

# Yoga-Vedanta Tradition of Meditation

SWAMI NITYASTHANANDA

## The Basis of Indian Tradition

Vedanta and Yoga are the two central pillars of Indian spiritual tradition. Vedanta provides the rational metaphysical background to it, whereas Yoga is concerned with methods of realizing Vedantic truths. *Yogavasishtha*, the ancient and highly acclaimed text attributed to Valmiki, outlines a similar idea when it says;

O Rama, there are two methods for the 'destruction of the mind'—Yoga and Jnana. Yoga is the stopping of the movements of the mind, and Jnana is perceiving rightly.

Here Jnana is related to the Upanishadic inquiry into the Ultimate Reality, and Yoga is the practical method of realizing that Reality. Both are necessary—one illumines the path, and another takes us along the path. Jnana without yoga is lame, and yoga without Jnana is blind.

## The Rise and Fall of Thought-waves

The most essential aspects of Yoga are concentration and meditation. They take the aspirant step by step to the highest state of concentration called Samadhi where all the mental modifications are stopped and the inner Self is revealed. Swami Vivekananda explains this with an illustration:

The bottom of the lake we cannot see, because its surface is covered with ripples. It is only possible to catch a glimpse of the bottom, when the ripples have subsided, and the water is calm. If the water is muddy or is agitated all the time,

the bottom will not be seen. If it is clear, and there are no waves, we shall see the bottom. The bottom of the lake is our own true Self; the lake is the chitta and waves, the vrittis.<sup>1</sup>

The *vrittis* are the thought-waves arising in the mind. The waves, as we know, always rise, and fall. Similarly, the same *vritti* or wave does not remain steady in the mind more than a moment. Thoughts of various kinds—sometimes related and many times unrelated, sometimes neutral or emotionally charged—invade the mind like waves. They, as if, blast the fort of discrimination (*viveka*) and dispassion (*vairagya*), overwhelm our self-consciousness, and kidnap or hijack us to a state of being—without even our knowledge. That is why, most of the time we remain in a state of self-forgetfulness or semi-consciousness. Unless we make a sincere attempt to meditate, we will not know how much we are slaves to our thoughts and how much self-forgetful we are. This is true of all, irrespective of the social status or group we may belong to.

We live in a dynamic world, where every particle is in constant flux. We cannot imagine a state where there is no action or movement. Even the apparent state of inaction reveals intense activity when analysed deeply. Still, there is an urge in man to be calm and silent without any activity, which induces him to go into the state of deep sleep everyday. Meditation is an attempt to reach that state

 The author is Acharya at the Monastic Probationers' Training Centre, Belur Math, Howrah, West Bengal.

consciously, gradually reducing the number of thoughts and finally retaining only one thought in the mind.

Arjuna's confession in the Gita that controlling the mind is as difficult as controlling the wind is no exaggeration. Nor can one avoid this task. One has to face inner dilemmas and difficulties in this stupendous task of overcoming the mind. But no great things are achieved without difficulties. Some thoughts are devastating like cyclone, tumbling down our towers of hopes, and sometime thoughts become as whirlwind of complexes sucking all our mental and nervous energy, leaving us completely exhausted. Some thoughts of minor importance stealthily creep in—taking advantage of our carelessness—and slowly overpower us. This brings in a hoard of other thoughts, and we are swept away by the current. Such is the state of our mind!

Though this imagery may unnerve many and discourage some to undertake the practice of meditation, still the very attempt to meditate gives us the knowledge of the dynamics of the mind. In the process we make great strides in self-mastery or self-awareness and develop a spirit of detachment. With the help of meditation, one can remain in subjective consciousness as a witness, keeping away distractive thoughts. We then feel our true existence, separate from the psycho-physical entity. At this stage the Buddhi or will-power becomes free from the shackles of desires and begins to derive light and inspiration from this divine subjective-consciousness. Thus strengthened, the Buddhi begins to gain control over all other aspects of our personality. Meditation is a process of extricating individual consciousness from the tangles of mental modifications of different types such as cognitive, affective and volitional, both positive and negative nature,

and feeling oneself separate from the psycho-physical entity. It is knowing the Self as It is.

### **Two Kinds of Concentration**

Meditation is a special kind of concentration. In ordinary concentration, the mind is focused on one particular subject, and there can be many divergent thoughts related to that particular subject. Here the subject may be one but thoughts are many and dissimilar. For example, if one is reading a book on electricity and if his mind is concentrated, all his thoughts would centre on electricity alone. But in meditation there is one subject and one thought related to that. Regarding this special kind of concentration, says Swami Yatiswarananda (1889-1966), an eminent monk of the Ramakrishna Order:

It is important to know the difference between ordinary concentration and meditation. By the word 'meditation' we mean Dhyana or contemplation. It is not just ordinary concentration. It is a special type of concentration. In the first place, meditation is a fully conscious process, an exercise of the will. Secondly, meditation means concentration on a spiritual idea which presupposes that the aspirant is capable of rising above worldly ideas. And finally, meditation is done usually at a particular centre of consciousness. It is clear that true meditation is a fairly advanced state, attained after long practice. It is the result of long years of discipline.<sup>2</sup>

This means that if one is meditating on the divine form of Rama at a particular centre of consciousness, the heart, for instance, then there would be a continuous flow of the same thought representing the divine form of Rama, to the exclusion of all other thoughts—even the thoughts related to Rama's qualities or his life. This continuous flow of one and the same thought is called meditation.

Normally there is a continuous flow of thoughts in our minds related to different objects, events and persons. If one thought represents one particular object, the subsequent one would be related to some other object or person. This state of mind is called *sarvarthata* in Yoga literature. In contrast to this, the flow of similar thoughts pertaining to a chosen object of meditation is called *ekagrata* or onepointedness.

This is a higher form of concentration having different but similar thoughts representing one and the same object. As a result of quick succession of these thoughts, the object of meditation appears to be steady and, as the concentration deepens, the object becomes more vivid and bright. This is somewhat similar to the case when still pictures are taken and projected on the screen: the form on the screen appears to be one and steady though the images are different. This meditative state is described as *taila dharavat*, 'like a stream of oil'. When we pour oil from one vessel to another, there is constant flow of oil without any sound or splash. But when we pour water in similar fashion there is so much of noise and splash. If the thought-current flows towards the object of meditation in an uninterrupted stream, without any restlessness, that state is called meditation. According to Patanjali, *tatra pratyayaikatanata dhyanam*—'an unbroken flow of thoughts of that object (of meditation) is called Dhyana.'

This is similar to *upasana* spoken of in Vedanta. Adi Shankaracharya gives a vivid description of upasana in his commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. He says,

Upasana, or meditation, means approaching an object of meditation as presented by the scriptures, making it an object of one's own thought, and dwelling on it uninterruptedly for long by continuing the same current of thought

with regard to it— like a stream of oil poured from one vessel to another.<sup>3</sup>

### Preliminary Stages

This state is reached only after one has passed through two other stages of meditation—*pratyahara* and *dharana*.

*Pratyahara* means making the mind free from the clutches of senses. The mind is always running after sense objects. When we see a particular object or hear a particular sound, the mind immediately grabs it and starts building a castle of thoughts around it. Same is the case when a particular thought arises in the mind. When we sit for meditation, at first the mind goes towards the objects of senses. We then withdraw the mind from these and try to fix it on the object of meditation. This withdrawal of the mind is called *pratyahara*.

Even after withdrawal, however, the mind refuses to remain steady and again starts wandering in the world of the senses. We repeatedly try to withdraw it from this wandering towards senses, and this struggle goes on for a long time, after which the mind becomes steadier and we are able to fix it on the object of meditation. This stage is called *dharana* ('held' or 'fixed').

### What to Meditate on?

The object of meditation can be the divine form of our chosen deity, or some sound like the Pranava (Om), or a particular centre of consciousness like the heart region (i.e., the centre of chest, and not the physical heart) and so on. When the mind remains fixed on the object for a definite length of time, without being disturbed by any other thought, and the object of meditation becomes steady and vivid, then the mind is said to be in the state of meditation.

One can also meditate on the awareness of 'I'. When we separate ourselves from the thoughts, and when we observe them as external objects are observed, then we feel our existence as individual consciousness, or I-consciousness, separate from all other things. We can meditate on this I-sense, and then there will be a series of *aham-vritti* ['I-thought'] in the mind. Even if other thoughts come, they just peep in and disappear. When I-consciousness occupies the mind-space, other thoughts cannot play havoc in the mind. In villages people keep certain type of eatables for drying in the sun, and often a child is asked to keep a watch, lest the birds would pick them up. The moment the child's attention is diverted, birds suddenly descend from nowhere and pick the food and fly away. Like birds, our thoughts will have their way whenever we lose self-awareness, and we would be carried away by the current of thoughts, and would not be aware of 'where I am'. If the lamp of awareness is kept burning in the heart-chamber, then the thieves of thoughts cannot enter it.

### **Being Alert**

The state of meditation is, in fact, a state of great alertness. The meditator must be very alert and not allow the thoughts other than that of the object of meditation. He must be able to detect the other thoughts intruding into the inner chamber of this mind housing the object of his meditation. The moment we forget ourselves, lose our consciousness, distracting thoughts will rush in and take us away from the object of our meditation—rather they kidnap us blind-folded. In the famed temple of Lord Tirupati, the priests do not allow anybody to stand before the deity more than a second or two, much against our wishes to stand there for sometime and offer our prayers. They immediately push us away.

In the same way, one should not allow any thought to stay before the adorable object of our meditation. In fact, the state of meditation is more wakeful than the wakeful state itself. Swami Yatiswarananda says,

If we are wide awake and follow spiritual life with dedication, we can detect every movement of the mind, observe every modification of the mind.

Sri Ramakrishna explains this one-pointedness with an example. He says that while threading a needle, even if one small strand of the thread is out of direction, the thread will not pass through the eye of the needle. Similarly a distracted mind cannot be focused on God; there should be no distracting thought. As the mind becomes concentrated during meditation, the object of meditation becomes more vivid, luminous and lively, just as the reflection of full moon in the water becomes clear and vivid as the ripples of the water subside. In that state the aspirant experiences pure joy within. This is the true 'taste' of meditation.

### **Need for Inner and Outer Disciplines**

The meditative life requires discipline at different levels.

*Need for a Routine:* First of all one must observe moderation in food, recreation, work and rest. The Gita (6. 16-17) says,

The success in yoga is not for him who sleeps too much or too little. To him who is temperate in eating and recreation, in his effort for work, and in sleep and wakefulness, yoga becomes the destroyer of misery.

Those who want to take meditative life seriously must follow definite routine and stick to it at all costs. Says Swami Yatiswarananda,

This is the only way to discipline the wayward will. We should plan our waking hours—how to discharge our daily duties, what to do with the

spare time, what thoughts we should have, etc. The life of spiritual aspirant must be conscious and alert. Minimize your unconscious thinking and activities. Be more and more wide awake.<sup>4</sup>

*Moral Integrity:* Apart from these physical disciplines, moral discipline is also indispensable. Swamiji says,

Why should a man be moral and pure? Because this strengthens his will. Everything that strengthens the will by revealing the real nature is moral. Everything that does the reverse is immoral.<sup>5</sup>

If a man loses moral sensitivity, he will be subjugated by worldly temptations, and will try to fulfil his desires unscrupulously without guilt. Naturally in such a condition man's mind becomes so restless that no meditation would be possible for him. Rather it is better for him not to attempt meditation. Now-a-days, many people practice certain techniques of meditation for the reduction of stress and tension. This they do without sufficient moral integrity. Hence their purpose is to carry out their worldly pursuits more efficiently! However, such practices have no spiritual value.

*Harmony In Interpersonal Relationships:* Another important prerequisite for a fulfilling contemplative life is good and harmonious human relationships, without which it is difficult to maintain emotional balance. If one is constantly at variance with the people surrounding him, his mind naturally remains agitated and this is obviously not conducive for contemplative life. Then, what must be our attitude towards various types of people we come across in our work-a-day life?

Patanjali talks of four virtues to be cultivated with regard to four kinds of people:

The mind remains serene by the cultivation of feelings of amity, compassion, goodwill and

indifference respectively towards virtuous, miserable, happy and sinful.<sup>6</sup>

One must be friendly with the good, which will help one in developing and manifesting one's own goodness. One must develop the capacity to feel for the suffering people, and try to help them; in his own capacity. If no other help is possible, one should pray for their well-being. This will help one to come out of the narrow limits of self-centredness, and make one kind and benevolent. This mental flexibility is favourable for meditative life. Another important virtue is to feel happy seeing others happy. We generally are interested in our own happiness and strive for it. This kind of pursuit of happiness itself is a hindrance to the expression of inner joy. When we stop this and live a natural life, others' happiness will make us joyful. This joyful attitude is absolutely necessary for effective contemplative life. And lastly, one must be indifferent towards bad people and bad thoughts within us, without getting upset. This is the attitude of indifference which Patanjali speaks of.

### Progress in Meditation

Swami Brahmananda, a great direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, says,



Meditation in the primary stage is like waging a war with the mind. With effort the restless mind has to be brought under control and placed at the feet of the Lord. But in the beginning, take care that you do not overtax your brain. Go slowly, then gradually intensify your effort. Through regular practice, the mind will become steady and meditation will be easier. You will no longer feel any strain even while sitting for long hours in contemplation.<sup>7</sup>

There are, however, certain signs of progress in practice of meditation.

*First*, the number of thoughts during the meditation will slowly get reduced. In the beginning, we get plenty of thoughts, good and bad, when we sit for meditation. But as we advance in our practice, the number of thought gets reduced.

*Second*, our mind's wandering will be greatly curbed. Even whatever thoughts we get when we meditate, they will not take us away from the object of meditation. We will have some control over them, and the thread of inner awareness would keep them under check.

*Third*, the mind will dwell on the object of meditation for a longer time.

*Fourth*, self-awareness will be intensified, and this will check wanderings of the mind.

*Lastly*, we will derive deep peace and joy in doing meditation and we will not try to avoid practice on some pretext.

## Conclusion

Swami Adbhutananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, gives a beautiful description of what is meditation in advanced stages:

There are you and your chosen Deity and none else—that is meditation. When the probationer's meditation comes to this stage then he may be said to have control over his mind; then the fickleness of the mind loses its power over his mind. Before the mind tries to think of anything other than the object of meditation the probationer comes to know of it and prevents it from doing that. All the workings and tendencies of the mind are revealed to him before they could assume any power to distract him from the contemplation of the Chosen Deity. Attachments or attractions to objects of enjoyment, aversion to desirable spiritual things, annoyance towards practices that may lead to spiritual enlightenment, etc., melt away before taking any form. All evil tendencies, such as doing harm to anyone, telling lies, disappear before producing any changes in the body. His nature is transformed. His body is transfigured. His eyes, face, his movements, his words—all indicate his meditative nature. A truly meditative man has different looks, different gaits, different respiration. During meditation his respiration stops, a calmness pervades his personality; he loses consciousness of his body.<sup>8</sup>

This summarises the ideal of Yoga-Vedanta tradition of meditation. □



## References

1. CW, 1:202
2. *Meditation and Spiritual Life*, Ramakrishna Ashrama, Bull Temple Road, Bangalore, 1983, p. 324
3. Shankara's commentary on Bhagavad Gita, 12.3.
4. *Meditation and Spiritual Life*, Advaita Ashrama, 2009, p.340
5. CW, 8.225
6. Yogasutra, I.33
7. *The Eternal Companion*, Swami Prabhavananda, 1971, p.336
8. *Swami Adbhutananda as We Saw Him*, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai, p.195