experiences.

But there is one serious problem. Modern students are like children who plant seeds in the evening and early the next morning wake up and start digging up the seeds to see what has happened. Of course, nothing has happened; the seeds are still there so the child covers them up again and pours water on them. Then, in the afternoon, the child wants to examine the seeds again. Let the seeds of your practice grow; give your practice some time to develop.

Have patience and do your practice systematically. Every action has a reaction. It is not possible for you to do meditation and not receive benefits. You may not notice those benefits now, but slowly and gradually you are storing the samskaras (impressions) in the unconscious mind that will help you later. If you sow a seed today, you don't reap the fruit tomorrow, but eventually you will. It takes time to see results; be gentle with yourself.

Meditation means gently fathoming all the levels of yourself, one level after another. Be honest with yourself. Don't care what others say about their experiences—keep your mind focused on your goal. It is your own mind that does not allow you to meditate, and your untrained mind is like a garbage disposal. To work with your mind, you'll have to be patient, you'll have to work gradually with yourself.

I sometimes hear students say, "I have not attained anything; I have been doing meditation for thirteen years!" Are you sure that you have been doing meditation? Or did you sit and sleep or dream or think? For thirteen years you have been thinking about many other things in the name of meditation; you think about your work and your boyfriend or girlfriend. You sat for all those years in meditation but you did not really meditate, and then you complain that nothing has happened to you. Do not give your mind space to wander when you meditate, but go step by step in the process. Train yourself. First, pay attention to your posture. Learn to sit correctly. Do your practice systematically. Then work to eliminate the mental and emotional obstacles.

If meditators probe the inner levels of their being, exploring the unknown dimensions of interior life, and if they have learned a systematic and scientific method that can lead them to the next state of experience, then they can go beyond all the levels of their unconscious mind and establish themselves in their essential nature.

Soundless Sound

During deep meditation, the ancient sages heard certain sounds called mantras. In the Bible, it is said that those who have an ear to hear will hear. When the mind becomes attuned, it is capable of hearing the voice of the unknown. The sounds that are heard in such a state do not belong to any particular language, religion, or tradition. According to our tradition, which is a meditative tradition more than five thousand years old, mantra and meditation are inseparable, like the two sides of a coin.

All the existing spiritual traditions of the world use a syllable, a sound, a word or set of words, called a mantra, as a bridge for crossing the mire of delusion and reaching the other shore of life. Mantra setu is that practice which helps the meditator make the mind one-pointed and inward, and then finally leads to the center of consciousness, the deep recesses of eternal silence where peace, happiness, and bliss reside.

There are sounds that are created by the external world and heard by the ears, and sounds heard in deep meditation. The latter is called anahata nada, the unstruck sound. Inner sounds, which are heard in deep meditation by the sages, do not vibrate in exactly the same way as sound vibrates in the external world. They have a leading quality. They lead the meditator toward the center of silence within. The following simile can help in understanding this: Imagine that you are standing on the bank of a river and you hear the current as it flows. If you follow the river upstream, you will come to its origin. There, you will find that there is no sound. In the same way, a mantra leads the mind to the silence within. That state is called "soundless sound."

The mantra imparted by a teacher to a student is like a prescription given to a patient. There are innumerable sounds, each with a different effect. The teacher must understand which best suits a particular student, according to his or her attitudes, emotions, desires, and habits.

A mantra has four bodies or koshas (sheaths). First, as a word, it has a meaning; another more subtle form is its feeling; still more subtle is a presence, a deep intense and constant awareness of it; and the fourth or most subtle level of the mantra is soundless sound.

Many students continue repeating or muttering their mantra throughout their entire life, but never attain a state of ajapa japa—that state of constant awareness without any effort. These students strengthen their awareness, but meditate on the gross level only.

Those who go beyond this stage use special mantras that do not obstruct and disturb the flow of breath, but help regulate the breath and lead to a state in which the breath flows through both nostrils equally. In this state the breath and mind function in complete harmony and create a joyous state of mind. When students attain this state, the mind is voluntarily disconnected from the dissipation of the senses. Then they have to deal with the thoughts coming forward from the unconscious mind, that vast reservoir in which we have stored all the impressions of our lifetime. The mantra helps one to go beyond this process, creating a new groove in the mind, and the mind then begins to spontaneously flow into the groove created by the mantra. Finally, when the mind becomes concentrated, one-pointed, and inward, it peers into the latent part of the unconscious, and there, sooner or later, it finds a glittering light. Mantra is the means. Meditation is the method.

In my own practice I sit down and observe my whole being listening to the mantra. I do not remember the mantra or repeat the

mantra mentally. Instead I make my whole being an ear to hear the mantra, and the mantra is coming from everywhere. This will not happen to you immediately in meditation, but when you have attained or accomplished something, it will. Then, even if you do not want to do your mantra, it is not possible to avoid it. Even if you decide that you do not want to remember the mantra, it will not be possible. Finally, even the mantra does not exist; only the purpose for which you repeat the mantra is there; you are there. The mantra might still be there, but it exists as an experience that overwhelms your whole being, and is not separate from you.

The most important role mantra plays is during the transition period that every human being will experience. A dying person's senses do not function properly. He gradually loses the sense of sight, the tongue mumbles words that cannot be understood by others, and he is unable to express the mind's thoughts in speech or actions. This painful and pitiable situation frightens the mind of a non-meditator. But if one remembers the mantra for a long time in such a state of loneliness, the mantra begins to lead him, and this miserable period of loneliness and agony is over. The mantra becomes his leader. Only one thought pattern is strengthened by remembering the mantra, and when it is firmly established it leads the individual to his abode of peace, happiness, and bliss.

The Art of Joyful Living

So never give up! Accept meditation as a part of your life, just as you eat, sleep, and do other things; make it your goal to have a calm mind, to have a one-pointed mind, to have a tranquil mind. Do not give that up. Meditation leaves a clear indication on your heart, which is reflected on your face. When people speak to me, I can easily tell whether or not they meditate or are even capable of meditation. Their face is the index of their heart.

You can attain the highest state of samadhi through meditation. Then you are here, yet there; you live in the world, yet above; you include all, and exclude none. When the day arrives that every man, woman, and child practices meditation, we will all attain the next step of civilization and realize the unity in all. Liberation can be attained here and now, and that experience is the ultimate goal of human life. •

Adapted from The Art of Joyful Living by Swami Rama, published by the Himalayan Institute Press, 800-822-4547 or <http://www.himalayaninstitute.org/>.

One of the greatest yogis, teachers, and humanitarians of the 20th century, Swami Rama is the founder of the Himalayan Institute and of Yoga International. Under the guidance of his master, the Himalayan sage Bengali Baba, he traveled throughout India and the Himalayan region, studying and practicing with adepts from a variety of traditions.

November 2003