

The Myths of Meditation! New Light on Dhyana

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The western mind has often missed important subtleties when attempting to experience and understand the ancient teachings regarding meditation. For most people the goal of meditation is to relax, whereas in India meditation cannot be achieved without relaxing first. The second misconception is that the mind should be empty. An examination of the words Dhyana and mantra will illuminate this and clearly reduce the most common misconceptions regarding meditation.

Roots of the words.

The Sanskrit word for meditation is Dhyana, which comes from the verbal root dhi or dhya. Both roots mean to "think", this is particularly true in the sense of inquiry, examination or introspection. In fact, in Vedic yoga, "dhi" is a reference to the Buddhi or thinking and discerning mechanism of the mind. It would be correct to call the intellect the Buddhi in its lower function. Dhyana as meditation is not merely a quiet mind, though this can be a significant achievement.

One of the initial goals of Dhyana should be proper or controlled thought. Clearly illustrated in Patanjali's yoga sutras, which states in the eight limbs that before meditation can begin one must possess concentration (Dharana). Concentration is not the removal of thought but the focusing of thought onto a single object or a single thought. An advanced state of the final three limbs (Dharana, Dhyana, Samadhi) is often referred to as "one-pointedness". One-pointedness is the continuous flow of thought, but each thought is in perfect harmony with the preceding thought. In addition, it could be viewed as such intense concentration that there is merger with the object of concentration. These two points would indicate that the goal is not mere absence of thought, which is beyond reach of most beginner and intermediate students, but a singular or focused thought rooted in powerful concentration. This focused thought actually forms the basis of practical application of Advaitic philosophy, known as inquiry. This system is one of the most advanced philosophical systems from India. But can more light be shed on the process of meditative thinking? Yes! The importance of thought can be clearly illustrated by the word mantra.

Mantra is derived from the verbal root man, which means, to "think". "Tra" as a suffix to man means to "rescue". It would also be correct to interpret "tra" indicating a means or method. Mantra is controlled thinking that actually rescues or saves the mind. What this means in reality is to purify the mind and prepare it for more expansive thought.

For most people the mind could be viewed as a vast sea with a hurricane flowing across it. The thoughts are waves coming from all directions without rhyme or reason. In fact, for most beginners the focusing of thought can be a considerable challenge. In the preparatory stages of meditation (learning to relax) they feel like a

ship trapped at sea in a horrible storm of thought. They wrestle with the thoughts, attempting to harness the wild activity only to experience frustration, after frustration.

Primary differences in systems.

The conflict appears to be between two philosophical differences between the yogic and Vedic yogic, especially the advaitic systems. Close examination will reveal that actually both systems have the same ultimate goal. Yoga is primarily taught to focus on purification of the mind. The Advaitic system is to go beyond mind entirely. Does yoga contain this concept? Yes! In the oldest Vedic teachings and within many Upanishads there is constant reference to thought being the foundation of physical and astral existence. This is especially true in the writings of the great Rshi Vashishta.

Within yoga we actually see a similar teaching "Yogas Chitta Vritti Nirodha" Yoga Sutras of Patanjali B.1 s.2, Yoga is restraint of thought in the field of the mind. Here is an apparent paradox and basis for the misunderstanding. Proper thought leads to restraint of thought, or focused thought leads to restraint of thoughts. Incorrectly this sutra has led some to consider the absence of thought to be the actual teaching, but Patanjali's selection of the word nirodha (restraint) is the key. Regrettably this has resulted in many thinking that the elimination of thought is the only goal. Especially since many scholars consider the second sutra to be the most important sutra, and the rest of the book is written to deal with that one issue.

Nirodha comes from the root rudh which means to 'obstruct', the prefix "ni" literally means lowness or downward motions. Nirodha means not just restraint of thoughts but to obstruct thoughts of lower nature. This would increase thought and concentration of a higher nature. A more western practical approach would be restraint of thoughts within the field of the ego, and an objective awareness of the thoughts rising from the cosmic mind (Brahman), or as some systems might say merging into pure thought, or pure consciousness. When the mind becomes fully focused on a single object of examination it is able to transcend itself and merge into pure consciousness. So Nirodha arises from one-pointedness or ekagra. It does not arise from a merely blank or unfocused mind. Extreme one-pointedness is Nirodha, not simply a mind left blank or wandering.

An examination of the remainder of the Yoga sutras of Patanjali will reveal that the last three limbs called Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi (concentration, meditation, super consciousness) actually contain thought and work within the field of thought (material creation, mental creation, emotional creation) through proper restraint, control and direction of thought. In fact, the Yamas and Niyamas (controls and restraints) introduced in Patanjali's yoga are founded in control of thought, though the goal taught is often just control of action. The goal is actually not just control of action but ultimately this must become control of thought, which results in these thought lower or negative thoughts being absent from the field of thought.

The goal within the Vedic system is to understand the expansiveness of the mind, and then to go beyond the mind, first by moving past the limited mind (Manas and Ahamkara), and eventually moving past Buddhi and Mahat eventually merging with Brahman. This is achieved by suspending some forms of thought but thought itself

has not come to an end yet. In the highest levels, thought itself comes to an end. But that is beyond the scope of a beginner or intermediate student.

Vedic Yoga's solution.

To deal with this issue the Vedic Yoga system provides three jewels:

1. Pranayama
2. Mantra
3. Dhyana

For the average beginner student the journey toward true meditation can easily begin with Pranayama. In its more advanced forms pranayama is actual control of prana; for beginners it is literally controlling the breath. Careful examination of simple breathing exercises will quickly reveal a meditative truth. As mentioned earlier, the goal is controlled thought. The concentration required for pranayama begins to bring the thinking process under control. In yogic philosophy, the breath is a reflection of the mind and visa versa. So the easiest path to control of the mind is through control of the breath. Once the basics of this is accomplished, pranayama can have step two added to it, mantra.

In the Vedic Yoga system Brahmins used various breathing exercises (pranayama), which are still in use today. The Vedic meter and swara both require control of the breath. But mantra takes the controlled thinking process to another level. Mantra begins to purify the field of the mind, further preparing for deeper meditation. Repetition (Japa) of mantra over long periods of time has been demonstrated to have powerful healing and clearing effects on the mind. The use of mantra appears in vedangas and upavedas such Jyotisha, Vastu, and Ayurveda. Not to mention the Rg Veda, Atharva Veda, Yajur Veda and the entire Sama Veda contain numerous mantras for these very purposes. In fact mantra appears within Brahmanas, Arankyas, Puranas, and Upanishads. Invocations and specific mantras are used to prepare the mind to think with many of the major Upanishads such as the Aitareya and Taittiriya. It is quite clear from reviewing the ancient text that a great importance was placed on mantra. The cosmos first gift to the physical form was the ingoing breath, and with the outgoing breath mantra was manifested on the physical level.

Initially mantra can be practiced aloud, after sometime it should be whispered. But the most profound effect on the mind comes from silent repetition of mantra. "Japa," the Sanskrit word for repetition comes from the root "jap" which means to whisper. It is important to note that in some Indian systems Japa is broken into two primal roots, 'Ja" and "Pa". "Ja" can refer to the mind, or that which is born, and "Pa" can mean to protect. So in some yogic system japa can refer to protecting the mind. After sufficient practice and experience with mantra, then the aspirants mind is prepared for Dhyana.

In the Vedic yoga system, Dhyana can manifest as many forms; one of the most popular is meditation on the physical form of a deity. This powerful and important tool in Vedic meditation is all but ignored in western society. This is due to numerous reasons such as: unawareness of the technique, fear of offending people, conflicting religious views, and the desire of western teachers to only be pleasing to students for financial reward among other reasons. Meditation on a physical form of the deity is a vital second step in the process of self-realization for many students.

Some might argue this point, possibly by pointing out that Buddhism does not use deities. It should be noted that deities such as Tara do appear in several forms of Buddhism, and the image of the Buddha is used in almost all, if not all systems of Buddhism. Though the Buddha image is not thought of as a deity, clearly we can see the same process at work as in the Vedic system. It is important to remember that Gotama Buddha did not rebel against Hinduism; as he often referred to his teaching as Arya Dharma. He rebelled against the emptiness and unawareness that had developed within the Vedic ritual. In fact the relationship between Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism has been a fairly close relationship, with even the Dalai Lama agreeing that the roots of Buddhism come from Hinduism. In addition, Tibetan Buddhism has been critical in preserving numerous Hindu texts, philosophies, and works.

The use of a deified image even exists within the Catholic Church with mother Mary representing the Shakti (feminine power) of divinity. Daily Catholics pray to a variety of images of Saints and Angels. It is quite clear that the use of a deity image or image for spiritual growth is almost universal. In reality and with proper education there should be conflict with using an image in meditation. It is one of the oldest and most widely used techniques in the world. After practice one would most certainly agree that it is a powerful technique and form of meditation. The appearance of a deity in Bhakti yoga is a very powerful aspect of the practice of Bhakti yoga, though there are some forms of Bhakti that are more oriented toward not accepting attributes.

Work with a deity image is a powerful technique that greatly aids in awakening the higher function of the buddhi (it should be noted that mantra facilitates the awakening of the Buddhi also). More abstract forms of deity meditation can be used as the skill of the practitioner increases, such as yantras, which serve as the body of the deity in the Tantric system, and with mantra, which serves as the mind of the deity. And still even more advanced meditation can be practiced on the deity by performing samyama on various attributes of the deity and ignoring the form completely; eventually leading to formless meditation for some practitioners that desire to explore that direction. Though some may choose to stay within the field of form, which is a completely valid system also.

This can eventually evolve into one of the simplest and highest forms of dhyana, which is self-inquiry such as taught by Ramana Maharishi. It is important to note that Ramana Maharishi had no objections to the use of form, ritual, or puja. Again we see that the concept of thought or the thinking principle is not deserted but is used like a hot knife to cut through the butter of limiting thought.

We see that the ancient seers recorded a perfect system for discovery of the true nature of the self. It can be, at the highest levels, pure absence of thought or absence of ego, but initially entails a great degree of effort to control and direct thought. Clearly we see ample evidence that the ancient seers considered it very important that the mind be cleared and prepared to fully experience dhyana and one of the most powerful tools in preparation for dhyana is mantra and pranayama.

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