

An Introduction to Teaching Meditation

It is challenging to define meditation but simply stated we could define meditation as “any discipline that aims at enhancing awareness through the conscious directing of attention” (Georg Feuerstein, The Deeper Dimensions of Yoga, p346).

Meditation can be formal as the act of a seated practice, and here experiences we may have of deeper more potent states of consciousness gradually seep into our everyday consciousness just as traditionally a cloth is continually being dyed and dried so that the colour gradually becomes fixed with the cloth. But very significantly meditation can also be carried out into the world, into our daily activities and relationships.

Benefits of Meditation

There are countless benefits of the practice of meditation to include:

- The ability to stay focused so we are more effective in everything we do
- A relaxed mind that stays more centred when there are ups and downs in life
- Greater clarity of perception
- Increased energy levels as our nervous system relaxes
- An increased ability to give more to others as our inner resources grow
- Increased sensitivity and compassion towards ones self, towards others and all of nature
- A more inclusive sense of love
- An ability to receive inspiration & access intuition
- More creativity and new methods of expression
- Responding more skillfully to situations rather than reacting in a conditioned unconscious manner
- Being more relaxed and able to go with the flow
- Feeling joy & contentment for no apparent reason!

And more than this:

- The possibility of wisdom growing from the inner silence within
- A deepening clarity of perception & appreciation of life
- Direct knowledge of the nature of objects as we become them
- Potential ‘powers’ arising (siddhis)
- Experience we are not the mind or body or senses, we are awareness itself, i.e the Self where even a glimpse of this will be life affirming and transformational
- The potential to realize the Self and be liberated

The movement towards meditation is a delicate process where perhaps the first sign that we are progressing is that we start to regard our citta-vrittis with less significance, i.e. that in our meditations we start to have greater appreciation for the silence we experience within and the growing presence of joyfulness inside our heart. We will also know that we are practicing effectively when our daily living becomes more peaceful and creative, when there is more happiness for no particular reason.

In sutra 1.32 to 1.39 we are given suggestions of how to make the mind clear and still so that as it states in 1.41 we can achieve samapatti. Samapatti meaning ‘complete acceptance’ is the

state where as Swami Satyananda Saraswati says in his commentary our mind becomes ‘just like the ocean which fully accepts all the water poured into it by rivers.’”

Choice of Object for Meditation

There are two main types of meditation:

Receptive awareness	Techniques where we create space in the mind to witness the contents of the mind; this is a more ‘yin’ or ‘shiva’ type of meditation where we are expanding our awareness.
Concentration	Techniques using a point of focus. This more of a ‘yang’ or ‘shakti’ type of meditation where we gradually release other stimuli and move towards ekagrata, one-pointedness.

We must however recognize that many meditation practices will inevitably be a mix of the different types of meditation but it helps us to be able to differentiate between the types so we can discern their slightly different functions. A good balance between the practice of both types is also helpful.

Ideally our choice of object for meditation is one that feels very comfortable for us, appealing to both the head and heart. In the Sutras we are given some ideas for a focus for meditation in 1.32 to 1.39 and told in 1.39 that in fact **anything can be chosen which is uplifting.**

In 1.32 we are also told that we ideally **focus upon on a single focus**, and generally this is taken to mean that we do not change our focus during any one meditation, and stay with the same technique for an extended period of time. Osho has an interesting point of view where he says that we can try a particular meditation focus for a few days and will know very quickly indeed if it is the focus for us, and whether we should continue with that focus for several months, or even years.

There are two main categories of potential objects, **saguna meaning with form or qualities and nirguna or formless.** Generally practicing with a saguna focus is considered to be more accessible for us, and only later would we be ready to practice nirguna or formless meditation which is essentially upon oneself.

Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness practices are an excellent way to begin meditation. At their heart they simply require us to be present to what is, and as such are very accessible. They can teach us a great deal about how to skillfully relate to physical sensations, thoughts and emotions, energy states etc. in daily life and also when practicing other types of more formal meditation.

Hopefully you will be happy to include some mindfulness practices in your own classes as they are excellent and are easily taught. Over time there are some parameters to be taught:

- We must have a beginner’s mind where we choose to experience the ‘known’ afresh with a sense of curiosity and inquiry
- We accept what is present in any moment, simply being curious, without desiring to change anything or wanting things to be different than they are

- Noting that acceptance is not that we agree with something or want it but **that we are willing to experience whatever is happening** from moment, bringing a friendly awareness to our experience
- We are still practicing as long as we remain conscious of our experience; even noting that our mind has wandered is a success, or moving position when done consciously is still part of the practice. Remember all of life is a pulsation, from this to that, so there will be movement in the body/mind, and this will vary from day to day.
- We understand there is no goal or special state to be achieved, rather we only need to be present to what is with no expectations.

Typical seated practices:

Mindfulness of eating a raisin or similar
 Mindfulness of breathing
 Mindfulness of physical sensations
 Mindfulness of sounds
 Mindfulness of thoughts & emotions
 Mindfulness of full range of experience
 (choiceless meditation)

Also:

Mindful movement
 Mindful walking
 Mindful everyday activities e.g.
 showering, brushing teeth
 Mindful interaction with others

There many things our mindfulness teaching can convey, which can be used as a main teaching point or theme upon which to 'hang' our lesson could also include:

- Becoming aware of the difference between operating on automatic pilot and mindful awareness, where we pay attention to what we are doing and what our experience is from moment to moment.
- A greater awareness of the nature of our mind, for instance:
 - Raising awareness of how much we mentally time travel
 - How we judge our own thoughts
 - How we hang on to some 'sticky' thoughts and push others away
 - The way the mind makes associations removing us from the present moment to moment experience
- How it is possible to intentionally direct our attention so that the repeated practice of noticing, acknowledging and returning to our focus teaches us we do not have to follow our 'distractions', which can quickly lead to a dispersal of available energy
- How direct experience through the different senses enriches life
- How there is a direct link between the body and mind
- How there is a direct link between the body and the emotions
- That we can equally be with what we might consider to be neutral, negative or positive without pushing away what is uncomfortable
- Learning how we handle difficulty such as feeling sleepy or bored
- Developing a warmth & compassion towards different aspects of ourselves
- Raising awareness of how we relate to others
- Creating the possibility of noticing and relating differently to our sensations and mental states
- **We are learning to fully experience directly without the 'story' and simultaneously move into the space of the silent observer within which all experience arises; we are learning to move from the 'doing' mode to the state of 'being'**

Meditation Techniques

Each person will naturally find some techniques suit them better than others, so please bear this in mind both for yourself and for your students. Ideally we teach the same technique for several weeks but overall introduce different techniques overtime as techniques suit different people.

So where to begin?

- Short periods of mindfulness of breath, body, mental state in practice e.g. rest periods
- Use of drishtis in asana, awareness of breath, use of ujjayi, use of mantra, playing edges etc. all aid concentration
- Moving meditations e.g. chankramanam (walking) or simple movements in asana
- Daily activity awareness e.g. cooking, showering, eating, typing etc. to be done at home
- Short seated meditations after asana and pranayama
- Meditation on body
- Meditation on sound
- Meditation on breath
- Meditation on thought
- Meditation on emotions
- Meditation using sight e.g.
 - Tratakem on candle light, black dot
 - Flowers, rocks, crystal etc.
 - space between objects
 - shambhavi mudra, nasakgra mudra etc.
 - chakras, chidakasha
- Meditation on subtle sound, e.g. nada meditation
- Jnana type meditations e.g. Who am I?

There are many meditations we can teach, however we need to slowly build up the time spent in meditation and move gradually towards more subtle types of meditation.

To set up for teaching meditation there are several considerations that need to inform our teaching:

- Choose an ideal time to practice meditation in a class, usually after asana and pranayama where a more sattvic state has been established.
- Take your time to settle students into their pose so they are really feeling they are moving from 'doing to being'. **Refer to the body** and encourage an appreciation of physical sensations so students are really anchored rather than remaining with previous thoughts. Sukha Sthira!
- Before moving to a specific focus encourage students to **be with their breath** to bring a gentleness and sensitivity to their sitting, gently focusing a disparate mind

Little by little teach students:

- That they can slowly & mindfully adjust their pose whenever it is absolutely needed
- To skilfully work with a wandering mind by noticing where it is and gently but firmly returning it to the focus, being clear that this is the nature of the mind and **we are not seeking to stop the mind thinking**, rather with practice and repeatedly drawing

attention to our focus we will have the focus in the foreground and thinking in the background rather than vice versa

- The mind generally wants things to be a struggle or a challenge, it wants complexity as it's role is one of measuring and comparing, so with meditation where the focus is generally so very simple it will still look for challenge. If we are aware of this then any such thoughts can be observed and we can return to our focus
- Release all expectation.
- That if we can directly experience any thoughts and emotions that arise in an objective way, i.e. without a narrative then this is a form of cleansing that we can welcome, with the energy being dissipated once experienced and as such digested.
- That is it okay to return to the breath or physical sensations at any time if the mind is too unsettled to remain with the focus, i.e. return to gross and then back to the focus when ready
- Do not narrow the focus too much, there will also be a gentle peripheral awareness, with about 80% on the central focus and 20% within a peripheral focus. This avoids making the body and mind too rigid or tense, and it is also better to be aware of the situation surrounding us so we can accept it and be unsurprised by it. From this perspective, without force, we may eventually, spontaneously move inwards to a single point of focus.
- Another way to expand our awareness and relax the mind is to provide two different focal points simultaneously, this helps greatly to keep the mind concentrated without tension and after a while we can take the mind back to a single point of focus.
- Being kind to oneself at all times, when going inside always bring yourself flowers!!

Remember there is a process...

Dharana to Dhyana (concentration to meditation)

Initially a technique requires some effort or steadiness and can only really be known as a concentration practice, paradoxically it only becomes a true meditation once 'we' are no longer 'doing' the technique, i.e. the practice continues but has become effortless. This is the process of moving from dharana to dhyana. Generally however the practice is still known as a 'meditation' even though we are purely concentrating.

When we are focused upon 'an object' then we are **learning the skills of pratyahara**, i.e. directing the senses inwardly, creating a stronger laser like mental faculty and the experience of mental stillness.

Dhyana to Samadhi (meditation to absorption)

We direct our attention and then paradoxically we naturally let go of all effort becoming fully immersed in the object of our attention, and once we have become fully immersed in the experience of samadhi can arise where the separation between the seer, the act of seeing and the seen is destroyed. Now there is no intellect or mind and the separate sense of 'I' has been removed, there is complete immersion or absorption.

A key to meditation is our relationship to the mind (notice here that none of us would question this statement yet this tell us something so very significant !!). What is the nature of the mind which we can convey to students?

- The main characteristic of the mind is constant movement

- The mind is fearful of change and likes control
- It wishes to be the master and cannot conceive being other than the protector and promoter of our sense of 'I'
- The manas, the lower sense mind, rigidly follows its conditioning with the samskaras, our past memories and emotional and instinctive drives, causing us to act according to past experience. Indeed we are all subject to what is called vritti-samskara-chakra meaning 'the wheel of movements in the mind' where samskaras create new associated vrittis substantiating existing samskara, creating new associated vrittis and so it continues. In this way the causal basis of thought is always rooted in the past; in a way the mind is like a computer which has been programmed to run in a certain way which may make us wonder what it would be like to return it to factory settings!
- When we perceive something we generally see it through the colouring of our mind, i.e. our conditioning
- The mind wants to verbalize everything so words come between us and what is experienced, indeed you could say at first there is an inverse relationship between our level of awareness and the movement of the vrittis i.e. thought

The yogic approach to meditation

Yoga looks for ways to free us from this circular cycle of causation so the mind becomes purified and we can see the mind for what it really is, and come to experience the truth of who we really are. This however is difficult because the Self which enlivens the mind can know the body, mind and senses but the body mind and senses cannot know the Self. This means we must go beyond the mind, body and senses to realize the Self and Raja Yoga, the classical yoga path of the Sutras leads us along this path. Where for instance:

- We can create new thoughts and actions, replacing the negative with positive, becoming more sattvic
- We can work with awareness, becoming conscious of our patterning so space is created around thoughts and emotions and they lose their ability to drive us.
- We experience the different aspects and levels of the mind e.g. the manas, buddhi, chitta, ahamkara and the conscious, subconscious & unconscious

Raja Yoga is most certainly a science of the mind and consciousness!

Reference to:

Feuerstein, Georg, *The Deeper Dimensions of Yoga*, (2003), Shambala Publications:MA
 Swami Satyananda Saraswati's, *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras*, (2nd edition 2011), Yoga Publications Trust:Bihar

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