



## Meditation: the heart of yoga

People who practice meditation are more likely to say: “I practice meditation” than: “I practice yoga”.

This is because for the general public “yoga” has become a synonym of “*āsana*” or postures, and meditation is regarded as a separate practice. Most people tend to think: “Yoga deals with the body and meditation deals with the mind”.

Indeed in yoga we usually start by working with the body through posture and breath. With these tools (*āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*), but also with the observance of social rules and personal guidelines (*yama* and *niyama*) you can work with your “gross” external structure and sometimes reach the deeper layers of your self. Does yoga stop here?

In Patañjali’s Yoga-Sūtra (the first and most authoritative work on classical yoga, circa 200 BCE), eight components of yoga are listed. The last ones form a three-fold entity presented as “the internal limbs” or “organs” of yoga: concentration (*dhāraṇa*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and finally the highest state where the meditator is completely absorbed into his object of meditation (*samādhi*).

Therefore, it is incorrect to view meditation and yoga separately. Meditation forms an integral part of the yoga process, the heart of it.

### “I can’t do it”

How does one meditate? A number of methods have become popular in past decades. Many of them are modern adaptations of yoga’s techniques. The media praise its benefits. Doctors acknowledge its contribution to physical and mental health. Google and other firms concerned about the welfare of their employees fit it in the working day; sometimes business meetings will even start with a few minutes of meditation...

However meditation is generally considered difficult, especially for beginners. One frequently hears comments such as: “I cannot meditate because I cannot empty my mind”. But the idea that to meditate is to empty the mind is also incorrect.

### Start where you are

A meditation journey unfolds in several stages and does not yield immediate results, therefore it requires patience (which often comes in short supply!). The preliminary stage consists in appeasing what Buddhists call the “monkey mind” with the help of certain calming methods. TKV Desikachar simply says: “One must be ready”. This may take weeks, months, or even years, depending on each person. It is important to realize that we cannot simply “turn the tap off” when it comes to thoughts, since after all the function of the “mental organ” is to think. Rather, we try to turn it down, to calm its flow before we attempt to concentrate, then to meditate.

Yes, that’s right: the mind should be somewhat steady *before* we start, otherwise we risk setting ourselves up for failure. If I rush into my apartment after stepping out of a busy commuter train, having ended the day in an argument with my boss, my mind will not be fit to meditate. I need to clear out the clutter first.



Many people give up meditation soon after starting because they try to jump straight into it without having done the preliminary work of calming the mind. This would have the same effect as running a marathon if you have never run a step before in your life. It would be painful and the odds are that you would not make it to the end, unless you are gifted with a natural ability. As common sense dictates, you should start from where you are, not from where you wish to be.

### **To concentrate or meditate: that is the question**

Once our mind is somewhat settled, or at least on its way there, the next step is to direct the attention on an object carefully chosen for its qualities and positive influence. For example, I might choose the lotus flower which stands for purity and harmony.

I make an effort to focus on the flower, even if there are distractions such as sounds and other visual stimuli competing for my attention every now and again. Gradually, I manage to stay focused on it and be less distracted; the more I practice this skill, the longer I can keep this direction. At some point, thanks to regular practice, I can eventually stay fixed on the flower for a few seconds without being distracted. Again, it may take a long time to reach this level!

This initial stage is called *dhāraṇa*, or concentration. We learn to keep the attention fixed on one thing and one thing only. Even if we do not take things further, this healthy habit goes a long way to help us maintain balance in life.

But let us assume that we do go further: where to next?

When these few seconds of focused attention are prolonged to a few minutes, perhaps something else will happen: an exchange with this object, an understanding of a deeper, more intimate nature: the flower and I are much closer to each other. At last, I absorb some of its qualities. The experience can be compared to moving towards the sun: as I move towards it, I feel warmer. This is called *dhyānam*, meditation. But it is not a permanent experience, nor can I take it for granted that it will be repeated.

More practice is necessary if I want to maintain this profound connection, to the point where something else may shift, and this ultimate shift brings the one who meditates and his object of focus together. The boundary between them becomes non-existent. They have merged, they are one. This very high state is impossible to describe and even the most advanced *yogi-s* do not attempt to do it. Suffice to say that it is “another state” (*anyaḥ*, says Patanjali) in which the mind is not empty but completely filled with the object it has chosen.

While this last stage may seem very abstract to most of us, a more pragmatic question arises: what are the results of meditation?

It takes us within our self, “poking” the deep layers of our psyche. It may reveal things that we did not suspect were there and that are not pleasant to see, making personal transformation disturbing. The paradox is that most of us expect to achieve peace of mind with meditation. As one question leads to another we might ask: can peace of mind be the solution to our problems? Or is it a form of escapism? We shall examine this topic another time.



### The raw ingredient

It is important to choose the object of meditation carefully since we aim to absorb its qualities at some point. Given that each person's path is unique, there can be no standard technique of meditation in yoga. Patanjali presents a few objects of meditation in chapter I of the Yoga-Sutra but after compiling a list he concludes: "You may meditate on any object that you are attracted to, which is suitable for you." (YS I.38 *yatha abhimata dhyānād va*). The possibilities are endless!

The object we choose to meditate with is the "raw ingredient" of meditation. If I choose the lotus flower, is it enough to summon the image of the flower and sit for a certain amount of time while trying to keep this image uppermost in my mind? You might answer that it is not, and you would be right.

A raw ingredient must be processed to make it more easily digested, and you need tools to process it. What are these tools? Which techniques are available? We will examine this topic in the next article.

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