

Loving Your Way to Awakening Meditation & Contemplation Homework Week 4

Meditation Practice

Please begin with ten minutes of Hatha Yoga postures or light stretching to wake up your body. Then do 5 minutes of Nadi Shodhana breathing.

Offer your meditation, asking that it be of benefit to all beings or to a particular person (or animal or place).

Chant the opening mantras that we provided or the mantras of your choosing

Preparatory Grounding

For a minute or two, *practice whole-body attention with the following four steps*. This will both ground you and expand your awareness of yourself as a unified physical entity.

1. Inhale and exhale, feeling the air flowing in and out of your nostrils.
2. Expand your awareness to include the movements that the chest and abdomen make when you breathe.
3. Allow yourself to be aware of your heartbeat or pulse in your body.
4. Include in your awareness the sense of your muscles holding your body in a balanced posture.

Core Practice

Begin by asking, “Let me feel the presence of love, in whatever form she appears now.”

With your attention on the breath, *become aware* of the presence around you of a benign, loving energy, the energy of grace and love.

Have the feeling of welcoming or allowing the energy to breathe you, even to hold you.

Feel or sense that your breath is arising and subsiding on its own, drawn by the power of love, which is breathing you.

Have the sense that your heart center opens like the shutter of a camera. Have the sense that love (tenderness, acceptance) is flowing in and out through the heart.

Now, add the mantra:

***Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare
Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare.***

Or you can use the thought “Trust,” as we were doing in class.

Feel that the syllables are being dropped into the heart like flower petals or drops of water.

Feel that the Beloved is saying the mantra to you.

Imagine that the mantra surrounds you like a cloud, and that you are breathing it.

To understand the real power of *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* mantra (or any other deity mantra), try adopting this attitude: Feel that, as a poet saint sings, “When you say these words, you touch God with your tongue. When you think them, your mind and heart become filled with God.” Notice whether taking this attitude creates a more sacred feeling.

As thoughts arise, notice the thought with the feeling that the thought is actually made of particles of love. Love in the form of thought. And let it flow out with the breath.

At a certain point, as your meditation deepens, let go and simply rest inside.

Inner Beloved Meditation

(An audio of this meditation from Class is available on the Student Page.)

The inner beloved is a unique and very personal presence for each of us. Some of us find the beloved to be a facet of our inner divine self, an aspect of our own inner being. For some of us, the beloved takes the form of a distinct other, even when he or she is being experienced inwardly. Even when we sense the beloved as an inner presence, he or she can appear as a teacher, or a lover, or a deity, someone we can dialogue with, feel guided by, or simply be present with as a guide into the deepening immersion into love.

Not everyone has a distinct sense of the presence of an inner beloved. For some of us, the beloved is always another person—someone you can physically touch or talk to. Or we may find that the idea of a beloved—a second person inner friend or lover or deity—feels dualistic, when our overall experience is of meditation as an immersion in unity. Yet, whether we are aware of it or not, we all have within us a figure of the beloved other. The beloved is a facet of yourself, but she is also other. He is your true soulmate, the one who can never disappear.

In this meditation, allow yourself to be as open as possible to the presence of the Beloved. In whatever way the beloved reveals herself, or hints at his nature, be present with that.

Instruction:

Find your seat—sitting bones grounded, upper torso lifting, shoulders relaxed down the back. Be present with the flow of the breath in your nostrils, taking time to center your attention on the flow. Notice the other parts of your body that move with the breath.

Your eyes are closed. Your hands are palms down on your thighs, or lightly held, one palm resting in the other, on your lap. Your eyelids are soft. Your cheeks are soft.

Place one hand over the center of your chest, and begin to softly think to yourself, “Beloved.” Imagine that you are calling the beloved who is present in your heart. Even if you have never been aware of this presence, let yourself call the beloved. Notice the emotions that arise as you do this. Stay with the calling, letting the word beloved begin to arouse a sense of this inner presence. It might be very subtle. You might be aware of a feeling of warmth, or of mystery. You might not be sure you feel anything. Perhaps you might find yourself remembering someone who is beloved to you, or who has been beloved in the past. Someone who’s presence kindled love within you. Someone you have loved, or been drawn to, or even infatuated with. Recognize, if you can, that this person may have been a guide to your inner beloved.

Now, keeping your awareness in the heart, imagine yourself in a twilight grove. Feel that your eternal beloved, the one you have loved for lifetimes, is present with you. The beloved may have a visible form, or may simply be present as an energy, as a sense of pure presence. Whether the beloved appears to your inner eye, or is simply a felt presence, let yourself sense how personal this being is. How the beloved loves you, with all your personhood, all your quirks, all your insecurities.

Sitting in the presence of the beloved, let yourself Breathe with the beloved’s presence, letting his love, her love flow towards you and through you with the breath. Let your sense of the beloved’s presence become more and more real. Let yourself breathe out your love to the beloved.

Now, breathe the beloved into your heart. Breathe the beloved in through the center of your chest, and feel that as you do, your heart expands backwards forwards and on all sides. Let yourself feel that you receive the beloved back into your heart. And as you breathe in that very personal, very specific love, the love the beloved has for you, internalize it completely. Feel, “I am loved, and I am love.” Let yourself sense from within how the lover, the beloved, and love itself are one. Bringing the beloved into your heart, sense that you yourself are the beloved.

Contemplation and Writing Practice

These questions can be the basis of a partner discussion. If you are not working with a partner, do this as a journaling practice.

Set aside at least half-an-hour this week to sit with a notebook or journal and contemplate some of these questions, and/or discuss them with your partner:

Contemplating the Connection between Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga and Bhakti Yoga

Many sages, including Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, show a path in which action, knowledge (meaning realization of Truth) and devotion are intertwined. In other words,

true devotion is based on awareness of divine Presence within yourself, an Other, and the world (Jnana). It also expresses itself through action done in the spirit of loving service (Karma).

Question: How do you experience the interdependence of Bhakti, Jnana, and Karma—love, knowledge, and action—in your own life?

Contemplating Trust as an Aspect of Spiritual Opening

Question: What is your experience of trust? In your experience, either in meditation or with an intimate other, how does trust feel?

In class, we spoke about how allowing our boundaries to melt (either in meditation or with another) is often hard for us because we have a hard time trusting the universe or trusting the Divine.

- a) Hold the thought “Trust” in your heart center and notice the felt sense of that word. Enjoy the feeling of trust.
- b) Ask yourself, “Do I feel inner barriers to trusting the universe? What stops me from fully trusting the universe or the divine?” Journal about what comes up or discuss it with your partner.

Return to the contemplation of trust.

Exploring Arrogance and Humility

Question: How do you experience your own arrogance? Remember, arrogance doesn’t have to look like self-praise. It can take the form of self-criticism, since arrogance make us judgmental of ourselves when we fail to meet the “standard” that we demand of ourselves.

Arrogance often takes the form of “I know this already”—that is, the feeling of knowing what is right or correct, including the feeling that you know what is the right way to practice.

This cuts off your ability to learn or even to receive feedback—and one of the ways you know you are feeling arrogant is that you don’t want to receive instruction or feedback.

Question: What is the difference between arrogance and self-confidence (in your personal experience of yourself and other people?).

Question: How do you cultivate humility without self-abnegation?

Question: Look at a situation you feel you understand—perhaps a political situation or a family situation. Or look at your ideas about spirituality, spiritual attainment, and your own process. Now consider the question: “Do I really know what is right or true? What would it be like if I were to allow myself to not know—and to engage this situation or practice with an open willingness to be in not-knowing?”

Contemplate Your Understanding and Experience of Viraha Bhakti: The Devotion that includes the Feeling of Separation from the Beloved.

Question: Have you experienced missing a loved one as pure pain? Have you ever discovered that the grief or sense of loss has opened you to deeper feelings of love?

Question: How would you practice finding the love within grief or loss or unrequited love?

Question: Consider various love relationships in your life. Have any of them functioned as “escorts” to the inner Beloved and/or to God? Does reframing a relationship in this way change your feeling about it?

Sutras for Week 4

Below, you'll find Sanskrit transliteration and English translation for Sutras 35, 36, and 37.

Spend a few minutes reading them, and if you are working with one of the commentaries, such as *Narada's Way of Divine Love* by Swami Prabhavananda, or *The Yoga of Spiritual Devotion* by Prem Prakash read through the commentary on each sutra from that book and include its insights in your contemplation.

As you read through these, repeat the Sanskrit three times out loud. (This helps you feel the energy in the sutras, which is considerable.) You can also sing it, draw it, or take it into a Hatha Yoga asana.

Here is a contemplation process to use:

- Say the English to yourself (or sing it!)
- Close your eyes, breathe into the heart, and hold the sutra in awareness for a minute or two.
- Open your eyes and write down any insights, experiences, questions, or conclusions about the meaning of the sutra and your relationship to it.

You can also do this process a partner discussion.

Sutra 35

तत्तु विषयत्यागात् सङ्गत्यागाच्च ॥

tat-tu viṣayatyaḡāt saṅgatyāḡāc-ca

One can attain that (spiritual love) by relinquishing sense objects and relinquishing attachments.

Journal or discuss how to apply this instruction to your life in a sustainable way, without causing dryness or pain. Most of us know which activities, objects, or attachments block our subtle connection to love as a divine force.

One clue is a statement from my teacher: "The highest form of renunciation is discriminating enjoyment"

Question: What does this mean to you?

Question: Are there things you know need to be let go of?

Question: What are they?

Question: How do you determine which attachments should be let go of?

In class we spoke about three approaches to this.

1. In sitting practice, noticing, and letting go of thoughts, desires, and distractions. Kindling detachment by focusing on your own awareness (or letting yourself be the Witness), and recognizing that thoughts, desires, and other objects
2. Cultivating balance in your sensory enjoyment—for instance, eating a small piece of a favorite dessert, timing your TV watching and sticking with it—and then noticing the pure experience of enjoyment that arises, and stopping before enjoyment turns into gluttony.
3. Seeing the divine in everything, as in the story about the Gopis seeing Krishna everywhere. “Whatever you taste, whatever you see, whatever you are drawn to, whatever you are averse to, remember that the divine is in that.” Realizing that what you really have to renounce is your identification with the separate self.

Sutra 36

अव्यावृत्तभजनात् ॥

avyāvṛtta-bhajanāt

From unceasing loving worship.

We spoke in class about practicing formal worship both as a concentration practice in itself, and as a way of cultivating devotional feelings that you can then take into daily life.

(At the end of this document, you’ll find instructions for setting up an altar, in case you don’t already have one.)

Question: What are some creative ways to cultivate an attitude of worship in your activities and relationships?

Below, a few suggestions to work with, but it’s even better to come up with your own.

- bowing inwardly to people you interact with
- bowing inwardly to your room, your garden, the street outside, the scenes you pass
- offering your food to the Divine in the form of your own digestion
- offering your work
- Imagining an altar in your heart and offering the inhalations and exhalations to it, or offering mantra to it as you do housework
- doing physical tasks with great attentiveness and presence, as if you are touching the divine in the dishes, the laundry, the computer keys, etc.
- looking for the Presence in other people’s eyes, and inwardly bowing to that

Sutra 37

लोकेऽपि भगवद्गुणश्रवणकीर्तनात्

loke 'pi bhagavad-guṇa-śravaṇa-kīrtanāt

Even while in the world, [spiritual love arises] from hearing and singing forth God's qualities.

Exercise: Devote some time every day to walking japa (mantra repetition), silently repeating (or singing or speaking) a mantra as you walk or do housework or any non-mentally-challenging task.

Exercise: Listen to music—like some of the music participants are suggesting on the listserve—that uplifts you and brings sacred feeling. Of course, there is such music in every culture. Find the music that opens your heart and consider your listening (or singing!) as a form of remembrance of God.

Journal or Discussion with Partner: What are some of the ways you recognize divine Presence in yourself and the world. Describe and discuss these for five minutes. Notice how it feels when you do this. Does it help you feel more loving?

Setting up an Altar

Making offerings at an altar—formal ritualistic worship practice (“doing puja”)—is a practice like meditation or mantra, and it has the effect of focusing the mind and turning it towards the divine. Every tradition includes its own protocols and offerings, but it’s fine to be creative as long as your practice kindles love and focus.

An altar should be placed on a table or shelf, unless you are doing tantric worship on a yantra, in which case it can be set up on the floor. Otherwise, the altar should be placed in such a way that when you are seated in front of it is or above eye level.

The altar is set up with the deity or deities seated on a cloth, along with flowers and various other articles that have spiritual significance. In formal worship, the deity image can be surrounded by sympathetic elements, including other deity pictures or statues. It’s also fine to simply have a candle, representing the flame of the Self, or a crystal or other spiritually significant object as your focal point.

If you choose a deity-focused altar, the positions of the deities and what is included are important—for instance, you wouldn’t place deities from a Buddhist or Christian tradition on an altar dedicated to Krishna or Devi, because in this very personal place, which is in a sense the spiritual home of your deity, you wouldn’t include unfamiliar or unrelated energies. But you might include related deities—Lakshmi or Ganesha or Shiva on a Krishna altar, as well as items that for you invoke sacred space, like crystals or candles or beautiful containers for food and water offerings.

Often devotees will have several altars, and if you feel connected to energies from other traditions, you will give these other deities their own seat. For instance, I have a big central altar that has several Hindu Goddess statues on it, as well as Shiva and Ganesha, but my statue of Buddhist Tara has her own altar. You might also have a separate altar for family photos, or articles from nature like rocks or pinecones.

The process of worship can be fairly simple and casual. Often, for most people, it’s enough to light a candle, wave incense, say some mantras. But the more present you can be with it, the more its inner essence becomes available. Altar worship is a practice like meditation, even though it is external, and is an invitation to focus and presence. The more focused your practice is, the more it brings consciousness to your altar, which then becomes the platform where you can go and be infused with remembrance of spirit and the presence of grace. An altar that we work with in this way actually becomes a power spot, like a temple, that you and others can feel. I know that many of you do ritual worship, and so you will have experienced how your attention and practice of making offerings literally enlivens the altar, so that it eventually becomes the seat of sacred energy in your home, and when you approach it or sit next to it you actually experience an energetic transmission from the altar itself.

The power of an altar is the power of your own intention and your own consciousness—it’s the awareness you bring into the altar that enlivens it. In other words, ritual worship is not a practice for worshipping wood or stone. It’s a practice for bringing presence and attention to a representation of the sacred, and thus of kindling consciousness in yourself.

In very serious formal worship, the dieties on the altar will be individually enlivened by being infused with prana and mantra, in a process called prana pratishtha, and if you do that the statue is treated as a living being, meaning that it is offered food daily, dressed, and cleaned in ritual ways.

I've found that it isn't necessary to do a prana installation ritual with an altar, because your practice of mantra and meditation and offering will actually enliven the altar on its own.

Of course, in altar practice, it is not the wood or metal, it is the consciousness that has been infused into it, and that consciousness is where you and the deity meet. It's your consciousness that you recognize in the deity on your altar, and its consciousness itself that begins to be embodied on the altar when you do ritual practice. This often starts out as a sort of as if practice, but eventually it becomes real. you start to actually feel the rise of bhakti during the ritual. Not everyone is drawn to formal worship ritual, but if you are, an altar person, it becomes quite ecstatic.

Formal deity worship is normally done in sequence, and though there are different sequences, in Hindu style worship, which is the one I'm most attached to, certain basic offerings are almost always included. These usually include a fragrant substance like sandalwood paste or perfume oil, a flower (s), incense, a flame which you wave in a circle, and food, usually fruit or sweets. In special circumstances, formal worship can become quite elaborate, including offerings of cloth, gold, jewels, water for washing, and much more. Mantra, especially invocation mantras, are the most significant part of the offering practice.

All these offerings can be made mentally, and if you want to practice mental worship, we've included an audio of the Worship at the Alter in the Heart practice we did in Class IV on the Student Page.