

YOGA AND JUDAISM CENTER



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MEDITATION BASICS by Steve Gold

I have been reluctant up until now to go into more detail about the basic practices and procedures for meditation, because there is no substitute for obtaining in-person instruction from a teacher who is receiving guidance through an established meditation tradition/lineage. However, it seems like the time has come to go ahead and elaborate a bit on the rather terse descriptions I have previously provided in my book, *Yoga and Judaism* (first and second editions), and in other articles on this blog. There are many different meditation techniques and variations to those techniques, but for the sake of brevity, I am limiting these descriptions to one primary practice and slight variations to that practice that I have learned through my yoga tradition and experimented with over the years. This practice is generally categorized as a silent, internal, receptive practice, as distinct from many other meditation and contemplation practices that involve other elements, such as using external aids, chanting, guided visualizations, etc. I believe this practice provides an excellent foundation that can serve as a springboard for other practices, and can be utilized with Sanskrit or Hebrew mantras or internal visualizations. The focus here is on the utilization of mantras. However, if sounds, colors or images come forward of their own accord during a meditation session, they may certainly be worthwhile tools for focusing one's inner attention.

There are two basic techniques in internalized mantra practice, by which the sounds are intoned only within, without any externalized vocalizations. One technique involves coordination of the intonation of the mantra sounds with the breath, and the other involves rapid repetition of a mantra without breath coordination. Specific descriptions of how to utilize mantras in either of these techniques is provided in the book, *Yoga and Judaism* (first and second editions), and in other articles on this blog. I particularly commend the reader to a new article found only on this blog entitled "Hebrew Mantras – Adonai Hineni", which describes a basic breath-coordinated practice of particular potency utilizing a Hebrew mantra, and also a similar yoga/Sanskrit mantra, known as the universal "So-hum" mantra.

Why Meditate? I always start my normal meditation classes asking the members of the class to introduce themselves and say something about their background and their interest in meditation. The most common responses include that people want to learn to relax, de-stress, quiet down

their noisy minds. Meditation will do all of that and more. It will help you address an inner call/yearning to connect with the spiritual essence that resides within us all. When that inner essence is contacted and magnified, the other benefits will follow, including becoming a more productive participant in everyday life.

Posture. "Head, neck and trunk in a straight line". My spiritual father, Swami Rama, never tired of saying this. There are a variety of seated positions that accomplish this. The most important point is to get the body in a position with this basic alignment that is comfortable, so that bodily discomfort is not creating a distraction. In this form of meditation, the primary concern is to leave bodily awareness and external sensation behind, which can only be accomplished if the body is comfortable and not a cause for distraction. (Zen meditation is quite different, where bodily and external sensory awareness is heightened. In contrast, the traditional yoga meditation involves withdrawing awareness from external sensation, freeing up this energy to focus within). It is also emphasized in this traditional yoga practice that the aligned head, neck and trunk need to be perpendicular to the ground, so lying down is not an option. The question is often raised about "why not lying down?". The simple answer is that you would be prone to falling asleep. Another answer is that there is something meditatively beneficial to having the body aligned perpendicular to the ground. There are other yoga practices that employ the body lying down, such as progressive relaxation exercises and yogic sleep (yoga nidra), but it is not recommended for meditation. For those who can sit comfortably on a cushion on the floor in one of the cross-legged yoga meditation postures, that is recommended. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into the variations on the cross-legged postures, but the most important point remains for the body to be comfortable. Most people need a cushion of some height, placed under the base of the spine (but not the legs) depending upon the physical make-up of the person, to raise up the hips so that the lower back is comfortably straightened without undue effort.

If sitting cross-legged is not comfortable, then sitting in a firm chair is the next best choice. A second important aspect, even if seated in a chair, is to do so in a manner in which the posture itself supports the back, without the back leaning on anything else, like the back of the chair. So, if utilizing a chair, sit forward, away from the back, and find a comfortable posture with the head, neck and trunk aligned. It is helpful for the feet to be comfortably touching the ground with the soles planted on the ground, for the thighs to be roughly parallel to the ground and the lower legs to be roughly perpendicular to the ground. For short people whose feet dangle from a normal chair, use cushions under the feet. For tall people whose height prevents the thighs from being parallel to the ground and the lower legs from being perpendicular to the ground at the same time, stretch the legs out in front until the thighs are parallel to the ground and cross the legs at

the ankles, preferably right ankle over left. If for any reason it is not comfortable to sit cross-legged on the ground or on a chair without external support to the back, then use whatever support for the back that will make you comfortable.

Concerning the arms, hands and fingers, there are various positions that can be utilized, but again, the over-riding principle is for the body to be comfortable and not a distraction. Hands palm down or palm up on the thighs is fine. A variation involves touching the tips of the thumbs with the tips of the index fingers, either palms up or down, resting on the thighs. A traditional Buddhist position for the hands is with the right hand resting in the palm of the left hand in the lap, palms facing up.

There are a few more subtle aspects to bodily positioning worth noting. Concerning the head, there is something in yoga called the "chin lock". If someone asked you to slightly nod your head "yes", the chin lock would be the position of the head in the downward position of the nod, with the chin just slightly pointing down and a little in. This little maneuver is very beneficial. The jaw should be relaxed, with the lips lightly sealed, the teeth comfortably separated, and the tongue gently touching the upper palate. There is also something called the "anal lock". This is described as slightly squeezing in on the anal sphincter, which also accomplishes tightening up on the perineum, the area between the anus and the genitals. Another method to accomplish this perineal pressure is to employ the cross-legged position of "siddhasana" whereby the heel of the left foot is positioned so that it is applying pressure to the perineum, with the heel of the right foot placed on top of the heel of the left foot. Sitting on a small additional cushion placed at this region also provides this added pressure to the perineum.

Sense Withdrawal. As discussed above, this meditation technique is designed to aid in withdrawing the expenditure/dissipation of energy through the external senses, and redirect this energy within, to aid in the unfoldment of inner dimensions. When employing the senses in engagement with external phenomena, a great deal of energy is involved. In this practice, the eyes are gently closed, thus easily eliminating the sensory expenditure involved with sight. (There are other techniques that involve keeping the eyes open, but that is beyond the scope of this article). Some yoga schools employ the use of ear plugs or other procedures to physically minimize the operation of external hearing. However, it is easy enough to assure that you meditate in a quiet space not likely to have intrusions of visual or auditory stimuli. (There are techniques employing the use of external sound, either introduced from an independent source or uttered by the meditator, but again, they are beyond the scope of this article). It is also easy enough to select a space not prone to strong odors, minimizing exposure to stimulating smells; and it is recommended that you meditate on an empty stomach for many reasons, including that by doing so, there is little chance of any

lingering tastes in the mouth that may provide a distraction. (There are practices that incorporate pleasing fragrances from burning incense or aromatic oils, but they are also beyond the scope of this article. I do not know of any practice that encourages meditating right after eating – the digestion process can be distracting, and diverts energy that would otherwise be available for the meditative process performed on an empty stomach). Concerning touch, positioning of the body in a still, comfortable posture as addressed above minimizes the sensations of touch.

It is worth noting that for every external sensation, there is a corresponding internal sensation that may be experienced during meditation and may help provide a point of inner focus. For sight, there is inner light, colors, images, visions; for hearing, there is inner sound and music; for taste, there is inner flavor such as a taste of nectar/ambrosia; for smell, there is inner fragrance; and inner touch usually takes the form of a sensation of inner heat, although other inner touch sensations are possible. While these inner sensations may be pleasant and assist with inner focus, they are not to be considered the goal of meditation, but only guideposts and tools along the way.

Breathing. There are many significant aspects to breathing as related to meditation. In the normal four-week course on meditation that I teach, I spend one full two-hour session just on this topic. For the sake of brevity here, I will emphasize the basics. Although there are other techniques that promote exhaling through the mouth, this practice emphasizes breathing only through the nostrils on both inhalation and exhalation. So to accomplish nostril-only breathing, as described earlier, during this technique the lips should remain gently sealed. Breathing should be at a comfortable and natural pace, allowing the bodily intelligence and needs to set the rhythm. It should be done diaphragmatically, coordinating the movement of the abdomen and solar plexus area with the breath: the abdomen/solar plexus region gently expanding during inhalation and gently contracting during exhalation. This is deep but gentle breathing, utilizing the internal diaphragm muscle located in the lower rib cage/solar plexus region, as distinct from utilizing expansion of the chest. Only the lower portion of the rib cage should expand and contract just a little to assure optimum use of the diaphragm and minimum use of the chest. There should be no extended pauses between inhalation and exhalation, just a natural continuous flow with that split second of suspension as it transitions from inhalation to exhalation, like the waves of the ocean coming onto the beach, turning, receding out, then turning and flowing in again. The breath should be smooth through the duration of each inhalation and exhalation, without any halting or jerkiness. Visualize with each inhalation that your body is like an empty glass being filled with the breath, first pouring down to the bottom and filling it up as it goes. Likewise, with each exhalation, the glass is emptied first from the top (being pushed up and out from the bottom), with the last bit of exhalation coming from the bottom. A slight variation is to

visualize/sense a circuit of energy flowing into the body and up the spine during inhalation, and flowing out and down the front of the body during exhalation, creating a circuit running up the spine and out through the nose and down the front of the body, then up the spine again, and so on. A further visualization is to imagine the release of stresses, toxins and obstructions with each exhalation, and replacing those with nurturance, healing and well-being with each inhalation.

Focal Points for the Journey Within. Once you are settled into your seated posture and have closed your eyes, begin to focus on the breathing as described above. To assist with establishing a comfortable breathing rhythm, first focus attention on the gentle expansion and contraction of the abdomen/solar plexus region coordinated with the inhalation and exhalation of the breath. Once a steady, comfortable rhythm is established, move the focal point to the tip of the nose, and observe the sensation of the breath as it moves in and out through the nostrils. This process aids in relaxation and moving your awareness from bodily awareness to breath awareness and the more subtle awareness of the life force ("prana" in yoga, "ruach" in kabala) that rides with the breath.

Several hours of my normal eight-hour meditation class focuses on the interplay between functions and nature of the mind, states of consciousness and emotions, all as related to the meditative journey within. Again for the sake of brevity here, I will discuss just the basic points. The mind has many functions, one of which is to serve as the seat of identity, of the sense of separate egoic self. This sense of identity is capable of inner mobility, so to speak; it can move through the various layers/levels that comprise the separate being. At the outermost layer, we are a physical body and identify with that body. Next in is the breath/pranic layer discussed above. Further in is the layer of lower mind, followed by higher mind, followed by the innermost subtle layer of spirituality beyond mind/breath/body. Our total identity includes all of these layers and more – we are conscious beings composed of body, breath, mind, emotion, and spirit.

In addition to the various functions of the mind and layers of the being, there is also an interplay of our sense of identity with emotional states and states of consciousness. The lower emotional states relate to the lower heart tied to our most basic primal instinct of self-preservation and its associated drives/needs for food, sleep and sensual gratification (pursuit of pleasure, avoidance of pain). Higher emotional states relate to the higher heart that is the source of spiritual yearning and Divine Love.

There are four basic states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep, and the state beyond and underlying all other states (in yoga called "turiya", the fourth state). There are also three transitional states of consciousness lying between the four basic states: in between waking and dreaming is the state of fantasy/imagination; in between dreaming and

dreamless sleep is the state of spiritual vision/prophecy; and in between dreamless sleep and the fourth state is the state in yoga called yoga nidra/yogic sleep. These states are also described in kabala. Our sense of identity is capable of shifting its focus between these various aspects of our being. This meditation technique is designed to assist one in a journey within, whereby the sense of identity locates these various inner aspects to one's being.

Once the attention is steadied on the movement on the breath at the point at the tip of the nostrils, you are ready to introduce a mantra, either a breath-coordinated mantra or otherwise. You may also move your focus of attention from the tip of the nostrils to either the "third eye" point between and above the eyebrows (the center of the mind), or the region of the heart (the center of the emotions). Moving your focus of attention is similar to moving your sense of identity. The idea is to locate the higher quiet mind or the higher quiet heart and rest your attention/identity in one place or the other. The lower heart and lower mind are very noisy and chatty, creating a seemingly never-ending emotionally-charged inner soundtrack/dialogue that seems to never shut up. That is what many people who come to mediation class ask about, how to quiet this inner noise. By locating and maintaining the focus on the quiet higher inner heart or quiet higher inner mind, the chattering starts to cease or at least recede into the background. Mantras are tools that aid in this process of connecting with the quiet inner heart or mind. The image I often use is that of a hurricane: the eye of the hurricane remains calm, even while the bustle surrounding it continues. Meditation is about locating and remaining with our inner eye of peace and serenity.

At some point, the identity riding with the vehicle of mantra/spiritual sound moves even further within/beyond, to the place of the silent, subtle, spiritual realm that is the origin of all – the origin of the mantra, the mind, the heart and of all internal and external phenomena. The Source of Creation of All is directly perceived, a sense of the process whereby everything arises out of the realm of the Absolute/Potentiality/Unmanifest into the realm of the Relative/Actuality/Manifestation and then back again. The process of Creation, Sustenance and Dissolution is beheld. Perhaps your sense of identity/self even disappears for a while. This is what in yoga is called "samadhi" and what in kabala is called "yichud", where there is a merger/absorption of individual identity with the Source of All. A profound sense of inner peace, serenity, bliss, balance, equilibrium ensues.

Eventually, if you keep at it long enough, this profound sense of inner peace attained through regular silent seated meditation stays with you, and you can take it with you into the external world of everyday activity. That is what is called "meditation in action". You will become a more centered, peaceful, yet dynamic and productive participant and contributor to everyday life, and experience a deep sense of fulfillment and existential meaning and purpose.

So now we have come full circle and have concluded with the answer to the question posed at the beginning, "Why meditate?"

A Few Last Details. Recommended time: 20 to 30 minutes, twice a day, on an empty stomach; best first thing in the morning, and either late afternoon before supper, or before bed-time. Locate a quiet place in your residence for meditation sessions, and commit to doing your sessions regularly. Meditation practice has a cumulative effect if done regularly. If not done regularly, the effect is diminished. It is that simple. The above are optimal conditions, but meditation can be done in a variety of less than optimal settings, including on buses, trains, planes, airline terminals, etc. Bon voyage! Om Shalom.