

MEDITATION - THE YOGA OF MODERN THEOSOPHY

Alan Perry

The Dhammapada, the famous Buddhist scripture, commences with the verse: "Our lives are shaped by our minds, we become what we think". We would do well to ponder deeply over this statement attributed to the Buddha himself. Yet how many of us actually seek consciously to shape our lives? And even if we tried, how many of us would actually have the mental power necessary to achieve it? Instead, we tend to drift along under the influence of our sensual desires and sub-conscious tendencies. Meditation is the principal method of countering this drift by stilling the incessant chatter of the mind and, at the same time, by diving deep within our consciousness, we can experience levels of joy unobtainable by any other means.

The word 'meditation' can be used to describe various mental processes. Often the great Christian saints and teachers refer to their 'meditations', but what they are actually describing is a process of deep spiritual thought – a thinking process. Also, some spiritual schools teach a method of trying to make the mind blank, open to spiritual influences. But 'meditation' in our present context is neither of these: it is a state of intense concentration, undertaken in order to still the mind which, if pursued to its ultimate, leads to union with the Divine (the Self, God, Ultimate Reality, in whatever way the individual chooses to interpret that). It is 'union' that holds the key to our understanding of meditation for Yoga literally means 'union' and the path of meditation is Raja Yoga (or the Royal Yoga), a systematic path of spiritual discipline leading to God-realization.

Over a hundred years ago, Madame Blavatsky (HPB founder of the Theosophical Society 1875) thundered, "Theosophy is for those who can think" (How to Study Theosophy, Robert Bowen, 1891) emphasising that Theosophy was essentially a Jnana Yoga, the path of wisdom and intuitive development. And of course in those days, teaching to the upper class intelligentsia of 19th century Europe, the only hope she had of bringing about a new spiritual consciousness was to appeal to and through the intellectual faculties. But HPB knew that this was not the whole story: the intellect provides only the bridge between our lower and higher natures and in her mystic classic *The Voice of the Silence* she clearly identified the very core of the yogic process: "The mind is the great slayer of the Real. Let the disciple slay the slayer".

Destroy my mind? Are you crazy? The secret lies, of course, in what we are referring to as 'my mind'. I, me, mine – this is what we're after. What I call 'my mind' is the limitation I have imposed upon the Universal Mind through the karma of countless cycles of birth and death. Destroy these barriers and limitations and we can then manifest our universal Divine nature.

Well, that's the theory anyway. And it has been attested to by many saints, sages and yogis over the ages. HPB knew this and that Raja Yoga was a means to achieve it, which is why she founded her Esoteric Section as a Raja Yoga school (which in essence it still is). In the summer of 1885, an interesting correspondence on the subject of probation and chelaship took place between the Master Khoot Hoomi Lal Singh (KH) and Mr. A.P. Sinnett, as recorded in Letter 65 of the Mahatma Letters (A.T. Barker compilation, Adyar). Writing about the ancient system of testing that had prevailed in the Masonic Lodges and Mystery Schools of yore, the Master KH wrote: "But in these days the vulgarization of science has rendered such trifling tests obsolete. The aspirant is now assailed entirely on the psychological side

of his nature. His course of testing – in Europe and India – is that of Raj-yog....”. All theosophists with serious spiritual aspirations should take good note of the Master’s statement.

Raja Yoga was propounded about 2000 years ago in India by the enlightened sage Patanjali and his Yoga Sutras are accepted the world over as the most authoritative text on the Yoga of meditation. In his second sutra, he defines Yoga as “the cessation of the modifications of the mind”. Translators may vary in their wording but the sense is clear. If you could suppress the constant thought-waves in the mind and induce a state of total stillness, then you would experience Divine union, which is Yoga.

Before considering how to bring this about, we should first take a look at the nature of the mind so as better to understand the problem we are confronting.

The best analogy is that of a lake, signifying the totality of the human mind. Its surface is covered with constant waves of various sizes, perpetually at motion, the result primarily of external elements such as the wind. These are the thought-waves [Patanjali’s ‘modifications of the mind’], ever being renewed by sensory stimuli from external sources. The sun is shining brightly overhead but the reflection of the sun in the lake’s surface is distorted by the waves, reflecting many sun-images not just The One.

Underneath the lake’s surface, which looks calm from outside, there is turbulence in the form of eddies and currents. These are largely caused by the formations of mud or sandbanks on the bottom of the lake, but these sandbanks have themselves been created by movement in the water above. This signifies the sub-conscious levels of the mind, the storehouse of our past karmic impressions and inherited tendencies from this incarnation as well as previous ones.

Through meditation, we can start to still the surface waves on the lake but while turbulence exists underneath, the surface can never become truly calm. However, as the waves progressively settle down, so will the sandbanks on the bottom of the lake and their turbulent effect will gradually diminish. But unless the effort to calm the surface waves is made, there can be no hope of smoothing out the lake’s bottom. Eventually, by persistent practice, the lake’s surface will become as smooth as glass and then – and only then – will the sun be truly reflected as The One. Unity without the mind’s distortions.

So meditation, in order to calm the mind effectively, has to work dually: first, by focusing the mind’s scattered energies to induce mental stillness (on the lake’s surface) and secondly, by raising the inner energies of our being to higher levels of consciousness, thereby settling the turbulence of our lower nature.

It is important to understand this second factor, especially for beginners, as the initial effect of this purgative process is often negative with the result that some meditators decide not to continue their practice, preferring instead to leave things as they are. They forget that it is their karma and it will come out somehow – if not by spiritual practices, then in their every day life. All spiritual life is a battle between our higher Divine nature and our lower animal nature, and we cannot truly commence the spiritual path if we are unable to face the reality of our inmost self. We need total self-honesty and the determination to improve ourselves: meditation sometimes creates a confrontation, an initiation test we must pass.

Coming to the process of meditation itself, Raja Yoga involves an eight-fold process, the so-called ‘eight limbs of yoga’; but the first five of these limbs are preparatory. They are yama

and niyama (establishing a spiritual ethic with certain observances and abstentions), asana (posture for meditation), pranayama (control of the body's energies through special breathing exercises) and pratyahara (restraint of the senses from external stimuli). Patanjali also mentions certain preliminaries which he calls Kriya Yoga, and involves such things as scriptural study: obviously it is important for an aspirant to have some understanding of spiritual truths before engaging in yogic activities, as well as living a basic morality with moderation and self-discipline.

Pranayama should not be attempted without the guidance of an expert: it involves great inner power and can cause serious internal damage if incorrectly or excessively done. Nor is it necessary to practise it in basic meditation, as distinct from calm, rhythmic breathing which is crucial in settling the thought-waves. Pratyahara involves withdrawing the mind from outside influences in order to intensify inner concentration and commences the all-important process of interning the mind.

Before we try to meditate, we must be sitting comfortably and steadily in a fashion that reduces our consciousness of the body. Ideally, the spinal column should be upright and unsupported, although in the early stages this is not as important as comfort, as most beginners find such a posture difficult to maintain for any length of time. If you sit on an upright chair, place your hands palms upwards in your lap, hold your head level and poised comfortably, shut your eyes and relax – then you are ready to start Patanjali's three final limbs: dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (absorption or illumination) – the three collectively known as samyama.

Concentration is defined by Patanjali as "holding the mind within a centre of spiritual consciousness" and what he means is that the thought-waves of the mind become restricted to a single object of attention, in this case one of the chakras or force centres in our subtle bodies. Once the mind is concentrated, then dhyana begins, for dhyana is sustained attention to the object of concentration. Samadhi is the end result of dhyana, when the mind has become completely stilled and the object of one's meditation is known directly by experience, undistorted by the predilections of the mind. This is the unitive super-conscious state of supreme bliss.

It should be emphasised that although Patanjali separates the process into three parts, they are not different activities but a progression through states of increasing mental control. We use the word 'meditation' to describe the total process rather than just dhyana, although dhyana is certainly the heart of the matter.

Another image may help. The mind is often likened to a mad monkey, swinging about among the trees. This is the normal state of the everyday mind. The act of concentration begins to restrict his swinging, until he starts swinging on just one tree, when dhyana commences. By dhyana, eventually the monkey will come to a halt (temporarily at least!) which is samadhi.

The power of concentration varies greatly with individuals and many feel frustrated by their apparent inability to focus the mind. If that applies to you, all the more reason to continue trying, because by practice concentration will improve. But it is important to understand that there is nothing wrong with your mind just because it is elusive and difficult to control; it is the nature of the mind to wander and it does not like being disciplined. As Sri Krishna told Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita (Chap 6. v.35,36) when the latter was complaining that "...training my mind is like trying to tame the wind", it is only by persistent practice and detachment that the mind will be brought under control – but it can be done!

The power to meditate comes from the will, which is our deepest spiritual faculty (atmashakti). One cannot meditate by physical or even purely mental exertion: these efforts serve only to create unnecessary tensions. Will power will increase as we persist in meditation, giving us greater power throughout our whole being and helping us to re-shape our lives, as the Buddha taught. But the initial will to meditate, to progress spiritually and to discipline oneself to undertake the necessary practical steps along the Path, comes from deep within us and is a sign that our spiritual evolution has reached the point where 'hastened unfoldment' can begin.

If we wish to become an Olympic gymnast, we must dedicate ourselves to training the body to follow the absolute dictates of our will and that can only be achieved by persistent, disciplined, daily practice over many years. Training the mind involves the same commitment, only the task is even more difficult. But, as with the gymnast, it is not just the end product that is important; there is enormous joy and inner satisfaction in the process itself brought about by an elevated consciousness. This is usually experienced as the evolution of personal conscience, heightened sensitivity to all-pervading Divinity and an expansion of one's capacity to love. These are the hallmarks of true spirituality.

Finally, if our life style is chaotic, so will be our meditation. We cannot expect to blunder through our everyday life and then sit peacefully and still in meditation. It simply won't work because our blunders will follow us. If our conscience pains us, meditation will exacerbate it for the Divine power within us will force us to acknowledge the consequences of the causes and effects we have set in motion. Therefore we must learn to live consciously, always aware of our actions, never thoughtless or careless, and thereby we shall find our whole life developing in a profound and beautiful way. Meditation should not be considered as something separate from our everyday life but as an integral part of it and if we persist in our practice, we will find that it becomes as important to us as eating and sleeping. Indeed, as J. Krishnamurti often pointed out, our whole life can become an act of meditation.

Theosophy will always be valued as a Jnana Yoga, but Raja and Jnana Yogas together create a complementary force that can generate great spiritual power, to elevate and transform us to become better co-workers in the Divine Plan. Most important of all, HPB always insisted that the truth of theosophical teaching is verifiable by experience. 'Theosophia' can be approached at three distinct levels; initially, as simply an occult teaching and philosophy; then secondly, its principles can be practised in our lives as a programme for higher living; and thirdly, they can be realized as Truth by the mystical consummation of yoga. The choices are ours.