

Experience, Discipline, Yoga, Meditation

UW-Madison, May 2000

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“He is so conditioned to think of emptiness as soon as he notices causal conditionality that in a future life, even though emptiness is not taught to him, the mere hearing of the doctrine of cause and effect revivifies his former understanding.” (Hopkins p. 171)

“It is a conception, as life begins in a conception, of a higher spirit that inspires and spiritualizes mind and life, that aims at enlightenment and, in so aiming, is itself a manifestation of enlightenment.” (Thurman p.113)

Yoga, meaning “union” and having as its root yuj (“to yoke”), is to be understood as a systematized practice by which an individual hopes to gain an increased awareness of her/himself, and ultimately the reality that surrounds them. Although the practice and philosophy of yoga address parallel questions to both religion and science, it has still been able to transcend these labels, the result of neither containing a dogmatic framework nor being restricted by the conventional methods of experimentation one finds particular to the sciences. I agree wholeheartedly with the following statement that hints at yoga’s ability to avoid the extremist positions that both religion and science seem to have claimed as their homes, “It is India’s mature answer to the universal question “Who am I?” – a question that, sooner or later, will impinge on any self-inspecting individual. (Feuerstein p. xix)

The first “records” of yogic practice have as their origin the ancient Indus valley civilization (approx. 2500-1000 BCE) in northern India, primarily in the form of seals depicting individuals in asanas (postures) that are common to the practice of yoga. These finds act to support what many have supposed for quite some time and is made explicit in the following, “It is one of the world’s oldest branches of spiritual inquiry, and surely the longest and most intense experiment of the human spirit.” (Feuerstein p. xix)

However, even though yoga has been available to humans for somewhere around 3000 years, not until eighteen years after the Theosophical Society was formed in New York (1875) did yoga begin to establish itself in the United States. At this time

Vivekananda brought both yoga and Vedanta philosophy to America, but the figure that acted most prominently to spread these two ancient treasures throughout the western world was a man called Yogananda.

Although yoga today is quite popular in the United States, there is still the distinct possibility that its practitioners will reap little from it in the form of results due to the following, “Yoga is made useless by six things: overeating, exertion, talking, extreme abstinence, public company and unsteadiness of mind. It is achieved by six things: courage, persistence, knowledge, determination and abandonment of public company.” (Worthington p.130) The following statement in mind, combined with the possession orientated thinking one finds in the capitalistic systems of both Europe and the United States, makes one wonder how successful the practice of yoga can actually be in the “deprogramming” of the deep, materialistic ruts most individuals seem to be experiencing.

Within the classification known as “yoga” there are countless types, each particular to the individual practicing, the yogi. However, there are seven major divisions, or “schools”, that are most often referred to. They are: 1) raja yoga (meditation), 2) karma yoga (selfless action; service), 3) jnana yoga (knowledge), 4) hatha yoga (physical), 5) laya yoga (suspension; absorption using Kundalini practices), 6) bhakti yoga (devotion), and finally 7) mantra yoga (sound repetition). Numbers one through three are often grouped together due to the fact that they focus on methods dealing primarily with one’s consciousness directly, while numbers four through seven utilize external methods in the hopes of attaining “inner” results.

There is one more type of yoga that warrants mentioning, Kriya yoga (preliminary yoga, ritual action). Kriya yoga is the cultivation of ritual action in all that one does. In many ways it acts as the first step that any yogi must realize in order to continue on her/his path of choice. Because Kriya is often thought of as a cleansing of one’s “spiritual” self, it has been accompanied by actual physical cleansing practices. Wood states with regards to Kriya yoga, “But it is much more than preliminary. It is the yoga of action, the yoga that must be practiced all the time in daily life. Without it, meditation would be useless, for yoga is not an artificial attainment, the opening of a door into another life, but a great change in attitude toward oneself and the world.” (p.19)

All types of yoga display four stages of development; “These are Arambha (beginning), Ghata (enthusiastic activity), Parichaya (practical knowledge) and Nishpatti (effortless mastery).” (Worthington p.132) The first three of these stages are somewhat self-explanatory, but for a bit of an exposition on Nishpatti with respect to meditation the following by Eliade will suffice, “Now (and this is of the highest importance), effort must disappear, the position of meditation must become natural; only then does it further concentration. ‘Posture becomes perfect when the effort to attain it disappears, so that there are no more movements in the body. In the same way, its perfection is achieved when the mind is transformed into infinity – that is, when it makes the idea of infinity its own content’ (Vyasa, ad Y.S. II, 47.)” (p.495)

In this paper it will be my hope to shed light on the practice of hatha yoga and its relationship to meditation practices, which for my purposes can be called raja yoga, but will include raja yoga, karma yoga, jnana yoga, and even elements of bhakti yoga. I will begin by speaking about hatha yoga’s influence upon the body, or more specifically, the use of asanas (postures). After this has been developed sufficiently the practice of

pranayama (an element of hatha) will be analyzed, ultimately resulting at a look at its use as the “connection” between the body and meditation (mind).

The goal of yoga is a transformation, a realization, and not an escape as many have mistaken in the past, but instead a confrontation. When one sets out on any yogic path the first thing to be done is to locate a personalized starting point. This point can fall into one of two broad categories; either the practitioner begins with the body or with the mind. As is already obvious from the layout of this paper, I favor beginning with the body. The reason for my preference is that it has been my experience that initially individuals have a much easier time “knowing” the body. Perhaps this is due to the materialistic and vanity orientated culture we find ourselves in. Also, seeing as it makes little difference where one begins, except of course for preference and aptitude considerations, it seems most appropriate to select a medium that allows the practitioner the greatest likelihood of dedication and discipline, or as slang would have it, to “sticking with it”.

Hatha yoga as was said before consists of the physical aspects of a practice, namely asana (postures) and pranayama (breath control). Little is known about who developed hatha yoga, but the following quote gives a suggestion, “The origins of *hatha-yoga* are quite obscure but are traditionally connected to the name of Gorakshanatha, a tenth-century master.” (Feuerstein p.xxv) Within the practice of the hatha method of pranayama one finds a distinction between sides of the body. “Ha” designates the right side of the body, particularly the right nostril, while “tha” denotes the left (and nostril). The relationship between the breath and the term “hatha” is mentioned in the following, “Hatha Yoga, so called from a certain portion of its teaching, as to the practice of special methods of dealing with the incoming and outgoing, or *ha* and *tha*, breaths, by which it is intended to affect the instrument, the body, so that it in turn will affect the Self within.” (Wood p.13) By “Self within” a reference to meditation is meant, but more on this later.

Within hatha (“ha” meaning sun, “tha” moon) yoga there have been developed many systems of physical exercises. In the United States five different hatha yoga types have predominated. They are; 1) ashtanga, 2) kundalini, 3) Iyengar, 4) Sivananda, and 5) Kripalu. All of these types use asanas (postures) as their respective starting point on the path to meditative stability, or samadhi.

Astanga yoga has a strong element of vinyasa (flow), and was created by Sri K. Pattabi Jois. What is meant by flow is that postures are held for shorter time periods while being connected by a well thought out system of movements known as surya namaskar (sun salutations). Sun salutations involve such movements as raising one’s arms to acknowledge the sun’s magnificence, bowing to the sun to do the same, prostrating one’s self before the source of all life, and finally returning to one’s original position, one of standing with full-body awareness. It is also important to note that within the astanga (eight-limbed) system there is a significant emphasis put upon the breath immediately upon beginning practice, a fact that for myself is curiously absent from hatha yoga types three and four above.

Kundalini yoga deals with subtle energies found primarily in conjunction with one’s nervous system, in particular the spine. One may have heard of the term “chakra”, meaning literally “wheel” in Sanskrit. Chakras are energy centers that the practice of kundalini works on developing. Through such a practice one’s ability to allow energy to flow upward within the central channel (approximately the location of the spinal cord) is

developed. This is a difficult task due to the fact that gravity causes a downward flow of this energy to be common in most individuals, if not all. Along the central channel there are energy “bundles”, or concentrations. These bundles are chakras, numbering anywhere from six to nine, depending on who one talks to. Seven seems to be the most common number and includes the following locations: the root, the spleen, the navel, the heart, the throat, the brow, and the crown.

It is important to remember that these designations are designations only. Depending on the individual, chakras may be a bit higher or lower than one expects. Also crucial to keep in mind is the fact that chakras are not physical “things”, but energy. It is for this reason that the discrepancy in number mentioned before has occurred, and most likely will continue to, indefinitely.

Kundalini yoga is the physical counterpart of Laya yoga. This is elaborated upon in this quotation, “The purpose of the Laya Yoga is to awaken the *Kundalini* (or “coiled one”), who will start up hissing, and can then be carried through the series of six *chakras* (literally, “wheels”), which are threaded upon that channel at various points in the body, which are situated at the level of the base of the spine, the root of the penis, the navel, the heart, the throat and the eyebrows. These *chakras* are depicted somewhat as flowers rather than wheels, and have petals respectively numbering four, six, eight, twelve, sixteen, and two.” (Wood p. 81) Often the discrepancy in the number of chakras has to do with the fact that many traditions do not count the crown (final) chakra due to the fact that when it is reached the process has reached its culmination, thus making any need to “count chakras” a very silly endeavor.

B.K.S. Iyengar developed Iyengar yoga. In the United States it consists in the use of “props” that more easily allow the practitioner the actualization of difficult asanas. Iyengar yoga stresses the importance of alignment in order to allow prana (roughly energy) to flow in it’s most natural manner.

Both Sivananda and Kripalu yogas were developed by the specific teachings of charismatic personalities, Swami Sivananda and Yogi Amrit Desai respectively. These yoga types are combinations of many different hatha practices, a sort of cornucopia if you will.

Now is a good time to speak briefly about what basic types of movements hatha yoga utilizes in order to benefit one’s bodily systems. Movements can fall into nine general categories: 1) standing asanas, 2) back bends, 3) forward bends, 4) twists, 5) sitting asanas, 6) inverted asanas, 7) balancing asanas, 8) moving sequences, and 9) mudras and bandhas.

Standing asanas act to strengthen the entire body. They do this by providing a full range of movement and also allow one to receive a complete workout from them alone. They are most often practiced at the beginning of an asana routine due to the energy needed for them, but if one so chooses they may be performed either at the beginning or end of a practice session. Two of the most noticeable results one can expect from standing asanas is an increased strength in the nerves leading to one’s legs, and an increased ability to keep one’s attention directed upon the entire body.

Backbends act to stimulate the nervous system. They do this by counteracting the effects of gravity and increasing one’s flow of energy. Both of these things ultimately result in an increase in one’s clarity of mind. Backbends require an acute concentration and should only be done when an individual is fresh to ensure the utmost care. They

should be followed by forward bends and twisting poses in order to return one's spine to its normal orientation. The results of backbends are anti-aging, countering of rounded shoulders, and an overall reversal of gravity's handiwork.

Forward bends act to relax and stretch one's muscles and nervous system. They can be used to relieve the tightness one receives from both everyday activities and previous asanas.

Twists act to release the pressure that builds up on one's spinal nerves. They do this by aligning the vertebrae and lengthening the spine. Twists result in the reduction of tension and a balancing of the spine.

Sitting asanas include all of the different types of asanas that were mentioned above and can be practiced at any time during a session. However, these asanas are most often done near the end of one's practice due to the fact that they involve lower intensity than standing asanas.

Inverted asanas act as a tonic for the body's circulation. One's endocrine system is put into balance by these asanas, which include most notably the headstand and shoulderstand. Headstands are known as the king of the asanas and stimulate one's pituitary gland and act to increase blood pressure. The Shoulderstand, or queen of the asanas, counteracts the headstand by lowering blood pressure and stimulating the thyroid (by means of one's chin to the chest). It is known as the great tension-relieving pose, and from my experience, I can attest to this.

Balancing asanas create grace of body. They tone the inner ear and ultimately result in an increase of one's power of concentration.

Moving sequences, such as the sun salutations mentioned previously, also build grace into one's practice. Through these movements one can more easily realize the connection that one's breath has with the body. Coordination is also significantly increased. These series of postures cause energy to be "stirred up", resulting in the manifestation of heat and energy, both of which allow one to arrive at "deeper areas" of pose and practice.

Finally, both mudras (hand gestures) and bandhas (locks, of which the three primary ones can be located at the root (anus), slightly below the navel, and at the throat) act as internal locks that tone one's organs. Both of these techniques seal in energies of the body in order to increase heat and create a directed flow of subtle energy.

Through the use of pranayama hatha yoga allows one's circulatory system to receive a cardiovascular exercise that is crucial to good circulation and oxygenation of the entire body's blood. As a result of this, for the first time one truly learns to use the respiratory system for what it was intended, to strengthen the body through both its control and increased capacity. Digestive fire is also fostered by one's breath, acting to promote the nervous system and ultimately allow the digestive system greater efficiency. Even the eliminative system in the form of peristalsis is aided by the cleansing techniques indicative of hatha practices.

In general, the thinking behind the practice of hatha yoga is that once one allows the body to relax through the practice of postures, the mind will naturally relax in accordance, "Practical investigation in that direction has led the Sages to conclude that Prana and Mind are interdependent in their functional abilities. As long as one remains uncontrolled, the other cannot be controlled. If one is under control, the other, too, comes under control of its own accord." (Sivananda p.106) By prana Sivananda means the

subtle energies that make up the body. They can be mastered by the use of one's breathing practices.

Again the idea of complete and effortless posturing and its relation to the mind is elaborated upon in the following, "The important thing is that asana gives the body a stable rigidity, at the same time reducing physical effort to a minimum. Thus, one avoids the irritating feeling of fatigue, of enervation in certain parts of the body, one regulates the physical processes, and so allows the attention to devote itself solely to the fluid part of consciousness." (Eliade p.495)

The idea that the breath is connected to one's mental states is not a foreign one. Everyone knows that when a person becomes angry the breath hastens, and the same can be observed during sex. And the opposite side of this coin is that when one is calm, the breath, in accordance, is itself calm.

It might be said that hatha has in some manner of speaking "reversed" the breath/mental state process. Even more appropriately put than this, hatha sheds light upon the fact that this relationship is a two-way street. The result of this is that if one controls the breath, ultimately mental states can also be controlled. In fact, the goal of intense pranayama training is the complete suspension of the breath for extremely long periods of time to allow the mind an arena having no distractions. "Patanjali speaks of the 'arrest,' the suspension, of respiration; however, pranayama begins with making the respiratory rhythm as slow as possible; and this is its first objective." (Eliade p.496)

It should also be noted that concerning the physical practice of hatha yoga, that the breath acts to oxygenate the blood during one's stretch and posturing. During this arrangement the stretch acts as a natural tourniquet, that, once released allows the fresh oxygenated blood resulting from pranayama to rejuvenate the area concentrated upon, and ultimately the entire body.

We now find ourselves a bit closer to understanding how one's breath can both purify the body and act to allow the mind a more "natural" connection with the reality it so longs for. Here I feel is a good place to again mention the foundational yoga mentioned previously, kriya. "The object of pranayama is to purify the nadis and build up bioenergy. This leads to the practice of kriya." (Worthington p.130) Kriya creates what many may consider a religious feeling of both body and mind. This feeling permeates all that one does, ultimately leading one to live a life of excitement and discovery, as opposed to the all too often despair and boredom that is seen in today's world. Wood develops this line of thinking nicely in the following, "Right in the thick of life's activities our freedom must be realized, for to desire to slip away into some untroubled sphere would be to deny the possibility of our real freedom. A man must be master of himself, whatever other people and beings, whose activities constitute the major portion of his world, may do." (p.19)

The practice of yoga consists of three basic elements; asana, pranayama, and samadhi. However, Eliade points out that there are more precisely eight aspects of yogic practice in the following, "They are: (1) restraints (yama); (2) disciplines (niyama); (3) bodily attitudes and postures (asana); (4) rhythm of respiration (pranayama); (5) emancipation of sensory activity from the domination of exterior objects (pratyahara); (6) concentration (dharana); (7) yogic meditation (dhyana); (8) samadhi (Yoga-sutras, II, 29)." (p.494), but for our purposes the three mentioned will suffice.

Very generally speaking, asana (posturing) acts as one's physical body, samadhi acts as one's mental body in the form of stabilized concentration, and pranayama (breath control) acts as the bridge between the two. Within the practice of pranayama the following should be mentioned, "Rhythmic respiration is obtained by harmonizing the three 'moments'; inhalation (puraka), exhalation (recaka), and retention of the inhaled air (kumbhaka). These three moments must each fill an equal space of time. Through practice the yogin becomes able to prolong them considerably, for the goal of pranayama is, as Patanjali says, to suspend respiration as long as possible; one arrives at this by progressively retarding the rhythm." (Eliade p.498)

Due to the fact that the breath acts as one's bridge between that which is perceived as separate (mind and body), I feel it (the breath) to be the most crucial aspect of an individual's practice. This statement by Eliade perhaps acts more clearly as my reason, "Hence, through pranayama, one attempts to do away with the effort of respiration, rhythmic breathing must become something so automatic that the yogin can forget it." (p.498). Not only does the breath allow one to easily foster inner heat and desired states of conscious, but it also acts as one's connection to reality. The breath is what sustains life and allows the individual her/his connection to that which at first "glance" appears beyond. The breath for myself is the proof that nothing is in actuality beyond the capacity of a disciplined individual. This is echoed in the following, "It is not simply a body of exercises or a set of ideas. It is the theory *and* practice of centering, of harnessing the body-mind so that it permits Being-Consciousness to manifest itself in and through us. (Feuerstein p.xx)

The stillness that one experience during the suspension of the breath does not correspond to the one-pointedness of mind that is indicative of meditation, it is one and the same as this one-pointedness. "A remark of Bhoja's reveals the deeper meaning of pranayama: 'All the functions of the organs being preceded by that of respiration – there being always a connection between respiration and consciousness in their respective functions – respiration, when all the functions of the organs are suspended, realizes concentration of consciousness on a single object' (ad Y.S. I, 34.)." (Eliade p.496) Again and again in the literature on yoga and meditation one finds this point being driven home with conviction, "The point of departure of Yoga meditation is concentration on a single object; whether this is a physical object (the space between the eyebrows, the tip of the nose, something luminous, etc.), or a thought (a metaphysical truth), or God (Ishvara) makes no difference." (Eliade p.493)

Even though hatha yoga selects as its starting point the body, it still does so with the explicit purpose of allowing the mind to enter into meditative states of conscious. All too often individuals concentrate upon what ends they desire, and pay little if any attention to the means by which they think its attainment is possible. Well it doesn't take a rocket-scientist to figure out that ends and means are related causally. This being said, if one selects the appropriate means to a given outcome, such an outcome will not only be a by-product, but a necessity. Hatha yoga has used this line of thinking and applied it to the most magnificent of all things (life), and in the most calculated way. "The purpose of the yogic experiment has been to explore not the behavior of matter but the very limits of consciousness." (Feuerstein p.xix-xx)

The practitioner of yoga is one who is disciplined, "By being totally responsible for yourself, you cannot help but become disciplined. But this discipline is not something

forced upon you from the outside. It comes from within. Living with facts is the only yoga, the only discipline.” (Rajneesh p.8) Internally initiated discipline is perhaps the thing that most attracted myself to yogic practices. It evokes feelings of responsibility, maturity, and the applying of an “active hand” to one’s position in reality. In addition to this, it is said that one who has practiced yoga successfully will display the following physical characteristics, “slimness of body, clear resonant voice, freedom from disease, bright eyes and lustre of face, control over one’s creative energies, good metabolism purified nadis, total awareness.” (Worthington p.131)

Meditation is the attempt to realize states of consciousness not ordinarily experienced, “It can come to you only through a basic transformation, a mutation.” (Rajneesh p.10) Ordinary states of consciousness are limited in that they can only access certain aspects of reality; “In the waking state of consciousness man finds his fullest activity in the body.” (Prabhavananda p. 54) From this statement it can be easily seen that “normal” consciousness is primarily limited to physical things. This idea is furthered in the following; “The inherent characteristics of this gross body are birth, decay, and death.” (Prabhavananda p. 55)

The two other major divisions of consciousness that one can experience are dreaming and dreamless sleep. It is said that, “In dreamless sleep, when there is no object of experience, the joy of the Atman is felt.” (Prabhavananda p. 58) By the term Atman is meant the eternal self, that which is the ultimate reality, not the pragmatic ego-based self that most individuals customarily identify with.

In the following the relationship between states of consciousness and unification of “self” and reality is mentioned, “The ‘unification’ here under consideration must be understood in the sense that, by making his respiration rhythmical and progressively slower, the yogin can ‘penetrate’ – that is, he can experience, in perfect lucidity – certain states of consciousness that are inaccessible in a waking condition, particularly the states of consciousness that are peculiar to sleep.” (Eliade p.497) Rajneesh captures the quality of this realization nicely in the following, “When you are no more, you are in meditation.” (p.20)

The goal of meditation is moksha, or liberation from samsara (cyclic existence). Meditation ultimately results in an awareness consciousness that focuses upon one point without distraction. However, it is important to note that this is not the concentration that most are accustomed, but an “opening” to the all of existence, “Meditation is expansion, where concentration is contraction.” (Wood p.105) Again, this state is known as samadhi, “Samadhi or blissful divine experience arises when the ego and the mind are dissolved. It is a state to be attained by one’s own effort. It is limitless, divisionless and infinite. When this experience is realised, the mind, desires, actions and feelings of joy and sorrow vanish into a void.” (Sivananda p. 179) “The idea is that the yogi in *samadhi* is uninfluenced by anything external, because the senses have become inactive, and he does not even know himself or others.” (Wood p.84)

The “experience” had during samadhi is thought to be the only experience an individual can have that is of reality as it actually exists. This being said, then what are all of us experiencing currently? “It is the situation as it now exists that is artificial, but we have become so habituated to it, it has become so mechanical, that we are not even aware that we are constantly transforming experience into words.” (Rajneesh p.11)

So what exactly is meditation and how does one go about performing it? Ultimately, meditation is everything one does, and everything in reality. Plainly speaking, it may be said that “actual” meditation is the penetrating of reality.

For the individual that has chosen karma yoga as her/his path, work is meditation, that is, work having deliberate action, attention, and intention, and being free of attachment to the fruits of any labor performed. Meditation to the practitioner of jnana yoga consists of the intellectual penetrating, or reasoning, into the depths of reality’s nature. For a bhakti yogi, having a devotional understanding to all that one does is meditation.

In many ways bhakti yoga and karma yoga are very closely linked. In fact, I would even suggest that to perform any of the seven major schools of yoga mentioned is to perform them all.

My own meditation practice has consisted primarily of hatha yoga sessions, having subtle awareness of both mind and body as the “object”, while performing postures. In my opinion, the type of yoga, or action of any sort for that matter, matters very little when attempting to understand meditation. I feel that all types of meditation, and thus all activities in life, are an attempt at a reconciliation of the relationship had with the concept of identity, ultimately resulting in the experiencing of all manifestations of reality as if looking in a mirror.

I’ll bet few are happy with that answer as to what meditation is. In the United States we like to categorize things to the point where we feel that we can point at something and say, “It is that”. In a more narrow manner meditation can be explained as a specific activity, but before this is done, it is important to keep in mind that meditation is not the “what” with regards to what one does, but the “how” that deals with the way in which a given thing is performed.

Within my personal practice, formalized meditation has consisted in several different styles. One of these has been to lay on my back with eyes closed while monitoring the breath. Most often I perform this after approximately one hour of intense asana practice. Another type of meditation I have used is sitting meditation, referred to simply as “sitting” (zazen in ZEN practice).

Sitting consists of sitting upon a cushion in the lotus posture (or simply cross-legged) and monitoring the breath, often by counting breaths, one to ten over and over for sessions ranging anywhere from thirty minutes to a day in length. Often in meditation mudras are used in order to close the “energy circuit”, thus ensuring that one maintains the cyclical nature and “recycling” of their pranic system. The two most crucial aspects of any meditation posture are to keep the spine perfectly straight, and the knees below the hips. Both of these things ensure that energy is allowed to flow smoothly upward.

I will focus here upon sitting meditation from the standpoint of Buddhist schools, particularly those found within the Tibetan traditions. Within Tibetan traditions, and in general most Buddhist schools, the object of meditation is the self (or lack of). If the self is not chosen as one’s meditation device the next logical “object” is shunyata, the lack of inherent existence (essence) common to all “selves”. This idea can be put another way by saying that all things arise in a dependent manner upon other things. However, because this process is continuous, ultimately nothing is really produced, and this is shunyata.

Realizing that all apparent things are subject to both emptiness and dependent-arising, in an attempt to free oneself from samsara (cyclic existence), is the goal of the yogi who practices Buddhist meditation. Hopkins makes this perfectly clear in the following, “One cannot free oneself from cyclic existence merely through cognition of the coarse selflessness of the person. One must realize the final subtle suchness of the person and of the mental and physical aggregates.” (p.30) The point that is being made here is that not only does the practitioner of meditation necessarily need to realize that the five aggregates (form, feeling, discrimination, compositional factors, consciousness) have no intrinsic place in reality, but that on every possible level, including those factors that may have contributed to their (five aggregates) origination, one must understand the active hand of shunyata. In addition to this, one also must come away from such meditation with a wisdom that has an understanding of, that due to the limits of language might be termed, a “positive assertion”, evidenced by Hopkins’ use of “subtle suchness”.

Enough of the abstract for the time being, what are the stages of meditation? It should be kept in mind that meditation does not have any right or wrong system. Any attempt to put meditation into words both changes and detracts from it. Meditation is experiential in character and cannot be relayed from one individual to another; it (meditation) is the communication one has with reality. In this way, it is personal. In others, it is not.

This being said, Hopkins on page forty-three lists stages for one newly developing the powers of meditation, those put forth by Jam-yang-shay-ba. They are listed below:

- 1) how a beginner develops experience with respect to the view of emptiness
- 2) how to cultivate a similitude of special insight based on a similitude of calm abiding
- 3) how to cultivate actual special insight based on actual calm abiding
- 4) how to cultivate direct cognition of emptiness
- 5) how to meditate on emptiness during the second stage of Highest Yoga Tantra.

In the following I will hope to convey, according to Hopkins, the process and manifestations of the above five stages. All further quotations will be from Hopkins and thus will be designated by page number only.

“First, one concentrates and clears one’s mind. Sitting quietly, one waits for the I to appear. If it does not, an appearance of it is created by thinking ‘I’, and with a subtle type of consciousness one watches the appearance.” (p.44) “Though such an I does not in reality exist, an image or concepts of it does exist and will appear. It is initially difficult to identify the appearance of a concrete I, but in time it becomes obvious. Sometimes the I appears to be the breath, and sometimes the stomach as when one has an upset stomach and says, ‘I am sick.’” (p.45) “Some teachers advise watching for the I for a week or even months before proceeding to the second step.” (p.46)

“If the I inherently exists, it must be either inherently the same entity as the aggregates or inherently a different entity from the aggregates. Sameness and difference of entity are mutually exclusive; if two things exist, they must be either the same or

different. If the I is found to be neither inherently the same entity as the mind and body nor a different entity from them, then the I does not inherently exist.” (p.47)

At this point the individual meditating must employ what is known as the “seven-fold reasoning in order to fully understand why it is that the “I” exists not in an ultimate sense, but a conventional one. Hopkins lists this reasoning on page forty-eight:

The seven-fold reasoning in brief is:

‘I’ do not inherently exist because of (i) not being the aggregates, (ii) not being an entity other than the aggregates, (iii) not being the base of the aggregates, (iv) not inherently being based on the aggregates, (v) not inherently possessing the aggregates, (vi) not being just the composite of the aggregates, and (vii) not being the shape of the aggregates.

It is important to note here that the type of investigation the seven-fold reasoning professes is of the intellectual, rational, and academic sort; and that both an inferential and experiential “understanding” of these reasonings must be accomplished through actual sitting meditation if one hopes to progress to the next stage. “In an inferential realization of emptiness, an emptiness is cognized conceptually or through the medium of an image. Despite the profound nature of such inferential intuition, direct realization is yet to be attained.” (p.66)

Again, studying the ideas realized through sitting is no substitute for sitting itself. For example, I have read this entire book by Hopkins, and I feel that I intellectually understand quite a bit of it, but this in no way means that I have assimilated the difficult ideas contained within to the point that I no longer have to think about them. When an individual has truly assimilated an idea of the meditative sort it begins to act somewhat like a “given”, a thing that can nearly be taken for granted, but not quite, as few things can.

Once it is understood that there is no inherently existent “I”, then one can begin to cultivate what is known as calm abiding. In order to do this one must satisfy what Hopkins on page sixty-eight refers to as prerequisites:

- 1) Staying in an agreeable place
- 2) Few desires
- 3) Knowing satisfaction
- 4) Pure ethics
- 5) Forsaking commotion
- 6) Thoroughly abandoning thoughts of desire and so forth

In the following some light is shed upon calm abiding, “Etymologically, calm abiding (shamatha, zhi gnas) is explained as the mind’s abiding (stha, gnas) on an internal object of observation upon the calming (shama, zhi) of distraction to the outside.” (p.67)

As was stated in the listing of the stages of meditation, once one has attained stability of meditation in the form of calm abiding, the opportunity to experience insight meditation is available to the practitioner, and not before. “The object with respect to which calm abiding is achieved should possess a special purpose. Observation of emptiness, as here in the second stage of meditation on emptiness, has the special feature

of facilitating generation of special insight, but emptiness – due to its profundity – is a difficult object for beginners.” (p.70) “Thus, in order to aid in the development of calm abiding, the yogi might not take emptiness as his object of observation. However, once the object is chosen, he would not switch from it to another until a fully qualified calm abiding has been achieved, much as one would not change the place of friction when trying to ignite a fire by rubbing two sticks together. During this period, continuous effort without, for instance, resting for a day or two, is required.” (p.71)

“Since beginners can only remain in contact with the object of observation for short periods, initially one should meditate in brief sessions even eighteen times a day; in due course stability will be achieved of its own accord, at which time the session can be lengthened. It is important not to try at first to meditate for long periods; otherwise, upon sight of the meditation cushion, one will feel nausea and laziness. The session should be left while it is going well, when one still feels that it would go well if continued.” (p.78)

I think that should just about do it, as far as getting one started upon the path of inquiry into the true nature of the self, and thus reality. It is a long road, but from what I have heard and read, and experienced, not quite as long as one thinks, not to mention the benefits.

Keep in mind that the bottom line, as far as both meditation and yoga are concerned, is experience. Without it all the books in the world would mean nothing, and they wouldn't even exist. Both yoga and meditation are practices. What this means is that whenever one performs one, the other, or both, one is doing so in a perfect manner that is based on the individual's own ability, stage, etc. One cannot be bad at either yoga or meditation, unless of course, one does not attempt them at all.

I also cannot stress enough the rewards that come from the feeling of responsibility that one receives from internally generated discipline. Ghandi knew this concept intimately in the form of both brahmacharya and Satyagraha, and so have countless others.

Let me conclude with two more quotes from Hopkins, both of which entertain the idea of Buddhahood and the Wisdom body. Enjoy.

“When the wisdom of meditative equipoise at the end of a yogi's continuum as a sentient being (that is, his uninterrupted path consciousness directly cognizing emptiness) becomes the final path of release, this wisdom of meditative equipoise itself becomes the Wisdom Body, a composite in one entity of both meditative equipoise and subsequent attainment. This means that all phenomena, emptinesses and conventionalities, are directly cognized all of the time. The emptiness of this final uninterrupted path becomes the Nature Body, the absence of all obstructions in the continuum of a Buddha.” (p.119)

“The Wisdom Body is the final, perfect wisdom. It is called the wisdom cognizing the mode of existence of phenomena in the sense that it perceives all emptinesses. It is called the wisdom cognizing the varieties of phenomena in the sense that it also perceives all conventionalities.” (p.120)

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