

VEDANTIC MEDITATION

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Dhyana, the Sanskrit term for meditation used by Hindus and Buddhists alike, first arises in Vedic literature. The Upanishads say, "By the Yoga of meditation (Dhyana Yoga) the sages saw the Divine Self-power, hidden in its own qualities" (Shvetasvatara Upanishad I.2). Another Upanishad states, "Meditate on Om as the Self" (Katha Upanishad II.5), showing the technique of mantra meditation.

Perhaps the most eloquent explication of meditation occurs in the Chandogya, one of the oldest Upanishads. "Meditation (Dhyana) indeed is greater than the mind. The earth as it were meditates. The atmosphere as it were meditates. Heaven as it were meditates. The waters as it were meditate. The mountains as it were meditate. Both men and gods as it were meditate. He who worships God (Brahman) as meditation, as far as meditation extends, so far does he gain the power to act as he wills" (Chandogya Upanishad VII.7).

According to Vedanta, liberation can be achieved only through spiritual knowledge, which requires meditation. Other factors, such as good works or rituals, are merely aids in the process. But such liberating knowledge is not any ordinary or conceptual knowledge. It is direct insight into one's own nature of pure consciousness.

Vedanta's main approach is threefold: hearing the teaching with a receptive mind (shravana), deep thinking about it (manana), and meditating on it consistently (nididhyasana) until full realization dawns, which is a state of samadhi or transcendent awareness. Such hearing is not simply noting the words of the teachings; it involves a deep inner listening with an open mind and heart. Such thinking requires full concentration and a firm intent to understand oneself. Such meditation is a repeated practice of self-examination and self-remembrance throughout the day as one's primary mental state.

Vedanta is a yoga of knowledge or a path of meditation. But it recognizes that other yogic paths are helpful, if not indispensable adjuncts, particularly the path of devotion (Bhakti Yoga), which takes us directly to the Divine presence in the heart. Vedanta employs all the limbs of classical yoga from asana to samadhi, using all methods of the yogas of knowledge, devotion, service and technique, depending upon the needs of the student.

Generally Vedanta does not prescribe any particular form of meditation en masse or give the same technique to everyone. Emphasizing the Self, it recommends different methods relative to the level and temperament of each person and according to his or her unique nature and life circumstances. For this reason Vedantic meditation is hard to characterize and defies any stereotype. There is no standard formula for it. However, there are a number of common approaches, particularly the practice of Self-inquiry that this book highlights. Yet Self-inquiry is also applied on an individual basis, in which its methods can vary greatly from one person to another.

Vedantic meditation is not only diverse but generally private, emphasizing individual practice more than group practice. Its model is the wandering sadhu in solitary retreat, rather than the monk in a big monastery. However, meditation sessions do occur as part of the satsangs or gatherings that are common in the tradition. These may extend over a period of days or weeks. Yet those participating in such sessions may practice different forms of meditation, based upon the specific instructions of their teachers.

Buddhist meditation aims to return to the natural state of the mind, which is regarded as the enlightened state. This occurs through negating the self or ego and awakening the Buddha-mind (Bodhichitta). Vedanta, on the other hand, is based on a clear distinction between the mind (manas), which is regarded as a product of ignorance or maya, and the Self (Atman), which transcends the mind. The Vedantic way is to dissolve the mind into the Self which is our true nature beyond the mind and its conditioning.

This Vedantic emphasis on the Self is perhaps its main characteristic, as well as its main difference from Buddhism. While Vedanta approaches pure awareness as the Self or Atman, Buddhism prefers the term anatman or non-self. This Vedantic emphasis on the Self finds an echo in Western mystical traditions like Gnosticism, which influenced early Christianity, and Islamic Sufism; all refer to God as the Self or the supreme I-am. This Western tradition of the Self dates at least back to the Biblical revelation of God as I-am-that-I-am to Moses, but it was generally obscured by a greater emphasis on monotheism as the highest truth. We also find such utterances of the Divine I am in pagan traditions, like those of the Celts, Greeks and Egyptians, which have many factors in common with Hinduism.

Vedanta's theism, honoring the Divine Father and Mother, is another point of difference from Buddhism, which does not recognize the existence of any Creator apart from karma. Vedantic theism has some connections with the theistic traditions of the West, though it is more diverse and gives a greater place to the Goddess.

With its theistic side Vedanta recognizes surrender to the Divine as a primary method of spiritual practice along with Self-inquiry. By surrender to the Divine within our hearts we can go beyond all our difficulties and limitations. Yet surrender, though easy to conceive, is also a difficult process because it requires giving up the ego and all of our fears and desires that go with it. To facilitate this way of surrender is added chanting of Divine names and other devotional forms of worship. These can also be practiced along with knowledge-oriented techniques like Self-inquiry.

In the Vedanta we approach the Creator as a means of discovering our true Self, in which both the soul and God are one. Union with God is part of the process of Self-realization. The Deity worshipped is ultimately the same as oneself and we must come to see it in all beings. Until we see the Divine beloved within our own heart, our devotion has not yet reached its highest goal.

Vedanta postulates certain ultimate principles of the Absolute, God, the Soul, and Nature. It recognizes the supreme reality as Being, Consciousness, and Bliss (called Satchidananda), which is eternal and infinite. In this regard Vedanta follows an idealistic philosophy much like the Greek philosophies of Plato, Plotinus or Parmenides. Part of Vedantic meditation is contemplating these higher principles— for example meditating, on the formless Absolute and its laws (dharmas) behind the world of nature.

Meditation on the oneness of all is another important Vedantic approach. Vedanta sees pure unity or oneness as the supreme principle in existence. It recognizes a single law or dharma governing the entire universe. Whatever we do to others we do to ourselves because there is really only one Self in all. This is also the basis of Vedantic ethics that emphasize non-violence and compassion, treating others not like our self but as our Self.

Vedantic meditation aims at returning us to this original state of unity, in which all beings abide in the Self within the heart. While Vedanta like Buddhism does recognize the Void, stating the Self is like space, it holds that the Self pervades even the Void and witnesses it. For this reason Vedanta seldom regards the Void as the ultimate principle and emphasizes the unity of Pure Being more than voidness.

Vedanta does not neglect the psychological side, either. Like most Indian spiritual systems, its purpose is to show us how to permanently overcome all suffering. Vedantic meditation involves meditating upon suffering and removing its cause. Vedanta regards ignorance of our true Self as the cause of all our life problems. Because we don't know our true Self, which is pure awareness beyond the body and mind, we must suffer, seeking to find happiness in the shifting external world. By returning to our true Self we can transcend psychological suffering

and detach ourselves from any possible physical suffering as well. The pain of body and mind do not belong to the Self that is beyond time and space.

Vedanta has a profound understanding of the different layers and functions of the mind, from what we call the unconscious to the highest super consciousness, for which it has a precise terminology. It recognizes the role of samskaras, the tendencies created in previous births, as causing our present condition and its difficulties as well as rewards. Vedanta sees fear and desire as the main roots of the mind that get us caught in the cycle of rebirth. It regards the ego or the false I, the I identified with the body, as the basis of these problems. Another part of Vedantic meditation is clearing our minds of the afflictions and karmic residues that block the practice of meditation. This involves affirming our true Self, which is the master of the Universe beyond all fear and desire, birth and death.

Vedanta recommends regular meditation for everyone, particularly during the hour or two before dawn, which it calls Brahma Muhurta or the hour of God. Sunrise and sunset are other important times for meditation because at these transitional periods in nature, energy can be more easily transformed. The times of the new, full and half moons are also excellent, as are the solstice and equinoctial points. Meditation is part of the very rhythm of life and nature and its ongoing transformations.

Very important for meditation is the period immediately before sleep in order to clear the day's karma from the mind. Vedanta regards the deep sleep state as the doorway to the Self, our natural daily return to God. Its practices develop our awareness through waking and dream to deep sleep and beyond. Deep sleep is the knot of ignorance; when it is removed through meditation, we can discover our true nature and eternal peace. Maintaining awareness through dream and deep sleep is an important and ancient Vedantic approach.

Vedanta is perhaps the world's oldest continuous meditation tradition. Like our eternal soul, it witnesses all the changes of time and history. It takes on new forms and inspires new teachers in every generation. Such an ancient and diverse meditation tradition is of great importance for all those who wish to understand what meditation really is and how best to practice it.

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