

Practical Meditation Guide

What is meditation and why should we meditate?

Meditation is the process of getting to know yourself completely, both who you are *inside* and how you react to what is *outside*. Above all, meditation is enjoying *yourself* in the literal sense of the word. Through meditation, you discover a very different “me” from perhaps the stressed or troubled person, who may seem superficially to be “me”.

People want a variety of things from meditation. Some seek peace, others seek self-control, some wish for greater inner power and some a sense of stillness, but, of all the reasons, the ones which are most often expressed are peace or peace of mind. At first sight there does not seem to be much difference between the two, but on closer inspection, we find that they are asking for different things. Peace is simply an experience, whereas peace of mind is a way of life.

At some time or other we have all enjoyed moments of peace, however fleeting. Simply to experience peace is not actually so difficult. Peace is something easily attainable through the practice of meditation because this is what meditation is specifically designed to give. The closed eyes, mantra meditation we did last week is very valuable when you need a period of peace in your daily life. However, to attain peace of mind implies that you want to experience peace constantly. While you go about your daily life, you need to be in control of yourself to the extent that you can have whatever experience you choose when you choose.

To experience constant peace of mind, you need something more than just a meditation technique. It is the experience of peace, previously gained through meditation, which you need to be able to use later on in your practical life, especially at times when it is not easy to be peaceful. If you can't use meditation to bring benefit to your daily life, is it really any use to you?

Therefore, the emphasis in this course will be a double one:

First, to teach a simple, effective method of meditation called Raja Yoga, and to discuss and experiment with ideas on how to deepen the experiences gained.

Second, to look at the reasons behind stress and tension in your life so that, through understanding, you can begin to change the root causes using the power gained through meditation; and also to clarify how you can translate peaceful feelings into peaceful actions, so that peace becomes peace of mind.

Who am I?

This simple question seems easy to answer at first. However, as soon as you start to think about it, you realize that giving your name or a description of your physical appearance does not describe the myriad thoughts, moods, actions and reactions which comprise yourself and your life. Even a description of what you do becomes confusing, because every day you wear so many different hats. You may start the day as a wife, husband or a mother. At work you may be a clerk, a teacher or a nurse. You may meet a friend for lunch. Which of these roles that you play is you?

In each role you play, a different facet of your personality emerges. Sometimes you might feel that you have to play so many different and opposing roles that you no longer know what sort of person

you are. Yet you are quite aware that your true identity is not defined by the role you play. How can you think of *yourself*? Who are *you* really?

What is needed is something constant, safe and stable. We get up in the morning, look in the mirror and we seem to be much the same as we were yesterday. But we all know that this is an illusion, because gradually, over time, the body is declining; it is not stable or constant. In Raja Yoga, instead of identifying with the body, we start with our thoughts, awareness or consciousness and identify with that, because our thoughts are always there, whatever age we are. Their content may change, but our ability to think does not.

If you imagine your *self/soul* to be like a tiny point of light, like a tiny star in the centre of your forehead, in your brain, behind your eyes, you have a point of reference that you can use when you think of yourself. Whatever you do or say, it is the *self/soul* that is performing that action through the body. The *self/soul* is like the driver and the body is like the car. To be in complete control, the driver has to sit in the place where he has access to the controls and can also collect all the necessary information to make decisions. Your identity is the *self/soul* and all other identities – man, woman, father, mother, friend, relation, worker, boss and so on – are simply roles that *you* play. Good actors can play any role but they know that at the end of the performance they will take off their costumes and resume their true identities.

In meditation you can create an awareness of the *self/soul* and experience your innate, peaceful, positive qualities. This is what is called *soul-consciousness*. It is not just something to experience while in meditation, but also as you perform actions. As you become more aware of who is performing each action, you gain greater control over your thoughts, feelings, words and actions. The natural consciousness of yourself as a peaceful being then fills all your actions and the desire for peace of mind is fulfilled in a completely natural and practical way.

Soul Consciousness

Why should the thought, “I am a peaceful soul” be any more beneficial to you than the thought, “I am the body”? In the previous lesson you learnt how this thought allows you to become detached from the roles that you play. It is important to understand what is meant by the word *detached*. It does not mean distant or inward looking to the point of isolation, where there is a breakdown in communication. Nor does it mean that you become an uncaring observer of what is going on. It simply means to have the consciousness of being an *actor*. You play your part with great enthusiasm and love, but you do not let the expectations, burdens and worries of outside situations or other people, affect your own understanding of who you are – a peaceful being. By being aware of yourself as a soul, you can experience your natural qualities so that the feelings you associate with detachment are not of distaste or lack of concern, but of peace, love and happiness.

How can soul-consciousness help you to improve your attitude toward yourself and others? We often have the habit of comparing ourselves to others, seeing ourselves in the light of what we consider to be their merits or faults. This can sometimes lead to a feeling of hopelessness, self criticism and other equally negative states of mind. Through the experience of soul-consciousness, you will come to realise your own worth and stop comparing yourself with others.

If you understand that you are a peaceful soul, you will understand that others must also be that. Through this awareness, you will be able to relate to them on purely equal terms. Sometimes actions may seem to be totally opposed to this idea – someone may get angry with you and you feel threatened, replying sharply in return. Thus, a heated argument can develop. This is a reflection of

body-consciousness; instead of seeing the other as a peaceful soul playing a part, you see only the part and think it is the others` true nature. If, instead, you have the determined thought to see the other as a soul, (like yourself), you will respond very differently to their anger. You will see their anger as something temporary and not intrinsic to their true nature. Instead of reacting angrily or being defensive, you will actually become detached from the situation. This positive attitude acts as protection for you; you then don't feel under attack. In addition, your stable, calm reaction will help to defuse the situation. Soul consciousness also allows you to be natural in the company of others. This easiness on your part helps them to relax, as they don't feel that you have expectations of them.

This thing called Mind

Sitting down and experiencing peace is one thing; actually using it to transform your life is quite another. A great deal goes on between the intention and the action, and sometimes you might catch yourself saying, "I didn't want to do that, but..." or "Sorry I didn't mean to say that." To be in full control of your life you need not only to know, but also to understand the process through which an intention becomes an action.

So, what is this process? The first and most obvious thing that comes between an intention and an action is a thought. Thoughts occur in the mind. In Raja Yoga, the mind is not seen as a physical thing but as a faculty of the self/soul, and therefore, non physical. Through the mind you imagine, think and form ideas. This thought process is the basis of all your emotions, desires and sensations. It is through this faculty that, in an instant, you can relive past experiences, produce happiness or sadness or take yourself to the other side of the world.

When there is the thought, "I want a cup of tea", the relevant actions seem to follow automatically. However, is thought the only link between intention and action? What about the expression, "*Think before you speak?*" Undoubtedly there must be thought before you open your mouth, or nothing would emerge; so, what is meant here? There seems to be two aspects to thought. The first is the thought itself; the second is the awareness and understanding of that thought. It is the intellect which is used to understand the thoughts. In the expression, "Think before you speak", you are being asked to use your intellect and consider whether your thoughts are worth uttering. Some other functions of the intellect are reasoning, realization, discrimination, judgement and the exercise of willpower.

The intellect is the most crucial faculty; through the intellect you exercise control over your mind and thus over yourself. One of the effects of meditation is to empower the intellect and make you clear headed so you can develop perspective and a firm resolve.

There is a third faculty of the self/soul which comprises the impressions left by the actions we have performed. These impressions can be referred to by the Sanskrit word *sanskaras*, for which there is no simple translation. Habits, emotional tendencies, temperament and personality traits are all built up by sanskaras imprinted on the self/soul through each action it has performed. Sanskaras create the personality in the same way that individual frames on a feature film make up a story. Every action is recorded, whether it is a physical movement, a word or even a thought. As you live your life, you are continually creating sanskaric imprints – you are *creating* your self. Personality, the most fundamental feature of each individual, unique self/soul is determined by these sanskaras.

The mind, intellect and sanskaras function together in a cyclic pattern which determines how you behave, what thoughts you have and even what mood you are in. First the mind produces thoughts, evidence that the intellect judges. On the basis of that judgement, an action is performed or not

performed. The action, or inaction, creates a sanskara which, in turn, becomes part of the evidence in the mind.

A good illustration of this is the formation of a habit such as smoking. The first time you are offered a cigarette, many thoughts, both for and against, arise in the mind: "It's bad for my health", "I wonder what it tastes like", "It's very easy to get addicted", "Everyone else does it" and so on. On the basis of these thoughts, the intellect makes a decision. Let's suppose that it makes the decision to try a cigarette. A sanskara is created by that action and the next time you are offered a cigarette that previous action becomes part of the evidence in the mind, as a memory: "I smoked one before". If you decide to smoke one again, the repetition deepens that sanskara, until eventually the evidence in the mind, urging you to do smoke, has become so overwhelming that no evidence for not smoking remains. The intellect has now become very weak. There is no longer a choice or judgement to make. There is just the strong thought arising in the mind: "Have a cigarette!" and you perform the action automatically. You are no longer in control; your past actions in the form of sanskaras are ruling your present.

However, you can use this mechanism to create peaceful, positive sanskaras. As you sit in meditation, you will experience peace. This experience forms a sanskara and as you meditate regularly, peace becomes a habit. As the intellect gains strength of will through meditation, it becomes easier to act on peaceful sanskaras, as opposed to negative sanskaras such as anger. Thus the intellect begins to control both the mind and the actions. Gradually you will reach a point where you choose to put into action only those thoughts which lead you to experience permanent happiness and contentment.

Keeping the Balance

To continue to progress toward your aim of attaining constant peace of mind, the most important thing is balance. If you spend too much attention to sitting in meditation, being introverted, and not enough attention to relating peacefully to others, this may create an imbalance. You may become withdrawn, living in your own inner world, instead of the "real world" outside. You may find that relationships with others become difficult.

There are four aspects to bear in mind to avoid such an imbalance. If equal weight is given to all four, you can remain balanced while making natural, easy progress.

These four aspects are: *knowing, being, becoming and giving*.

Knowing refers to the understanding of knowledge. You have learnt the basic concepts of Raja Yoga: you are a self/soul; your true nature is peaceful; you have a mind, intellect and sanskaras. Now you have to fit them together. These concepts are like the pieces of a puzzle; it is only when they are fitted together in the correct way that the picture emerges.

By turning the information over in your mind, playing with it, matching it up to your life as it unfolds, you begin to create a coherent view. Once there is understanding you begin to feel that you are in control of your situation. Knowledge allows you to be detached from potentially stressful situations.

Being refers to yoga, the experience of meditation. Even if you can sort out all the logical connections between the bits of information you have received, unless you have a grasp of their true meaning, you cannot really say you have understood them. So how are you to understand what words like *peace, love, soul* and *detachment* mean? You understand these concepts only by

experiencing them. The experience of peace makes peace a reality. It also gives you a basis of trust and faith, for it is when the concept and the experience coincide that the self/soul can feel secure. Practical experience of the theoretical knowledge which you have been given verifies the knowledge. This leads to trust in the knowledge; through that trust and sense of truth you build a stable foundation.

Becoming refers to your actions. In the last paragraph, harmony between knowledge and experience was emphasized. If there is any contradiction, trust and stability disappear. Again, what is vital here is harmony between what happens internally and what happens externally. To sit in meditation and experience yourself as a peaceful soul, and then immediately afterwards to become angry with someone, renders that peaceful experience meaningless, and the self/soul feels lost and confused. Meditation must be made practical; its positive power must be reflected in action. You will actually become that which you experience in meditation.

Putting the results of meditation into practice must, on the whole, be a conscious thing. It will not happen miraculously, without your paying attention. Even though you are creating peaceful sanskaras in meditation, the old peaceless sanskaras will continue to create negative thoughts in your mind, sometimes very powerfully. It is only through conscious choice within the intellect that you can discriminate and change your behaviour.

What is important to understand here is that you will never experience progress unless you make an effort to change your negative actions and habits. However good your experiences in meditation are, if they are constantly contradicted by your actions, you will continue to create negative thoughts about yourself; your mind will become a battlefield instead of a haven of peace.

Giving refers to harmonious and altruistic relationships with others. Although becoming peaceful automatically helps your relationships with others, you still have to pay attention to this area, mainly because it is your relationships with others that spark off peacelessness within you. It is easy to be friendly and giving when those around you are also friendly and giving. Unfortunately, in the world today, we often find ourselves in interpersonal conflicts, ranging from mildly uncomfortable to openly hostile. In these situations, the practice of giving is your protection. It protects you from experiencing negativity, and also benefits the other person who is unfortunate enough to be feeling aggressive.

These types of situation are the tests which face you every day. It is how you cope in these instances which are the true measure of your progress. Giving should be done without the desire for return or reward. It should be a natural process, simply motivated by the wish to share with others positive experiences which you have internalized. Feeling happy and content is the natural reward for your positive actions. Without desires and expectations, your giving becomes truly altruistic. When you have practiced meditation for some time, giving becomes something beyond words. The knowledge and meditation experiences will become so much a part of you that simply by being your true positive self, you will give the experience of peace to all those you meet.

When all these four aspects of *knowing, being, becoming* and *giving* are in harmonious balance, the self/soul will be at peace with itself and in harmony with others.

Karma

Up until now, we human beings have found it very difficult to classify exactly what is right and what is wrong. Throughout history our definition of right and wrong has been changing. Different cultures

and religions came up with different definitions and classifications. Even within the same religion, people of different generations have different ideas of right and wrong. Even if you don't consider the external situation at all, but look within yourself, you will find that your understanding fluctuates a great deal. In childhood, your understanding was on one level; in adolescence it changed; in maturity it has changed again.

As you are influenced by the atmosphere or the words of human beings your intellect wavers in its own judgment. So, can you arrive at a point where you know absolutely what is right and what is wrong? Not while you are limited by identification with this physical costume – your body/mind. The religion or philosophy into which you were born, as well as the limitations of gender, of age and of culture, will all colour your ideas, thoughts and judgement.

By maintaining the consciousness of your true identity – your self/soul – you are able to understand accurately what is right and what is wrong. This is simply because, in this state of consciousness, you can only experience peace, happiness and love. So, you can only perform actions based on these qualities. These actions will be beneficial actions, bringing happiness and positive results. In body-consciousness there is not the pure intention behind the actions and our actions are performed with selfish ulterior motives, such as greed, ego and possessiveness. These are non-beneficial actions which give sorrow and bring negative results. *It is the consciousness with which we perform action that is important.*

The *Law of Karma*, of action and reaction, is applicable to the spiritual sphere and is absolute. It states: *For every action there will be an equal and opposite reaction*. Opposite, of course, means opposite in direction. Whatever interactions you have with others, you receive the equivalent in return. The law is simple, and when understood in its full depth, it can give insights into the significance of events in your own life and in the world at large. In Christianity this law is known by the saying, “*As you sow, so shall you reap*”. It is also known as the *Law of Cause and Effect*. Understanding this, when you see certain effects, there is now the realisation that effects can only take place if there is a cause. So karma (action) is the cause, and the fruit of karma is the effect. Generally, when you see the fruits of your karma, you might tend to forget that you are responsible for these effects. If the fruit of karma is bitter rather than sweet, you might point the finger of blame at others and say that others are responsible for your suffering. Understanding the Law of Karma makes you take total responsibility for your own situation, your state of mind and indeed your whole life.

Sometimes only half the Law of Karma is understood, that is, the part concerning destiny. Someone may think helplessly: “Whatever is happening to me now is because of my past actions; so, there is nothing I can do about it. It is my fate.” However, more importantly, the other side of the Law of Karma teaches that, if you now perform pure, beneficial actions, you can create your own positive future in the direction of your choice. Not only are you not a slave to destiny, but the understanding of Karma philosophy makes you the creator or master of your own destiny.

Any negativity of the past has led you into “karmic debts” with those around you. Where you have in the past given sorrow, you must now repay that debt by giving happiness. You have to settle your past “karmic accounts”. The power to sustain this effort of settling past karma can come through meditation or yoga. As you come to understand your own true nature more fully, you can understand that this is the true nature of everyone. You can see through the mask of negativity and relate to the soul directly. This will help you not to create further negative karma; you will not react badly to the negativity of others.

With soul-consciousness you will naturally give love and respect to others, and you will, in time, receive love and respect in return. Karma begins in the mind as thoughts, the seeds of action. As is the thought, so is the result. Thoughts, like actions, spread vibrations and influence the surrounding atmosphere. Karmically there will be a return of those vibrations. Pure, peaceful, happy thoughts are the most valuable treasures of life.

Understanding the consequences of actions means you take care to do everything properly. Having little control over your actions is a sure sign that you have little control over your mind. If you concentrate completely on what you are doing in the present, this allows you to be in full control of both mind and body. You keep performing actions in soul-consciousness so that, no matter how much you have to do physically, you can remain light and peaceful.

Aspects of God – The Source – The Supreme Soul

Throughout history, we human beings have sought many things. Above all we have desired two things: happiness and a perfect relationship. If we have achieved either one or both of these things, it has been a constant struggle to keep them. They have usually proved to be temporary. If we want to achieve them on a permanent basis, we must look beyond the limited gains of possessions, money and fragile human relationships.

Raja Yoga has two meanings: *Sovereign Yoga*, the yoga through which you can become the sovereign, the master of yourself; and the “*Supreme Union*”, or “*Union with the Supreme*”. This second aspect of Raja Yoga involves developing a relationship with the Supreme, the source of perfection, *God*. Within this yoga or union you can fulfil your wish for inner happiness and your desire for a perfect relationship.

It does not even require that you first believe in God. It is useful to simply have openness to the idea that there may be a greater source of spiritual energy than yourself. Through your own experimentation in meditation you can develop an understanding of this concept. If someone asked you, “Do you believe in the existence of Mr. X?” you would be inclined to want to meet him first, before committing yourself. Under the circumstances, you would keep an open mind. Similarly, with the concept of a supreme spiritual energy, until there is direct experience, it would be unwise to commit oneself. Yet, if you want to have contact with the Supreme Being, there are certain things that you must know. First, you should know the form of the Supreme so that you will be able to have accurate recognition. Secondly, you need to know what “language” to use so that there can be communication. Thirdly, you need to know where your meeting can take place.

In Raja Yoga, just as there is a very precise notion of the form of the soul, so there is also a very precise notion of the form of the Supreme. In fact, God is recognized as the Supreme Soul. So, He/She has a form identical to that of the human soul, that is, a point source of consciousness, a spark of light energy.

This Supreme Soul never takes human birth and has no sexual gender- but I shall use the term “He” for convenience. The Supreme never forgets his original qualities as we do. He remains eternally peaceful, blissful and powerful. Our own experience of our original qualities has become limited due to “body consciousness”. In Raja Yoga there is a particular name for the Supreme and that is Shiva Baba. Shiva means benevolent. He is the only being who is truly altruistic, whereas we humans normally look for something in return, even if it is only the pleasure of giving. Baba is a familiar name for Father in India; thus, Shiva Baba is the benevolent Father/Mother of all souls and is also known as Friend or Beloved.

How can you communicate with this Supreme Being? Meditation is about experiencing yourself, experiencing your own qualities. You create peaceful thoughts in order to experience peace. Paradoxically, the more you absorb yourself in that peace, the fewer thoughts you need. The communication with the Supreme is on this level – the level of silence. In deep silence you can lose yourself in the Ocean of Peace. You begin to feel the qualities of the Supreme surrounding you and you begin to understand your own qualities and specialities more deeply. This experience brings confidence and you feel refreshed. You take power, which enables you to maintain a peaceful mind while going about your daily life.

You also need to know where to find the Supreme. When you sit in meditation and go deep within yourself, a feeling of stillness comes over you. In that silence, your experience is that you are in an unchanging, timeless world. Yet the physical world is ever-changing and when your consciousness is tied to the physical, you can never get away from the passage of time. It is as though you have taken your consciousness beyond this world to another world. Raja Yoga calls this place the *soul world*, the original home of the soul. It is a timeless world of stillness and silence, full of peace and power, a world of infinite golden-red light. This is also the home of the Supreme Soul. So by taking yourself there, you begin to experience His unlimited qualities of peace, love, purity, bliss and power surrounding you. Through this most perfect of all relationships, you take power and guidance so that you can clear your karmic debts of the past and create a peaceful, happy and stable future.