

# Meditation "Dhyana"

Consciously or unconsciously we are all seeking that peace that is inherent in all of us. It is our nature to want to find the everlasting self.

## What Is Meditation?

The Sanskrit word *dhyana*, derived from the verbal root *dhyai* is to contemplate, meditate, think. Raja Yoga, yoga of mental mastery, was called the royal practice. The great sages and yogis went into deep states of meditation to reunite themselves with the ultimate reality or cosmic consciousness, to find the ultimate union. Meditation teaches us how to control our thoughts, to focus them to such a degree that there is clarity, or union without duality. Meditation is both the observance of consciousness and conscious awareness at the same time. Let me use as an example a large mirror to represent the *jiva* (individual self or a living being), and what it reflects as how you see the self, or yourself. If each of your thoughts were assigned to little yellow sticky notes and these thousands of little sticky notes were placed haphazardly all over a mirror, this would represent your mental activity or mental control. And the few places left on the mirror where you could still see the mirror itself, yourself, were to represent how we see only a partial reflection, or a glimpse of the true self or reality. So, by focusing on the thoughts (the sticky notes), constantly observing them, controlling their presence, they can be organized, categorized, and eventually removed. Leaving the mirror unobstructed, nothing in the way. The mirror now represents a true, clear reflection of the *jiva* (individual self). You are the experience and the one experiencing at the same time. This is conscious awareness and *svadhyaya* (self-study). As you continue to practice the techniques of meditation, your thoughts will be clearer, your mind will relax more, you'll feel more at peace, and this way of being will be carried into your daily life and everything that you do.

## About the Mind and Its Reality

The mind sees itself as consciousness, or reality, when in fact the mind is only a small part of what total reality truly is. The mind's reality itself is an illusion (*maya*). The practice of Meditation is a way of dispelling the veil of this illusion. Meditation leads the practitioner to an ever-increasing state of complete awareness (*samadhi*), or total reality, in the absence of the ego mind (no judgement), where there are no lineal limitations, like time, space or causation. There is only totality, or true reality. There are several types, styles and focuses for meditation, and they can be adapted to an individual's needs and personality. Synonymous to most types of Meditation is the practice of sense withdrawal (*pratyahara*), turning the attention inward, concentration (*dharana*), focusing your thoughts on a something (a thing, an activity or a concept) to a point so completely that there are no other thoughts. At this point concentration becomes Meditation (*dhyana*). In short, meditation is a practice of concentrating with so much focus on one thought, concept, action or thing (one pointed) that everything else is gone. This is *citta vrtti nirodah* (cessation of thought). For this to happen the unwanted thoughts need to be suppressed, ignored, or dealt with. There needs to be a method by which the thoughts become fewer until there remains but one (technique meditation), or no thought remains (your awareness is not on or in

the mind) and your awareness is on the consciousness itself. When there is no identification with the thoughts this is called *citta vr̥tti nirodah* (cessation of thought). This process is what meditation is all about. From this nothing you experience a sense of absorption into a realm of pure consciousness. In this state you and reality are one, there is no longer a separation. You are in touch with, and merge with everything; intuitive awareness, knowledge, universal truth, understanding and experiencing simultaneously the complete essence of the self and true reality (divine spirit). The you you knew no longer exists and for the time being you experience a sense of completeness, nonduality, and *santosh* (contentment). It should be mentioned that meditation could also be practiced without focusing one pointedly on a particular technique to clear the mind. You can observe the thoughts as they come and go, recognizing that they are only thoughts and consciously experience them as they present themselves. This is insight, or conscious awareness meditation. To a degree it is still focusing one pointedly only the focus is on the consciousness itself which is pretty expansive and not thought of as an individual thing even though it may be.

## About the Mind and How It Sees Itself

The human mind begins to develop in the womb, and as it continues to develop it records, categorizes and files all of your experiences. It knows these experiences as total reality. This is not true reality but reality limited to the instrument through which it has been perceived. Knowledge or perception, is based on encoded, recorded memories that have been stored in the instrument of the mind to be recalled as needed to perceive reality. We know the color red, as red, so when we see it again, a thought-wave (*vr̥tti*) arises with an encrypted code recognizing the color, and so we know it to be red. It's that simple. From the compilation of our lives' experiences perceived by the mind through our five senses (*indriyas*) (seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching) we know reality, so we think.

According to the great sage Patanjali all knowledge is objective since the mind itself is not the seer, but only an instrument of knowledge, an object of perception like the outside world. The Atman, the real seer, remains unknown. It is as if a little electric light bulb would declare, "I am the electric current" and then proceeds to describe electricity as a pear shaped glass object containing filaments of wire. Such identification is absurd—as absurd as the ego's claim to be the real self. Nevertheless, the electric current is present in the light bulb, and the Atman is in all things, everywhere. (From *How To Know God*, 1953, p.12, 13)

## How Is Meditation Different than Concentration?

Thought waves are easiest to understand if you think of them as sine-waves, each point of every wave being the actual thought and the spaces on the way up to and down from these points being what has to happen for the thought itself to manifest. Using the alphabet as an example I'll show you how this works.



In order to think of, or say the letter "A," a series of informational encrypted bytes of information are sent to the part of your brain that retrieves information available on the "A", both leading up



thing instead of as a reality. When you have successfully engaged the mind in an activity, it will stay with it for as long as it's interesting. The greater the challenge, the more attention the activity gets. Due to the complexity of the relationship we have with our minds, and the varying differences in nature of our personalities, it would be unlikely that any one type of meditation would work for everybody. Because there are several types of, and focuses for meditation, you can try several of them to find the one you like the best. You may find that as a beginner one of the less complicated meditation techniques is easier to start with and after you become more comfortable with the process you'll be ready for a more complex or specific meditation to better suit your needs. Meditation can be looked at many ways but basically no matter how you look at it, it falls into one of these two categories.

In yoga there are two main types of meditation- concrete or Saguna (literally "with qualities") and abstract or Nirguna (without qualities). In Saguna meditation, you focus on a concrete object on which the mind can easily dwell – on an image or visual symbol, perhaps, or a mantra which brings you to unity. In Nirguna meditation, the point of focus is an abstract idea, such as the absolute, a concept that is indescribable in words. Saguna meditation is dualistic – the meditator considers himself separate from the object of meditation, whereas in Nirguna meditation the meditator perceives himself as one with the object. (from *The Sivananda Companion to Yoga*, 1983, p.91)

There is a difference between meditation and a meditative experience. In meditation you actively participate in the process, or activity. In a meditative experience you either relax and space-out or you become mesmerized by whatever it is that you are doing or seeing. Here are a few examples. You're sitting in a boat, fishing pole in hand and you zone out while you're waiting for a fish. Or you're watching television and you stop actually watching but you still see the television. Or someone is talking and even though you know that they're still talking, you really aren't paying attention. In those examples the mind is just running, like when your car engine is running and you get out to do something and forget that you left the engine running and you go do something else. Both the car engine and your mind are going but they serve no purpose. Similarly when you relax listening to music, even if you sit in a meditation position thinking "this is meditation", it really only qualifies as meditative because no work is involved. Both meditating, and relaxing into a meditative experience have beneficial qualities but, like the car engine, it can run smoothly in park or it can take you somewhere. It really depends on what you're looking to do or in this case where you want to go.

## Types of Meditation

The following are brief descriptions of several meditation techniques.

- **Breath Meditation**

This technique simply requires breath observance. The practice of breathing is called Pranayama. There are many types of Pranayama, from passive to vigorous, with a lot of control and without any control. The less stimulating ones are often used for, and will eventually lead to, meditation. You've probably noticed by now that all activities of experience, of life, require some sort of breathing. The breath is a normally involuntary function (of life) that can become voluntary. To this degree, by observing, or even

participating in your breathing, you can be in control of your existence. That control is consciously obtained. Because of the consciousness' involvement, the act of breathing becomes meditation. The breath itself is experiential, and as the experience continues to unfold, you observe. That's meditation (to contemplate). It should also be mentioned that the activity of the breath itself has a direct relationship with, and is inseparably connected to, the physical body, the nervous system and the mind. Each continuously reacting to the reaction of the other; perceived stress = mental anxiety = physical tension = erratic breathing, or calm breathing = relaxed body = no anxiety, physical or mental. By relaxing your breath you relax your body, nervous system and your mind. So conscious breathing brings all aspects of yourself into a more relaxed state, and if you continue to stay with it, eventually leads to meditation. The basic technique is to sit comfortably with your back straight; your eyes closed and begin following your breath. You can either observe the breath as it passes through the opening of choice (nostrils or mouth), or observe the expanding and contracting (or rising and falling) of your abdomen. Nasal breathing is more beneficial than oral breathing for many reasons, but the most important reason within the context of understanding meditation is that it simulates the parasympathetic nervous system, causing a sense of relaxation. By consciously observing your breath you heighten your internal awareness. You begin to develop a relationship with all the systems of your body (because they are all somehow connected to, and are effected by, the rhythm of your breath). As your relationship with your breath unfolds you will begin to experience the sense of peace that permeates your whole being. Through this concentrating on breath awareness your relationship with your breath will change and so too will your relationship with the rest of your body, including your mind. Lastly the act of consciously observing your breath will eventually lead to *citta vrtti nirodah* (cessation of thought) where you will only be aware of the breath itself and its effects on the experience at hand.

- **Mantra Meditation**

This technique goes back thousands of years. A mantra is a word or words, usually with some significant meaning (truth, love, union, god, union with the absolute). Japa is the repetition of the mantra. By actively repeating the mantra a sense of control begins to develop between the consciousness and the mind or thought waves, and this eventually leads to *citta vrtti nirodah* (cessation of thought). The mantra becomes the primary focus and the secondary thoughts begin to diminish until, so it seems, only the manta is left.

- **Relaxation Response**

This is also called mantra meditation. It was introduced by Dr. Herbert Benson in 1968. Dr. Benson and colleagues at the Harvard Medical School studied the physiological effects of meditation on the mind and body. Dr Benson introduced a simple manta, the word "one" that could be used to keep the mind focused while breathing comfortably. Similar to the other mantra type meditations, no focus is emphasized other than the repetition of the mantra, in this case the word "one". When the mind wanders, or you realize you're not still repeating the mantra or if you simply forget, you reintroduce the mantra and continue from there. This technique is so simple that it works for almost anybody. The word "one" is easily repeated, it's not difficult to remember, it's not a secret, and it costs nothing to get. Mantra repetition also eventually leads to *citta vrtti nirodah* (cessation of thought).

- **Transcendental Meditation (TM for short)**  
This is also called Mantra Meditation. It was developed by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The huge success of his technique was due to its compatibility with our culture's temperament (not so Hindu). It was introduced in America in 1959. T.M. quickly became very popular and is still widely practiced. T.M. centers or clinics give instruction on how to practice this type of meditation and introduce a secret, personal mantra to its practitioners. Basically, one mentally repeats the word (mantra) while sitting still. The lips and tongue should not move. The eyes are closed and the attention is turned inwards. No mental force should be used. Each time the mind wanders the mantra is reintroduced.
- **Trataka Meditation (steady gazing)**  
This is the technique of gazing at an object to purify the optic and psychic facilities. It involves alternately staring at the object or point of focus without blinking, then closing your eyes and visualizing the object in your mind's eye. The focus can be on a candle flame, a star, a photo, a gemstone, a mandala or yantra (geometric diagram) or any other object or symbol. This technique is something we do occasionally without knowing it. There are times when we "space out" temporarily with our eyes open and when we suddenly realize it, we close our eyes and still see the object we were staring at. This qualifies as a meditation because where ever the eyes go the mind follows.
- **Vipassana Meditation**  
This technique is called witness, insight or mindfulness meditation. This style of meditation is both difficult and easy. It's difficult because you participate without doing anything about what you're participating in. It's easy because you don't have to really do anything except witness the experience at hand. Basically Vipassana Meditation is contemplating consciousness in consciousness, hence the mindful dilemma. The technique is to sit comfortably, upright, eyes closed and breathing. You begin by noticing anything you can consciously. Things like breath, thoughts, bodily sensations, or anything, without judging, or trying to be in control. You just watch intently, and consciously observe. You consciously watch whatever you experience, and that experience itself is the meditation, not what you are watching.
- **Zen Meditation**  
There are many levels to Zen meditation and it is best to have a teacher to guide you in the beginning to help you understand both the process, and what comes up for you in the process. The basic technique is to relax, breathe gently and try not to be attached to any particular thought or concentrate on any particular object, and not to have any control of the thoughts themselves. Breathe gently and let the breath come and go naturally. Eyes should be kept slightly open and cast downwards at a 45-degree angle without focusing on anything. Simply maintain proper posture and natural breathing. This type of meditation is similar to the Vipassana meditation in regards to the observing aspects, but there isn't as much concern about staying consciously involved (even though the Zen enthusiast might disagree).

It should be mentioned that there is a difference between a meditation technique and meditation practices. A technique is what you do to initiate and sustain the meditative experience that makes it meditation. It can be a focus, an observance or an action that is employed to heighten awareness, usually repetitively, to create the meditative experience. Breath-Following, the Relaxation Response, T.M (Transcendental Meditation), and Tratak (gazing) Meditation are all

techniques used for meditation, they themselves are not a practice, but they are a way to practice. Meditation itself has a lineage. Its origin is of a spiritual nature. Hatha Yoga originated from deep states of meditation. As mentioned previously, the spiritual seekers used meditation to reunite themselves with the divine, to become aware of, and understand the meaning of their life's existence. There is documentation that meditation has been practiced for as far back as there are records of humanity. Most of the meditation styles originated from these times when one's spirituality was the only real worthwhile pursuit. So, Hindus, Buddhists, Sufis, Jews and Christians all practiced meditation one way or another to gain a deeper, or better understanding of the ultimate reality.

"He who in this oneness of love, loves me in whatever he sees, wherever this man may live, in truth this man lives in me" (From the *Bhagavad Gita*, chapter 6, sec 31).

From these spiritual origins with their different lineages which all seemingly lead to the same place, different focuses were used to practice meditation. It is these differences that the techniques come from. For example, there is a difference between Zen and Vipassana meditation even though they are both Buddhist in nature. Vipassana is primarily about the observance of consciousness without technique and Zen uses techniques and observance. Buddhist meditation can also include Insight Meditation and Loving-Kindness Meditation. There are literally hundreds of possible focuses and techniques. You can say the lord's name (mantra) over and over, you can repeat a prayer or you can count beads. You could follow your breath, stare at an image or focus on healing. You can expand yourself exponentially, use your body as a vessel to channel the suffering in the world into positive energy, open your chakras, or cleanse your soul. Meditation can be used for spiritual pursuits, physical wellbeing, psychic endeavors (mental hygiene), or whatever you want. No matter what style you practice or what technique you use, meditation is beneficial to practice. Until you've become comfortable (which may take years) with meditation you may not understand the difference between using techniques and pure experience, but when you do you will know the spiritual side of it, too.

## **What Will You Experience as You Practice?**

Swami Vishnu has written: "Meditation does not come easily. A beautiful tree grows slowly. One must wait for the blossom, the ripening of the fruit and the ultimate taste. The blossom of meditation is an expressible peace that permeates the entire being. It's fruit is....undescribable." (From *The Sivananda Companion to Yoga*, 1983, p.89).

The experience of meditation is a difficult one to explain. It is as individually unique from person to person as we are to one another. Even though your own personal meditation may seem very similar from day to day, they too will be different. Each time you step into the water of a mountain stream your foot will get wet, but it wasn't the same water that got your foot wet. Every moment of every day is constantly changing. This constant evolution is the experience of prakriti - the power of creativity in both manifest and unmanifest forms, the "content" of experience. It is this experience that we meditate on.

One of the difficulties with meditation is that it is impossible to know when you're doing it right. The reason for this is that there is no way for you to know what someone else's meditation is like

so you can compare yours to it. It can't be copied, recorded, duplicated, seen or purchased; it can only be experienced. For that reason, as a beginner to meditation, it is advisable to have some guidance either from a teacher, a book, tape or whatever. As you continue to practice, questions will come up. If you have someone to talk with about your experiences it will make the process a lot easier to understand for you.

A few of the common things that beginners experience when they decide to begin a meditation practice is first of all, which focus or technique to use. You may want to try several techniques to determine which one will be most suited to your personality or temperament. As you begin, you will be amazed at just how difficult it is to just relate to your mind. Your eyes may not be willing to stay closed, or if they do, they will probably dart around behind your closed eyelids trying to figure out what's going on. The eyes are the windows to the outside world; they are the primary means through which the mind gathers information. The mind wants to know what's going on. Due to the lack of actual visual input the mind flashes images, patterns and colors to the optic sensors making it appear that there is something to see. This eventually passes and the eyes begin to relax, the images lose their form and become less obvious (although there will usually continue to be some kind of flowing patterns and colors). The next dilemma is usually physical comfort. For most people it's best to find a comfortable physical position that you can stay in for an extended amount of time, one that will allow you to go deeper into your meditation without being distracted by physical discomfort. Many of us aren't used to sitting around with our spines straight for a prolonged period of time, especially on the floor. When your mind is aware of physical discomfort it will repeatedly come back to it until it goes away, either because you did something about it, or it goes away on its own. In Zen meditation you would be encouraged to "stay with the discomfort" and meditate on it. In other types of meditation you are encouraged to give yourself permission to adjust your body as needed until you are comfortable. Sitting in a straight back chair is usually the most comfortable way for a beginner.

Until the body is relaxed and staying on its own, the mind won't let go. The messages the body sends are there so the mind will know what to do. There is a difference between sensations and awareness. Sensations are experiences felt or perceived by the senses and they are relayed to the mind. Awareness is the observance of experience or perception as it's happening. It is not mental activity; it is conscious awareness. If the mind does become preoccupied with bodily sensations, instead of identifying with them, observe them as they are, remain neutral, try not to be drawn one way or another. Most of our awareness is based on input from experiences outside of our bodies and perceived by our five senses. When you turn your attention inward, which is what you are doing when you meditate, this is called pratyahara or sense withdrawal. By withdrawing, and turning your attention inward you begin to develop the ability to experience yourself through your consciousness, or conscious awareness. Unless you're uncomfortable, or in pain, the next obvious awareness is the movement of your breath. Because calm, natural breathing is so soothing and comforting, just following it will put your body at ease, calm your mind and relax your nervous system. At this point you are now "centered", which is a term used to describe the things you just did (maintain a comfortable position, close your eyes, relax your breath and clear your mind). This "centering" could take anywhere from a few seconds to several minutes, maybe longer depending on how much you practice, and how comfortable you are with the whole experience, or the process of getting centered.

It is at this point that the techniques previously described can be successfully employed to further the meditative experience. As you begin to, and continue to use the various techniques, you will most likely find that your mind would also like to do something else like, like recall old thoughts, compare this to that, think about tomorrow. You may also start talking to yourself, saying things like "Is this working?", "When will I know?", "Why am I even doing this?" etc.... It has been said that the mental activity in an undisciplined mind trying to meditate is like a cage full of mad monkeys. This is why the techniques are used, to create a means by which the mind can be trained to release its control over your experience so that what is left is the experience itself. As this process continues to unfold you may feel a sense of movement in your body, like you're swaying, teetering or falling. This happens when the mind has relaxed to such a degree that it isn't holding on as tight to its control over your body and its activities (this is a good thing and will soon pass). It is very similar to when you drink alcohol and you get a little relaxed. So you pull yourself together, straighten up and continue. Next, you may get a sense of wandering in your mind, like dreaming. When you become aware of it (the dreaming) you simply reemploy whatever technique you are using and continue from there. If you are using an activity as your focus (mantra, gazing or breath work etc.) you will find that the activity, which at one point was difficult to employ, begins to happen naturally, and eventually automatically continues on its own. From there you begin to understand what meditation is all about and you become both the experience and the one experiencing at the same time.

Through meditation we begin to understand the meaning of our life's existence, who we really are, what we really are, what's me and what's not me. We develop a sense of understanding, and feel a sense of belonging which aids in the integration of our personality. It may take a long time, and a lot of meditating, but eventually the meditator and the meditation become one and the same. This will be a little startling the first few times, but it is the eventual goal, finding that ultimate union or samadhi. Meditation isn't just about the wellbeing that it brings on a physical and mental level; it's an emergence with the object of meditation, leading to emergence with the consciousness itself.

There is a saying that I like to use when I try to explain why I'm the way I am. It goes like this—"based on what I currently know, it would be impossible for me to be anything other than what I am right now." You can't really know something without becoming it; it is assimilated into you. Similarly, everything you know is who and what you are. All of your experiences and knowledge are you. It is through this emergence that we begin to know things, or experience things beyond what the mind can know, like a mantra, a breath, a deity, a concept, a thought or object. It is unitive awareness on a conscious, energetic and spiritual level. This is samadhi, and samadhi is self-realization (*atma-jnana, purusha-khyati*), or liberation. Even though meditation is enlightening in itself, is not an end to the situations that we face as we try to find ourselves and understand our true nature or experience higher planes of existence. It is only a path that can be taken to experience the whole process of finding and knowing the everlasting self.

## **What Do You Need to Know?**

There are no prerequisites for practicing meditation. However, there are some things you can do to make the process easier, more comfortable and meaningful. It should also be mentioned that for some severe psychological disorders meditation may not be beneficial to practice, but it can

aid in psychological treatment. Check with your psychiatrist or therapist if you are currently working with one. Because nothing is forever, when your thoughts aren't detrimental to your health or wellbeing, you can use meditation for its beneficial qualities.

## **Where Should You Practice Meditation**

You should practice meditation in a clean, airy and quiet place, free from distractions, like noises that would startle you, people coming and going, drafts, phones or anything else that will catch your attention. The temperature should be comfortable and the surroundings pleasant and peaceful. If the probability of being distracted is high you can take some steps to minimize the possibility. You can turn off or unplug the phone or anything else that may go on and off during your meditation. If possible, close the door to the room that you will be in and put a sign on it saying, "do not disturb". At work you can put a sign on the door that says "do not disturb, praying", that will keep most people from interrupting you. You can face the East or North to take advantage of the earth's polarity or rotation.

## **When Should You Practice Meditation**

Meditation can be practiced at any time of day or night, but it is thought that the most auspicious times are at dawn and dusk, when the atmosphere is charged with spiritual energy. It best to practice at the same time every day so that your practice becomes a habit. You create the time instead of trying to find it.

## **How Do You Get the Discipline to Practice Meditation**

That is something that has to come from you. If you want something you have to do something about it. Be realistic, if you're really ready to try meditation, then schedule a time in your day or week to practice it and do it. As a beginner, I think to really give meditation a fair chance it should be practiced regularly, at least a few times a week for several weeks. This will have given you enough time to really notice if it's worthy of your time and effort.

## **How Often Should You Practice Meditation**

It is more beneficial to practice once or twice a day, but you will still benefit if you do it on an as-you-can basis. It is best to gradually increase the length and frequency of your practice so that you don't have to give up too much of your other daily activities. Most of us have a full schedule every day of our lives, so if you add something to your schedule something else has to be taken away to make the time. If you take away too much too fast there will be resentment built into your practice right from the beginning, and you'll probably give up meditation all together to get back what you've lost. Eventually your meditation practice will become more interesting to you than some of the things you had to give up and you will willingly give up more so that you can meditate more. Interestingly, one of the benefits of meditating is that you actually have more time just because you meditate. This happens because you're able to make decisions quicker because your mind is clearer (which saves time) you're more relaxed so you don't need as much

down time between your activities, and you don't need as much sleep because you have less fatigue. For these reasons there's more time for meditation (which wouldn't be there if you didn't meditate).

## How Long Should You Meditate

As a beginner you should start with trying to stay with it for seven to ten minutes. As it becomes easier, work your way up to fifteen, and then twenty minutes. Be patient, let the experience unfold, don't try to force it. The harder you try, the longer it will take to get it. It may seem like when you finally give up, it just happens on its own. That's the beauty of it. Eventually, when you're comfortable with meditation it's advisable to meditate for twenty minutes minimally, thirty minutes advisable, and forty-five minutes optimally.

## How to Practice Meditation

Regardless of which type of meditation technique you're going to practice, it (like any activity) should be given your full attention. If possible, meditate before eating so your body isn't working to digest recently consumed food. If possible you should satisfy your body's need for comfortable ambient temperature so you're not uncomfortable physically. You should sit with your spine straight and your body comfortable (legs, arms etc.). A long time ago when mankind was exploring the meaning of life, which led to the practice of meditation (to contemplate or think), it was found that the preferred position should be comfortable, steady and open in order to optimally experience energy, prana, prakriti, consciousness, the divine or whatever. This position of comfort and steadiness was known as an asana or the position of the experience (which was also the beginning of formal yoga postures). The movement into and out of a position was all part of the experience, but it is at that point where the position was fully expressed, experienced and held, that it qualified as an asana, the seat of the of the experience or pose. All yoga postures end with the word asana after whatever it is that the posture describes. For example, in **Ardha Chandrasana**, Ardha means half, while Chandra means moon, hence the half moon pose. In **Tadasana**, tada means mountain, hence the mountain pose. The word asana also describes the position for meditation, it is in a steady, comfortable position that the experience is fully expressed and experienced. The posture usually associated with meditation is the full lotus or **Padmasana** where your legs are folded, and crossed with your feet up on your thighs and your hands on your knees. The lotus posture is a difficult position for many people to get themselves into and comically, if you wanted an excuse for not starting a meditation practice then your body's lack of flexibility may be just what you're looking for. The posture itself is not the most beneficial part of the practice even though your body should be open and unblocked allowing prana (life force) to move freely in your body. If you're not comfortable in your own experience, and if sitting in the lotus position isn't comfortable, then it's not the position for you. There are several other options:

- In the **easy pose** or **Sukhasana**, you sit on the floor with your legs crossed Indian style, your spine straight and your hands resting on your knees. A pillow can be placed under your tailbone for comfort and proper alignment or pelvic tilt.

- In the **kneeling pose** or **Vajrasana**, you sit back on your heels, with the tops of your feet flat on the floor, spine straight, and your hands on your knees. A meditation bench (small bench with the seat slightly tilted) can be used in this pose to make it more comfortable on the ankles and knees as well as to provide better alignment in the lower spine.
- The **seated chair pose** or **Egyptian pose** is one of the easiest positions for any beginner. You simply sit all the way back (your spine up against the back of the chair) in a straight back chair (preferably without arm rests) with your spine straight, feet flat on the floor and your hands on your knees. It is important to have your feet flat on the floor. If your feet don't easily reach the floor, you can stack a few books under your feet (equal heights) so that your feet and legs can rest comfortably.

## What About Your Hands

The hands themselves are quite incredible. They are much more than the tools that we use to gather things up, or to feel what we touch. Our bodies are polar; they have polarity, magnetism. Energy flows through our bodies all the time. Through our hands energy is channeled in and out. When you touch someone they know your intent. Some people can heal others by touching them. The right side of your body including your hand, symbolizes or represents the sun, masculine, receiving, and the left represents the moon, feminine, giving. The way you hold your hands is called a Mudra. Mudras are gestures. There are whole body Mudras like the yoga posture "yoga mudra" and hand mudras like the ones often associated with meditation. We use hand mudras all the time to express a point (talking with your hands), or to greet someone (a handshake), or to point out blame (point the finger at someone). Placing the hands in prayer is a gesture or a mudra. The precise ways of holding the hands and fingers are also mudras. These mudras can be used to open up, stimulate, activate, or shut down, seal, and close energy channels and pathways in the physical, pranic, or energetic body. Most of the meditation techniques do not emphasize any particular hand position other than placing the hands palm down on the knees or thighs. This is so the hands have some place to be and so the shoulders, arms and hands can be supported and relaxed. I believe that because there is so much to meditation, and because it is usually used for mental hygiene (a technique to clear the mind instead of spiritual unification), that working in mudras would turn a lot of would-be practitioners away. The most common hand mudra used in meditation is where the tip of the thumb on each hand touches the tip of the index fingers forming a circle, and the remaining fingers stay straight. This is called the Jnana Mudra. Both hands are turned upward and placed on your legs on or near your knees. The fingers each represent something including the thumbs.

- The thumb is the universal self or god.
- The index finger is the individual self or the self that we identify with.
- The middle finger is the ego or that part of ourselves that is governed by afflictions.
- The ring finger is the maya or illusory aspect of our self, represents power, money and fame.
- The pinky finger represents worldly actions and reactions.

"It is said that (act this out with your hands as you read the following words) as the individual self (forefinger) reaches up to seek the universal self (thumb), moving away from involvement with ego (middle finger), maya (ring finger), and worldly reactions (little finger), the universal

self reaches down with grace, and, showing itself as itself, takes the individual self into itself." (By Richard C. Miller, *Yoga Journal*, September/ October 1996).

Another common hand position is where both hands rest in your lap, palms up, fingers interlaced and the thumbs on top touching or resting on one another. If you consider the previous description of finger and thumb signification you could assume that in this position all aspects of yourself (represented by your fingers) are together in a submissive position under the higher self which rest above (over seeing). With or without the mudras, meditation is beneficial to practice.

## How Will You Know if You're Doing It Right?

You really can't know if and when you're doing it right. It's a process of experience, and it's the experience itself that meditation is all about. The difficulties you encounter as you begin to meditate are not to be avoided. Stay with them, learn, observe and explore; that's all part of the process. The obstacles, the fears, the confusion, the anxiety, the comfort, the peace, the serenity; these things and feelings are all you, and as you face these aspects of yourself you'll be getting to know the real "you" better. Your experiences are you, so don't be judgmental. You should welcome the things that show you the "self". It is these things that you notice that qualify the experience as awareness, and that awareness opens the door into your consciousness.

## Benefits of Meditation

There is scientific documentation on the health-enhancing qualities for both the mind and the body for those who practice meditation. To some degree these benefits are unique to the practitioner's individual disposition, dilemmas, situations, psyche, personality, attitude, and health. The more help you need in a certain area the more benefit you get from working with it. During meditation your heartbeat and breathing rates slow down (lower blood pressure). Oxygen consumption and metabolic rate falls by twenty per cent. The blood lactate level drops. This level goes up with stress and fatigue. The skin's resistance to electric current increases fourfold, a sign of relaxation. EEG readings of brain wave patterns shows increased alpha activity, again a sign of relaxation. Meditation also affects the production of three important hormones related to increased longevity, decreased stress, and enhanced well-being; cortisol, DHEA, and melatonin. **Cortisol** levels decrease. Cortisol is the "stress hormone," and the more of it you have, the more stressed you feel...the more susceptible to disease you are and the faster you age. **DHEA** levels increase (hormone decreases with age). DHEA acts as a buffer against stress-related hormones (such as cortisol), which is why as you get older and make less DHEA you are more susceptible to stress and disease. **Melatonin** increases (melatonin facilitates restful sleep). Less restful sleep results in a decrease in the quality of your life and greatly accelerates the aging process. This is why meditators require less sleep than non-meditators; they sleep better. Melatonin is also an antioxidant. The sense of mental peace and physical relaxation de-stresses the body (unties the knots), allowing the natural or intended state of the body and its functions to operate normally. Meditation has proven itself in the field of mental hygiene, where it is being used to treat obsessive-compulsive disorders, depression, and anxiety.

During meditation the way you deal with, and hold onto, (relate to) your life's experiences (perceived experiences, concepts, beliefs, and attitudes) changes. Because we internalize everything that happens in our lives, it is assimilated into our minds and bodies. These events, perceived and experienced by our senses and our minds, are responsible for our physiological and psychological make-up. During meditation your awareness is no longer based upon illusion, the correlation between the conscious and subconscious manifestations of our experiences is broken and we are free from the effects of these aspects of our past and present lives. When you are in meditation and are no longer identifying with the ego mind, which is the seat of all of your judgements, thoughts and perceptions, your energy no longer goes towards mental pursuits. It is free to do what it was naturally meant to do, to continue to restore, balance and maintain vibrant health and vitality. As you continue to meditate over a period of time, you eventually and inevitably come to understand that you are inextricably connected to every other living thing in the universe (which functions as a result of the same laws of nature and energy). When you experience that unity, you begin to vibrate in unison with all other living things, and tap into the same universal life force energy. From this non-limiting experiential level of existence you are constantly exchanging energy (prana) with all living things and benefit from this by receiving vibrant energy from which you can't help but experience perfect health. The crudest way of looking at this is that you are in the way of the natural order of things, and if "you" get out of your own way, your health will also return to its original state. Our bodies were designed (regardless of what or who you think designed them) from the very beginning of our individual existence at conception, as an organisms that has the ability to be totally self-sufficient. In other words, we have been provided a vehicle that if taken care of properly, will be able to sustain life providing that the host (us) also contributes by living good and providing fuel (air, food and water) for energy, and releases byproducts as necessary. Like a plant, taking in and giving off different energies, we are meant to co-exist simultaneously with everything around us in an environment suitable for our existence. The difference is that the plant isn't a sentient being (even though it does perceive its environment), but we are.

As you continue to practice meditation, its health enhancing qualities will change your very existence. You will know yourself better. Your sense of self will be stronger and more meaningful. You'll need less approval from others because you'll be more confident. Regardless of how your day or week has been your mood and temperament will be more stable or even. Your world will be more secure. You'll feel better about yourself, and you won't be so easily effected by your life's day to day activities, whether they're positive or negative. This is why meditation is so healthy to practice. It is more than just mental hygiene. It's more than a tool for physical wellbeing. It is an experiential practice through which we reunite ourselves with the ultimate reality, where we remove, or see beyond the veil that hides us from the truth. The "you" that you knew no longer exists. The dis-ease state your body has manifested, due to the internalization of your lives experiences, is shunned and you are no longer unbalanced. The more you meditate the more its health enhancing effects are carried into your daily life. Through meditation you will come to know the "everlasting self" in its purest form, the ultimate union with the divine, and maybe even total consciousness or Samadhi.

During any activity in which you become fully absorbed, there is union. When the activity is the only thing that you're aware of, there is nothing else. There is no internal conflict, no judgement, or any other distractions. You are no longer the sum of your parts (past experiences). There is

only you and whatever it is that you're doing. Often when you're totally into whatever it is that you're doing you're unaware of the time, and you may forget to stop for lunch, or even stay up really late because nothing else seems to matter. There is a suspension of all other activities. The possibility exists that when we are sick, dis-eased, or emotionally injured, it is due to how we react or are reacting to our life's experiences. It is those experiences that create the problem. We all have a place in which we are most susceptible or prone to have health problems. If you placed a board between two ladders, and put a weight in the middle, where would the board break? It would be different for each board you test because the boards would all break at their weakest point, which is unique due to the sum of its history. We too have a weakest point. When you meditate, you disassociate from your past experiences and are no longer (temporarily) internalizing the manifestation of your experiences at your weakest point. Thus, your health is no longer a reflection of your past. This is why meditation is the single most health enhancing technique known to mankind. Our minds make us sick; they make us suffer. We get so caught up in what we think that we have conflict. We are seldom satisfied, and when we, are it soon passes, and again we want and want. We want to not have pain, to be loved, to not lose anyone dear to us. We are afraid of life, the unknown, and of death. The mind can never be satisfied because it is not a something in itself, it is only a thing that perceives experiences, and if it's not trained, it will run in circles trying to understand what it can not know.

If you can get out of your mind and its memories, you will be free from the afflictions (kleshas) that haunt you. Being in the moment means accepting whatever you are experiencing at that time in that moment. It means not wanting, or avoiding, not judging or comparing, no attraction or aversion, no clinging to the past or longing. It means losing the sense of asmita (I-am-ness). You are not "in the moment" until you are there. This cannot be known until it's happening. If you weren't trying to be, or wishing you still were, in the moment, then you wouldn't even know you missed it. You can choose how, and how not, to react in response to every experience you have, but it takes practice. It requires getting to know the "real" Self better, and recognizing the difference between thought and conscious awareness.

Here's an example of living in the mind versus being in the moment. If today's weather forecast called for a high of twenty degrees and a low of twenty degrees how would that make you feel? It can't make you feel anything, you made yourself have a feeling. That's living in your mind. Your feelings are based on the information you retrieved on whether or not you like it when it's twenty degrees, or how you feel about the snow. The more you obsess about it the more it becomes an affliction. You may think, "Twenty all day! It's not going to get warmer. Now what am I going to do? Winter is so depressing! I hate being a prisoner in my own home. I was going to go for a walk, but now I can't. What if it snows? I hate driving in the snow! What a terrible day!" Or maybe you have had three weeks of below zero weather and now you're excited because it's warm today. Maybe you love the snow and you're looking forward to skiing, or shoveling, or snow blowing. Maybe the schools are closed and it's a snow day. Hooray! These scenarios are about our mental afflictions. To be totally in the moment everything is only Now. If you want to go outside, you dress for the weather. When you're ready for your walk, decide then what you want to do. If you don't have to go to work or school because of the weather, how could you use this extra time that wouldn't normally be there? Maybe just sleep a little more. Call an old friend? Seize the moment. There will be no regrets. Did you ever have a day go by

that you felt like you wasted it? Get over it or you'll waste even more time. Every day you live in the moment is a day well spent.

Let's go a little deeper. What if someone calls you fat? What happens then? How do you "feel" from that? In our culture being fat is not a favorable body type. So due to the cultural rules and norms such a statement would most likely hurt your feelings. You would have mental, emotional and physical reactions. You would probably become depressed, feel inadequate and unloved. These very normal reactions to such a hurtful statement would eventually begin to create behavior responses. In your mind you would probably recall the statement over and over imprinting it into your long term memory making it something you know- "I'm fat, yes I know I'm fat". And because you emotionally react to what you think, you probably feel emotionally low. Your physiology changes. You slouch, your shoulders roll forward. You don't stand tall and you don't smile much any more. Physiologically you begin to change as you internalize this simple statement "I am fat". Your appetite changes, you can't sleep, you change the way you dress so nobody can see your body and you become depressed which eventually leads to becoming sick for a long time because your body can't deal with keeping you healthy. But, (and this is a true story,) if an adult woman goes to India with some "meat" on her bones the Indian women would praise her saying "you're so fat, you're so pretty" and stare, envious of your beauty. The point being that the statement "fat" only has as much power, control or meaning over you as you let it. It's like when you drive home from work clenching tightly to the steering wheel with white knuckles because of something that happened previously. How long can a previous experience effect you, only you can know. Through the practice of meditation you will begin to notice this phenomenon of continually living in the past and be able to break the pattern. You will be able to recognize the affliction whether it's mental, physical or emotional and let go of it and move on from there. You will be able to recognize the difference between living in your head and being conscious of the present moment. This is especially helpful if you are the kind of person that dwells on things for a long time.

Lastly, I want to share with you a story about my own experience with health and pain. For most of my late teens and early twenties I was almost constantly suffering from pain in my abdominal area. I thought that it was normal because I always had the pain so I didn't think anything was wrong. To help deal with the pain I drank alcohol to make life easier to deal with. Eventually the lifestyle I was living caught up to me. Drinking wasn't working any more and the pain was unbearable. In 1981 in late November at age twenty-two I called my father and insisted that he take me to the hospital because I was dying. After a long and grueling process I was finally admitted into the hospital with acute pancreatitis. Without getting technical about the problem, let's just say that my pancreas was secreting so much digestive enzymes that I was being poisoned by my own body. As time went on I only got worse. My pancreas was so inflamed that surgery was not an option so they took me completely off food and water and fed me intravenously. Weeks went by without any signs of improvement. The medical staff didn't have any ideas that could aid in my recovery. On the thirty-ninth day, without food or water and my condition deteriorating, I was told that if nothing changed I wasn't going to make it. A lot of things went through my mind. Something inside me wasn't ready to give up yet. I thought about life and how little I had lived compared to what might be a long life. I remember thinking to myself that I was going to live to be one hundred years old and saw myself blowing out the candles on my cake and then dying right there in and on my cake. I had never before thought

about how long I would live but I knew that I was not ready to die right now. Two days later I was released from the hospital with nothing wrong with me other than the weakness that I felt from losing so much weight. This experience made me open my eyes with curiosity. I wanted to learn more about how my will to live overpowered my illness and got me to restore my health once again. The mind-body connection became intriguing to me. I quickly gained my weight back and changed my diet. I quit drinking and took better care of myself. But this wasn't the end of my problem with my health. Every year I had a minor relapse of the pancreas problem. I self-treated the condition by not eating or drinking until the symptoms went away. I began to notice a pattern as to the time of year it occurred and what was going on in my life at the time. As it turned out I almost always got sick around family get-togethers and I always got sick between November 1st (which is my birthday) and Christmas. With the help of a lot of therapy I realized that the issues I had with my family (which is a whole other story) was the root of my dilemma. It was easier for me to be sick than it was for me to be with my family or to come up with an excuse to get out of it. And it was hard to deal with because I knew that I loved my family. It is a fact that people often get sick when there is no other way to deal with their life's situations. We breakdown when we can't deal with it any more. For me it gets into a lot of early childhood family issues that I was never comfortable with or able to resolve. To this day I believe that my problems are finally over with this particular dilemma of reacting to my life's situations. I still have the same family but I can now be with them without it killing me. I still love them. I like being with them and the holidays don't stress me out the way they used to. The difference is that I am now happier with myself, I am more in control of my own life, which makes it easier to be around anyone. This further reinforced my belief that there is a connection between the mind and body. The point of sharing my personal experience with you is to help explain how meditation (the mind) can help one to be free from their own afflictions (in the body). As you practice meditation you will become more comfortable with yourself and your thoughts. You will begin to find yourself in a new and different kind of relationship, one that will change your life. As I mentioned earlier, in meditation you work at repeating a technique to create and sustain your meditation. This eventually leads to several uninterrupted moments (seconds or maybe minutes) in which you are not thinking (identifying with the mind) but are in fact focused to the point that there is either non-judgmental awareness or consciousness awareness (not identifying with the mind). In both cases you are able to see or know things as they are without the mental, emotional and physical ramifications that you would normally experience if you were not meditating. So, through the practice of meditation you will be able to live your life more peacefully because you have a better realization of what experience is and what getting all caught up in your mind is. You will start to notice when things are bothering you by the signals you get from your body and/or your mind. And because you have a better relationship with yourself, one with more understanding and acceptance, you will be able to relax more into the experience of life and live a little more comfortably. As you continue to practice meditation you will find that meditation itself isn't something that you have to make yourself do. It is something that becomes part of your life, and you look forward to it. Instead of expecting another day of chaotic stress and irritability, you look forward to another day of knowing that sense of peace that you find in your meditation (samadhi).

As you continue to incorporate meditation into your life you will eventually come to know a state of "effortless being" which will make the experience of living more wonderful and you will come to know what wellness really is.

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