 Although we begin meditation practice for a variety of reasons, the intention from a scriptural point of view is clear: meditation is to help us attain the fulfillment of the human incarnation: the realization of our oneness with the infinite Self, Brahman. This is the goal of yoga.

Meditation Experiences

by
Sarasvati
Buhrman

Most of us, however, begin meditation practice with less lofty ideals and more immediate concerns. In bhakti yoga (the yoga of devotion) it is said that people come to the spiritual path for one of four reasons: to seek release from pain; to seek better worldly circumstances for themselves or others; to gain knowledge; or due to a high stage attained in a previous birth. So initially it can be helpful to reframe the goal in terms that seem more personally accessible to us: learning how to cope with stress or pain, achieving inner serenity, responding to the longing for spiritual fulfillment, or investigating consciousness or the nature of existence. Some of us nourish the hope that meditation will make us a better person: clearer and more capable of helping others and our planet. All of these are worthy goals in themselves; as our practice develops, the desire for liberation will make itself felt.


The real problem for most of us is not our goals, but rather the process of fulfilling them. Many of us start with reasonable goals and the best of intentions, but our practice falls by the wayside, often because the results along the way are different from what we expected—they require much more work and take a great deal longer than we anticipated. The path seems at times exciting, inspiring, and deeply rewarding; at times uncertain, erratic, dubious, and littered with thorns. As my guru, Baba Hari Dass, once put it, "The spiritual path is not a highway." It is individual, nonlinear, and often unclear. On top of it all, the masters tell us that our perceptions about our progress or lack of it are often faulty because much of what happens to us occurs on levels of our being of which we may be partially or completely unaware. My guru often comments that the process of sadhana is like an airplane flight: "We know when we take off, and we know when we land; in between we are not so sure where we are."

We can better understand the nature of sitting practice if we accept that we are speaking of a process that unfolds in stages. Over time meditation deepens into progressive levels of samadhi. Illumination does sometimes occur instantaneously, as some stories from the Upanishads and the *Yoga Vasishtha* illustrate, but more often comes gradually. And no matter how much we may complain about our occasional failures to progress, none of us who have given our lives to the process of yoga sadhana can deny that it affects every level of our being. It radically transforms our mind and perceptions, our physiology, the energy processes occurring

within our subtle bodies, and our emotions. Different yogic traditions explain the process of meditation and its stages differently because they focus on and work with different aspects of this transformative process.

Nevertheless, there is a common thread running through all of them. It goes like this: if the Divine Self exists within, then all we are doing in all of yoga practice is purifying these different levels of our being so that the Divine is uncovered, revealed, and allowed to shine forth. That is the reason that asana, pranayama, meditation, ritual, devotional yoga, yama and niyama, selfless service, and self-inquiry are practiced.

The transformations of body, energy, and mind that occur in this process of purification can produce various meditation experiences, some of which are felt only internally, and others of which may seem more dramatic because they affect the body's physiology as well. They do not necessarily indicate that any higher stage has been reached, but come about because of a shift in prana or a shift in awareness. It is important for yoga teachers and yoga practitioners to understand them, because even though these experiences are completely natural, students can become anxious when they occur; further, without proper understanding it is easy to overinflate their significance.



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A Multitude of Practices

DIVINE CONSCIOUSNESS IS VAST, AND EVERY YOGI EXPERIENCES it in a slightly different way. It is a bit like the blind men and the elephant. One man feels the tusks and says, "The elephant is sharp," while another feels the tail and says, "It is long and thin." Still another feels the ear and says, "It is flat and wrinkled." Likewise, the various systems of yoga approach divine consciousness from a variety of directions. The hatha and tantra yoga systems focus on the movement of prana and kundalini, the bhakti yoga tradition discusses experiences arising from devotional feeling, and the ashtanga (raja) yoga of Patanjali delineates stages of samadhi. Hatha yoga texts, like the *Gheranda Samhita* and the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, describe transformations occurring within the physical vehicle as it is purified by practicing the different limbs of hatha yoga: *shat karma* (kriya), *asana*, *pranayama*, *hatha yoga mudra*, *pratyahara*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi*. These texts also describe changes in the yogi's subtle body and in the flow of energies through the physical and subtle channels. Both hatha yoga and tantra yoga emphasize arousing the kundalini energy, the reservoir of prana at the base of the *sushumna* (the subtle body channel overlain by the physical spine). When this energy begins to rise up *sushumna*, it causes *sattva guna* (the quality of purity, clarity, and peace) to increase in the mind, and meditation becomes easy and natural. According to the traditions of tantra, *kulakundalini*, the reservoir of kundalini stored at the base of *sushumna*, must be united with *akulakundalini*, situated in the *sahasrara* chakra, in order for liberation to be attained.

In hatha yoga, the activation of kundalini is achieved mostly through pranayama practice and hatha yoga *mudras* (more advanced practices in which the body is held in a specific posture while *bandhas* [locks], breath retention, and concentration are synchronously performed). In tantra yoga, a primary method is sequential visualization of the first six chakras as a means of removing the limitations of individualized consciousness contained in some of the petals. Qualities such as carelessness, cruelty, negligence, fear, anger, gullibility, etc. are purified a little more each time kundalini passes through the *bindu* (center) of the chakra. This is why tantrics practice methods that arouse the kundalini: mantra, pranayama, meditation on the kundalini, the company of an enlightened teacher, and devotional methods such as *puja* (worship) and *kirtan* (chanting).

Bhakti yoga, which is related to tantra through its emphasis on mantra and deity, focuses on the purification of the emotions and develops love for God, usually through the vehicle of relationship with one's *ishta deva* (an ideal form of God). As a friend once said to

me, "The truly amazing thing is that although God is so vast, it is still possible to have a personal relationship." Most devotees of bhakti yoga experience a relationship with God that is intensely personal in nature. This relationship, as various scriptures describe, takes various forms according to individual proclivities; we may feel that we are the servant of God, or the lover of God, the child or the parent of God in a child form (such as the baby Jesus or the baby Krishna), the friend of God, or even that we have a great love for God without any defined form.

Bhaktas (practitioners of bhakti yoga) can choose among a number of practices, such as *japa* (repetition of a name of God), singing, chanting, meditation, performing *puja*, reading or hearing stories about the lives of saints, etc. By constant practice of these methods with the aim of keeping God's presence continually in one's heart and the contemplation of the Beloved continually in one's mind, the devotee strives to attain true surrender. It becomes a one-pointed practice, and one day the individual ego dissolves into the divine ego, and universal love is experienced. Then the devotee worships God in everything because the light of the Divine is perceived as reflecting in everything. The experience of this love is intensely blissful, and persistent cultivation of it ultimately bears the fruit of liberation. Enlightenment in bhakti yoga is said to be experienced in four ways: *salokya* (residing in the same realm as the deity), *sarupya* (residing in the same or like body as the deity), *samipya* (living in close proximity to the deity), or *sayujya* (complete absorption into the deity).

In ashtanga, or raja yoga, codified by Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutra*, kundalini and chakras are not mentioned. Surrender to God is mentioned as a method, but discussed only briefly. The emphasis of the text is on the nature of mind itself, and how mind is transformed through the practices of ashtanga yoga, kriya yoga, and the different stages of samadhi, until the liberated state, *kaivalya*, is attained. The discussion of these stages of samadhi is fairly complex, and meditation experiences which appear to fit this model will be dealt with in part 2 of this article, to be published in the next issue.

Beginning Meditation

IT IS SOMETIMES SAID THAT THE FIRST STAGES OF THE meditation process are the most difficult. The first distraction is the physical body. Sometimes there is real pain in sitting, and sometimes the ego just tries to distract us by creating itches we will want to scratch. Sometimes there is hyperawareness of the physical body: heartbeat, the breathing apparatus, blocked

sinuses, digestive discomfort, or some other pain in the physical body. When the body relaxes, sometimes the head falls forward or backward.

The second obstacle is the mind, which is accustomed to flowing outward and often resents the effort and discipline required to turn our attention inward—it creates all kinds of excuses about why we should be doing something else. Or, instead of being too *rajasic*, the mind becomes *tamasic*. Occasionally students report that when sitting for meditation they become unconscious and remember nothing of the experience. The mind becomes quiet and falls into a kind of unconscious sleep, instead of going into dhyana or samadhi. People who experience this state usually describe it as something like this: “I went away somewhere, but don’t know where. I don’t remember anything. I don’t think I was asleep, but. . . .” Baba Hari Dass has described this state as a kind of *yoga nidra*, related to deep sleep. When the person wakes up again the mind will go back to the object of meditation automatically. The aspirant has been successful in the attempt to quiet the mind, but there is too much *tamas guna* present. Although the person may feel rested afterwards, the feelings of peace, clarity, and well-being associated with dhyana and samadhi are absent. Vigorous pranayama practice before meditation, and conforming strictly to a yogic diet (one that excludes meat, fish, eggs, garlic, onions, mushrooms, alcohol, and any type of sedative substances), as well as regularly practicing yoga asanas, usually correct the situation.

True meditation, by contrast, creates feelings of peace, relaxation, or euphoria. Instead of resenting the process of meditation, the mind begins to look forward to it. It is worth striving for. And it comes, sooner or later, when we learn to sit without moving the body and we persist in our efforts to concentrate and re-concentrate on the singular focus of our practice. This will happen more quickly and will be deeper if some technique for quieting the breath and mind, such as pranayama, chanting, or devotional singing, is practiced first. At some point the magic happens: the effortless flow of awareness from the mind to the object of meditation arises in the mind, and we wonder afterward why we resisted meditation practice so hard and for so long.

As Meditation Deepens

WHEN WE BEGIN TO SPEND MORE TIME IN MEDITATION, awareness deepens; perceptions of the physical body may diminish while perceptions of the subtle body may appear, leading to a seeming alteration of normal spatial relations. A person may, for example, lose consciousness

of the body from the neck down, and feel as if the head is expanding, or as though the body is levitating, or that their body is now facing in a different direction. Sometimes people report that they feel as though there is a great distance between their head and their hands or knees, as though galaxies intervene. The body can feel as light as cotton. Pressure or tingling can occur in various parts of the body due to the movement of pranic energy. Sometimes inner lights appear in places in the body relating to the chakras, the energy centers of the subtle body. An aspirant going from dhyana into lower samadhi may lose body consciousness with a jerk so violent that the body falls over. When meditation deepens into the lowest stages of samadhi, these sorts of experiences may continue; one may, for example, hear the inner sound current emanating from the *anahata* chakra (the heart center), or feel as though a light is filling the head and nothing else exists, or a great light may appear at the *ajña* chakra (behind the eyebrow center), and the mind sometimes dissolves into it. Sometimes the form of a deity appears in the mind; one may feel as though it is actually present and one can talk to it. One may dream of chakras, or kundalini rising, or deities, or spiritual masters.

One of the most common experiences of meditators is the spontaneous stopping of the breath. When the mind goes deeper, the breath naturally becomes more shallow. In the West we say that this is because the metabolism slows and oxygen demand drops. The yogis say that the brain accumulates more prana and so less breath is needed. Baba Hari Dass explains that meditators can suddenly notice that they are not breathing and yet feel perfectly comfortable. But then the unconscious fear of death arises and the person will have to breathe. As Baba Hari Dass observed, “A preconceived notion about the necessity of breathing distracts one’s mind from experiencing a higher state.”

Experiences Attributable to Spiritual Devotion

IN BHAKTI YOGA CERTAIN OBSERVABLE BODILY CHANGES may take place. They are described in Narada’s *Bhakti Sutras*, and there are also references to them in the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Srimad Bhagavata Maha Purana*, and various other religious works of the Hindu tradition. They are known as the *ashta sattvika vikara*, or the eight purifying changes. These devotional symptoms do not appear in all yoga practitioners, but neither are they particularly uncommon. Because many people experience them spontaneously in the company of a spiritual master, or when chanting or singing devotional songs, or from mystical experiences that occur in



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sadhana, from religious ceremonies, or even from reading scriptures or the lives of saints, it is important for yoga teachers and practitioners to understand them. They also can be seen among aspirants in a variety of spiritual paths including some shamanic traditions, where they are often interpreted as evidence of voluntary possession by a deity or benign spirit.

But according to yoga, the *ashta sattvika vikara* occur because the emotions of devotion interact with certain pranic flows in the chakras of the subtle body and begin to purify the body-mind complex. Each of the five lower chakras controls the manifestation of energy into one of the five states of matter: solid, liquid, luminous, gaseous, and pure space. When emotions arise, they interact with the energies of these five centers, and the result is physical expression of an emotional state. When the emotions of love or longing for God or spirituality arise, the resulting expressions are considered positive because they purify the subtle nerve channels, or *nadis*.

The concentration of prana rotates every hour among the five lower chakras. The first of these *ashta sattvika vikara* is called *stambha*, meaning "stunned." It occurs when devotional feelings arise while prana is concentrated in the solid or "earth" element, at the *muladhara* chakra (at the base of the spine). The body becomes still and cannot move, and the mind and breath may be temporarily inactivated as well. If the prana is concentrated in the liquid or "water element" at the *svadhisthana* chakra when a strong devotional feeling arises, another of the *ashta sattvika vikara*, called *ashru* (weeping), can occur. It is said that the tears of devotion are cool and come from the outside corners of the eyes, unlike tears of anger or bitterness which come out of the center of the eyes or the inside

corners. *Ashru* is seen often in ashrams where there is a great deal of devotional sentiment; people find themselves spontaneously crying without understanding why.

When the prana is concentrated in the *manipura* chakra, where the luminous or "fire element" resides, two expressions of purifying change are possible. One of these is called *baivarna*—the skin can radically change from one color to another, and the devotee may feel quite tired. The other is *sveda*, or sweat. Great heat can be created in the body, causing copious, spontaneous sweating—"as if," in the words of Baba Hari Dass, "the person just stepped out of the water." When the prana is concentrated in the *anahata* chakra, the seat of the gaseous or "air element," a variety of changes can happen: spontaneous rapid breathing or trembling, called *kampa*; or blocking of the voice so that one cannot speak and only hoarse sounds come out (*svarabanga*); or *pulaka*, when the hairs on the scalp prickle or stand up, goosebumps arise on the skin, and there is a feeling of joy in the heart. When the prana is concentrated in the *vishuddha* chakra (located at the base of the neck), an experience called *pralaya* can take place. The body faints, and if standing, it may fall to the floor. Other *bhavas*, such as unconscious dancing, singing in ecstasy, chills, and release of mucus from the throat and head, can sometimes be observed; about these, Baba Hari Dass has written: "These are natural processes of purifying the body, mind, and nerves. . . . Ancient yogis recognized that intense sattvic emotions were inherently strong in only a few, rare people, and so they developed other means whereby anyone can purify the body and awaken kundalini, for example, through the practices of hatha yoga (pranayama, shat karma, mudra, etc.)."

Experiences Attributable to Kundalini

TEXTS FROM THE TRADITIONS OF TANTRA AND HATHA yoga describe the activation and rise of kundalini energy within sushumna nadi from the base of the spine into the head. As kundalini rises, it creates sensations of peace, ecstasy, and great energy; it rises smoothly in some people and more violently in others. This energy makes the mind go deep much more quickly, and the yogi longs to meditate. For this reason it is considered desirable to activate this energy.

How do we know when kundalini becomes active? The answer is simple: it can be felt as an energy mov-

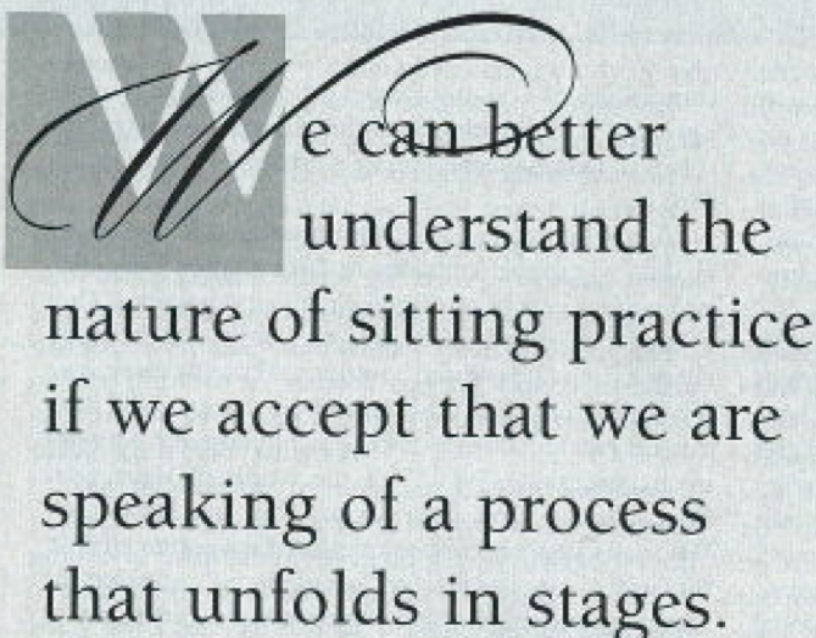
triangular structure which forms the base of the pyramidal sahasrara chakra, is a complex energy center that is the location in the subtle body for the *mahat*, or cosmic mind. Its *bindu*, or center, is called *shrîi*. It is only when *shrîi* is pierced, and the cosmic mind is transcended, that kundalini passes through a one-way valve which prevents it from flowing back down sushumna. Until this takes place, kundalini rises upward when the yogi meditates, but will go back down again, quickly or gradually, when the consciousness externalizes following meditation.

According to some hatha yoga texts, the rise of kundalini from muladhara to ajña takes from 3 to 18 years and can be experienced in various ways. In the begin-

ning it may be felt as a sensation like an insect crawling inside the spine or an itchy or tingling feeling on the outside, or a feeling of liquid or air passing through a pipe, or as a mildly painful sensation at the base of the spine. In the second stage the sensation of movement increases and a snake-like upward coiling motion can be felt. In the third stage it is said that kundalini "jumps like a frog." It may go quickly from one chakra to another, but may not rise further until the mind goes deeper. In the fourth stage the energy shoots up very quickly "like a bird flying from one tree to another." Baba Hari Dass writes: "When kundalini reaches ajña chakra, everything becomes illuminated, and one's understanding of the reality and illusion of the world increases enormously."

The following experience, recounted by an American woman, is, I think, typical of those yogis who follow the path of kundalini.

The kundalini became active very early in my spiritual journey, quite a while before I met my guru. But it took 18 years for it to pierce ajña chakra, and still its journey isn't complete. In the beginning it would spiral upward in the area of the first three centers, or it would jump to manipura chakra. The blissful sensations would come when it came to anahata or vishuddha, but that happened less frequently, because my mind had to go deeper in order for it to occur. This went on for many years, and sometimes my head would turn from side to side in meditation, which Babaji said once was a less desirable way for the kundalini to get through *mastak granthi* [a blockage at the base of the skull]. Then I started to be able to feel it coming into my head, both the front and back pathways. But one day when I was meditating it came so powerfully to ajña that it was like



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ing inside the spine. When kundalini begins to move, all of its energy may not be released from the muladhara chakra—sometimes only small amounts will rise up sushumna. But if even a spark reaches the ajña chakra, it can stimulate a strong spiritual experience, such as the vision of a deity.

When kundalini moves only in the muladhara or a short distance above, it may stimulate light and sensations in other chakras, as well as movement of other pranas in the body, which in turn can be experienced as physical sensations. And having once moved upward, the energy does not necessarily stay at the level to which it has risen. My guru has often explained that there are only two permanent seats for kundalini energy: the *muladhara* chakra at the base of the spine, and above the *vijñana* chakra. The *vijñana* chakra, a

this huge lightbulb turned on inside my head, and when I came out of meditation and opened my eyes I could hardly see anything because this light was so bright. A powerful thought shot through my mind that all of the experiences of my life that I had thought were so terrible were actually of very little consequence, and that liberation is our fate.

In order to prepare the body for the auspicious event of the activation of kundalini, yogis eat a sattvic diet and regularly practice asana, pranayama, meditation, and sometimes shat karma, ritual, and mantra as well. If the nervous system of the physical body and the *nadis* and *vayus* of the subtle body have not been sufficiently purified in advance by these practices, difficulties such as temporary illnesses, mental disorientation, or emotional confusion can occur. This most often happens when the student has previous *samskaras* of strong meditation practice, but the physical body has not been purified and prepared in this life by the practices of hatha yoga. In these individuals, kundalini may become active quite suddenly in response to a small stimulus: hearing a certain mantra chanted, for example, or entering the presence of a spiritual master, undertaking pranayama or meditation practice, or ingesting certain herbs.

Difficulties can also arise for people whose kundalini becomes active after a number of years of meditation practice in a spiritual path that does not use the concept of kundalini energy or teach physical practices for strengthening the body and nerves. In both of these cases the remedy is the same as the preparation: regular practice of asana, pranayama, meditation, shat karma, and a sattvic diet. Ayurvedic treatments may also be needed to balance disturbed *doshas* and settle sleeplessness or mental or emotional agitation.

A Final Word

HAVING REVIEWED MEDITATION EXPERIENCES AS THEY are presented from the perspectives of several paths, we should try to be clear about why these teachings are given. The first reason is so that students will not be frightened by these experiences, or worry that they are doing something incorrectly. They are expressions of a natural process that unfolds inside of us as we come into contact with higher consciousness. The second reason for discussing these experiences is to show that there is no single way to spiritual realization; rather, a variety of paths exist. If we understand this clearly, we won't make the mistake of evaluating others' experiences on the spiritual path in terms of our own experiences, or our own path.

The experiences discussed here can be taken as encouraging signposts along the way for us and for our students, but only if we understand that there are multiple signposts along several roads. We will not all experience the infinity of divine consciousness in the same ways. Divulging spiritual experiences in situations which might invite feelings of criticism, competition, envy, or inferiority in ourselves or others is always to be discouraged.

Finally, we should not make the mistake of confusing experiences with the goal. Experiences are temporary; the goal of *kaivalya* (liberation) is permanent. The great saints from all traditions make it quite clear that this goal is achieved not only by arduous inner practice, but also by striving to live a virtuous and selfless life in every moment.

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