

## Your Mind is Your World: Meditating with the Yoga Vasistha

### Week 1: Meditation & Contemplations Homework

(including Journaling/Partner Questions for Discussion)

Please meditate for at least 20 minutes each day. You can meditate at any time of day, or before bed. This week use as your basic meditation the sequence below:

In the sequence below, we'll begin with a basic posture practice, segue into breathing, and then enter a meditation on Awareness that we practiced in class. For some of you, this will feel immediately powerful. For others, it may take some time to get familiar with it. So, below you will find a graduated practice.

The center we'll practice with is the *Ajna Chakra*. We'll enter it in this class by focusing on the area within the head just behind and above the upper palate. This is one of the centers where it is especially easy for many people to "enter" pure awareness, to take the "backward step" that lets you become aware of the subtle clarity of Awareness and of its expansive, limitless nature.

The effect of this meditation can be similar to practicing Witness Consciousness or imagining your head as the sky (as we did in the *Vijnana Bhairava* classes). All of these are methods for coaxing the underlying Consciousness that is the creator, not just of thoughts but of all that is, to reveal itself as the substratum of your mind and even as who you really are. This can happen on several different levels, but it is never something you can manufacture or force. However, with attention and willingness to let go of your ideas about it, it will emerge on its own.

This center is a doorway or gateway into *chidakasha*, the space of pure Consciousness or Awareness that can be accessed in your body (even though Awareness is not just in your body, but everywhere.) We begin by looking into Awareness in this center. As you begin this, it will feel that you are outside the center, looking into it, looking at the space of awareness as an object of attention. In other words, it will feel as if it is outside you, which of course it actually isn't. Sometimes as we focus on the center and Awareness, we feel our attention drifting or opening until it feels as if we are outside the body. That's also a natural experience since Awareness is both outside and inside. As the meditation matures, you may subtly feel yourself "being" Awareness. However, this can take time. But the practice below will help you begin to discern the subtle difference between thought and the awareness from which it arises and begin to recognize the texture of your own awareness and become more and more comfortable within it.

## 1. Daily Meditation Instructions

Begin by offering your meditation, asking that it be of benefit to other beings or to a particular person (or animal or place).

Spend a few minutes settling in your posture. First, make sure that you are balanced on your sitz bones, neither too forward nor too far back. Imagine that lines of energy run from each sitz bone and from your coccyx down into the earth. Feel your base sinking into the seat and the support of the earth beneath you.

Allow your chest to lift and open and the torso to gently rise from the grounded base. Notice any tension in your shoulders and release it.

Your hands are on your thighs, palms up or palms down, or folded, in your lap, one hand resting in the other.

Your tongue rests softly on the floor of the mouth, and your lips are slightly open, allowing the jaw to relax.

Imagine your head suspended from a cord that reaches from the crown (the fontanel, or *brahmarandhra*) to the ceiling.

Take nine conscious deep breaths. Breathe in down to the belly, letting the belly expand. Exhale FULLY, drawing the belly in a little bit to help you expel all the air.

At the end, notice the energy in your body. Become aware of the heartbeat. See if you can be aware of the sensations in your muscles.

Bring your attention to the breath stream flowing in the nostrils. After a few minutes, begin to become aware of the *Ajna chakra* as a “space” above and behind the upper palate. Feel the breath flowing in and out of that area.

Sense the breath beginning to open your awareness of the space behind the upper palate. Feel the energy inside the breath touching and opening that center. Feel that with the breath, your attention flows backwards into that space of awareness.

If you are comfortable meditating with a mantra as a point of focus, you can use the mantra you usually use, or the mantra “*Ham Sa*” (I am That) “*Swaahaa*” (which means “I offer myself” or “I am one with the divine awareness”.) If you are using the mantra, breathe it in with the inhalation, and then let it go as you exhale, allowing your attention to rest in the inner space of awareness above and behind the palate.

Now, begin to focus your attention on the field of awareness itself, using the area behind the palate as your point of entry. “Looking” into awareness with your inner eye, notice its texture, the quality of aliveness or movement within it. Let yourself be present with the subtle field of your own awareness.

Now ask yourself, “Where is awareness? Is it inside or outside my body?” Without looking for a verbal answer, let yourself open to the space of awareness, the sky of awareness that extends behind you and to all sides of you. Sense that space of awareness as a sky. See if

you can notice what it is “made of”—the subtlety of that space of awareness. Can you be aware of its texture, its tendency to move and shift? As thoughts arise, and also as thoughts rumble beneath the surface, see if you can notice that behind them, beneath them, is but see if you can sense it as intelligence itself

Notice thoughts arising, sensations arising, feelings arising. Ask, “In what do these thoughts, sensations etc. arise?” Again, without looking for an answer in words, let yourself become more and more subtly aware of the ground of awareness within which thoughts and feelings arise inside this subtle textured field of awareness. Notice how thoughts arise within that ground. Notice how thoughts release back into the ground awareness itself.

When you lose focus, return to the feeling of the breath flowing in and out through the nostrils. Then, again, focus inside that space of awareness. See if you can explore its edges. Notice whether it has an end. See if you can expand your attention as wide and deep as possible inside that awareness. Keep entering more deeply into this space of awareness. As thoughts or emotions arise, as the sense of I-ness arises, release them into the awareness that is the ground of all of them. Don’t worry about whether you’re “doing it right”. Recognize that as you turn towards awareness, it begins to reveal you to yourself. Keep relaxing your sense of seeking or striving for awareness and realize that it is always present. Can you identify with it as you?

Finally, rest in the felt sense of awareness, or simply with the breath and the mantra. Before you rise from meditation, take a few moments to tune into the felt sense of awareness itself.

Then in the course of your day, whenever you remember, stop, tune into the sensations, thoughts, etc. that you are aware of, then pull back and become present to the felt sense of being aware. Do this practice for a moment or two. As you integrate it into your day, you become more and more able to distinguish Awareness from the contents of the mind.

## **2. Walking Around Practices: Taking these Teachings into Your Day**

*(If you are working with a partner, discuss these practices and your experience with your partner. Any of the questions can be a basis for discussion.)*

Below are three ideas from the *Yoga Vasishta*. All of them describe reality as it is experienced by Essence itself, the undivided Awareness within everything that exists. Along with each of them is a suggested exercise that lets you take this idea into your life. Every day, at the end of meditation, choose one of these ideas and hold the intention that you’ll hold it as awareness whenever you remember during the day. Use the teaching as a lens through which to look at events in your life, or as a reminder to take a ‘higher’ or “wider” perspective.

Of course, you don’t have to think about it constantly. But consider setting an alarm for three different times during the day, and then spending 3–5 minutes contemplating this

teaching and/or looking and something that's occurred in your recent life through the prism of that teaching.

***“Everything arises within consciousness. This whole material world is arising like a dream within the perception of the dreamer.”***

**Practice:** Spend some time walking around with the idea, “All this is my dream.” Notice what it feels like to see your life as a dream. How do you interact when you see the events of your day this way? How do you experience your emotions? Other people? The physical world?

Then consider your life like this: “All this is the dream arising within the one great Consciousness, the Source, the great mind. Just as the figures in my dreams are not different from my own awareness, all this is not different than the great Mind that conceived it.” How does this contemplation affect the way you live and react?

***“Whatever the mind thinks of, that alone it sees. The world is as you see it.”***

**Practice:** Today, choose to be highly attentive to your own beliefs, moods, and ideas. How are you acting and reacting to situations according to your moods—positive or negative—or your ideas or beliefs about who you are and who others are? Can you see that what you're thinking about affects your experience? Is it really true that your life, the events, and the people in it show up differently for you depending on your mood, state, thoughts, or beliefs? To what degree does your life today illustrate the principle “The world is as you see it”? And, as you begin to recognize how your perceptions change your experience of life, what would happen if you dropped a particular idea, expectation, or belief about how things are or how they should be. What happens when you let go of the “story”?

***“This self is neither far nor near; it is not inaccessible nor is it in distant places. IT is what in oneself appears to be the experience of bliss and is therefore realized within oneself.”***

Holding this idea in mind, notice your moments of happiness, especially the ones that arise spontaneously. Consider that the felt sense of happiness is itself the divine Self. Consider that any experience of joyfulness that arises is intrinsically meaningful.

**Question:** Do certain mind states tend to create happiness or relaxation? What mind states block the experience of joy? Without trying to manipulate your mind, see if you can notice and inhabit any feelings of happiness that arise. Can you feel happy without a “cause”? Can you let go of the circumstance you associate with happiness and simply sense the feeling?

### 3. Contemplating Dispassion: Questions for inquiry and journaling, and for discussion with your partner:

**Question:** What did you feel when reading or listening to Rama's confession of depression? To what extent can you recognize how dispassion or disinterest in the world or even depression has spurred you to deepen your practice?

**Question:** Consider times in your life when you have felt dispassion. What was the experience, and how did you react to it? Notice the circumstances in which dispassion arises. (For instance, it might start with giving up on a relationship, coming to terms with an unfulfilled ambition, or realizing that the life path you have been following is no longer (or never has been) satisfying.)

**Question:** Why is dispassion important in spiritual life? Really consider this question and answer it from your experience and observation as well as your intellect. For instance, how is dispassion different from resignation to circumstances? What is the relationship between dispassion and surrender? How can you feel dispassion while also keeping your heart open?

### 4. Reading Practice: Contemplation of the Teachings

Below, I have attached some passages from the text for you to read and contemplate. These are short, and I've included instructions on how to work with them. If you are working with a partner, you might want to read and contemplate them together.

However, those of you who have the time and inclination are encouraged to read a few pages of the text during the week. (We've got a link to a free download of the *Yoga Vasistha* on the Student Area of my website.)

I ESPECIALLY recommend that you read the first chapter, called On Dispassion, about Rama's despair and his seeking. (Questions for contemplation about it are in Item 3 above.) As you read it, consider the ways in which you recognize or resonate with Rama's perceptions about life. See the last question in Item 3 for some questions and contemplation suggestions about dispassion.

The *Yoga Vasistha* is not a text to read quickly. For many people, reading a few pages of this book is a practice, a wonderful way to shift your mind out of its ordinary state and to contemplate what the world looks like seen through the eyes of an enlightened being. It's especially powerful and transformative to take it one chapter at a time, even reading a few pages at a time, and use the text as an inspiration for meditation and for subtle contemplations.

In truth, this text contains just a few core ideas, which are revisited again and again using different language, different similes, stories, metaphors, and explanations. That means that if you don't "get" one section, or don't find it interesting, the same idea will be re-explained later. Eventually, it seeps in. You get it. In fact, as you read it, the truth within

the words—even what you don't at first understand—begins to work on your mind. Your attention is drawn to the hidden truth that is your Source. The book takes you beneath the superficial aspects of your mind and calls your beliefs about yourself and the world into question over and over so that you begin to be more and more attentive to the ground of Awareness, the *chidakasha*, or space of Consciousness behind thoughts, impressions, and egoic identification. It's a gradual process.

At first, the text may seem abstract. Little by little, it sinks in and literally changes your state of consciousness. By reading and contemplating it, your mind begins to resolve itself back into its own subtlety, and you become more easily able to perceive yourself from the point of view of Awareness.

Reading this text is a practice in itself. In fact, contemplative reading of sacred texts, known as *Lectio Divina* in Latin, is an important part of spiritual practice in most of the great traditions. Reading in this contemplative spirit is like being in the presence of an enlightened teacher, whose state of consciousness literally mingles with yours, and transforms it.

In *Vedanta*, there are three stages of taking in a text and imbibing its meaning. The first is called *shravana*, which means “hearing”—deeply listening to what is being said or read. You read a passage carefully, as many times as you need, to take it in. At this stage, you don't resist or question the teaching. You simply receive it. Since these are short readings, you will be able to read a passage over several times.

The second stage is called *manana*, meaning rumination. You turn the ideas over in your mind. You ask, “What does he mean by this word? How does this relate to other traditional understandings I know? What do I agree with? Have I experienced anything remotely similar? What do I think the whole passage has to show me? What does it remind me of?”

The third stage is called *nidhidyasana*. This is the stage where you meditate on the subtle essence of the teaching. After reading and thinking about the passage, you go into meditation and ask for insight or realization, or experience to arise, to help you deepen your understanding of the passage.

*A word of caution:* The *Yoga Vasistha* comes out of a tradition that privileged hard-core renunciation of the world as a prerequisite for enlightenment. Part of this had to do with the culture and the conditions of life in pre-modern times. Life was incredibly difficult in early medieval India's time and culture. To live the life of a farmer or laborer, as most people did, demanded all the energy at your disposal to survive. Caste and family determined the lives of most people. Few were literate. Hardly anyone had the freedom, sense of possibility, and choice we enjoy in the modern developed world. Given the conditions of their lives and the state of society, it's not surprising that holy people believed that living in society and having a family were obstructive.

Knowing what we now know about interdependence and the importance of integrating a spiritual life with relationships and care for society and the earth, the Vedantic dismissal of



external life can feel too extreme for us or simply irrelevant to modern conditions. So it's important not to dismiss the core of the text because some of its assumptions don't completely suit modern conditions. On the other hand, it's also important not to take it as an encouragement to give up everything and go to a cave! Also, understand that when we meet the text from a place of stress and overwhelm, when our minds are crowded with the to-do list and our mundane problems, it can take a little while for us to settle down enough to meet the sage in his state of wisdom. So, when you read, even if you feel, "Oh, this is not practical—it's too high!" or "I'm not up to this level of consciousness," stay with it and let the text act on you.

Notice the different types of resistance that arise in you as you read these passages, but don't let the resistance keep you from exploring the text. In other words, it's a good idea when reading a text like this to begin by surrendering to it. Assume that the writer knows what he's talking about. Read it a couple of times with the intention to believe it, to take it in, to 'submit' to it. Then sit for meditation, and ask to understand the truth within it in the most helpful way for your inner growth and evolution. At the same time, know that it does come out of a very different culture and time than ours. The wisdom in it can make us live with great freedom in the modern world, even if we don't take the more extreme teachings about the world to heart.

## **Passage I**

"Rama says, O sage, please tell me what the mind is.

Even as empty, inert nothingness is known as space, mind is empty nothingness. The mind is that which is experienced as objects of perception. Rama, thought is mind, there is no distinction between the two. The self that is clothed in the physical body is known as mind: it is the mind that brings the physical body into existence. Ignorance, samsara, mind stuff, bondage, impurity, darkness and inertia are all symptoms. Our so-called objective experience alone is the mind—what we experience is only what we perceive."

## **Contemplation Question:**

How does this statement, "What we experience is only what we perceive," apply to your life at this time? How does your experience of life—say, of people or things as your experience of intimacy, enjoyment, alienation, or sadness change as your understanding of yourself and the people around you has shifted? Take this statement into your day and consider your experience in light of it.

*If you are working with a partner, discuss this with them.*

## Passage II

“This entire universe is forever the same as the consciousness that dwells in every atom, even as a bracelet is not different from gold. Just as the ornament potentially exists in gold and the sculpture potentially exists in the stone, the object exists in the subject.”

### *Contemplation Question:*

How do you feel when you hold this teaching in awareness? Read it through several times, then consider the different ways it can be understood (for instance, the “objects” in your world, others, trees, material objects and your own body, exist within your consciousness. Or all this exists within the Great Light of Consciousness.)

Finally, sit in meditation, asking that your own inner Consciousness give you a deeper understanding or experience of the teaching.

If appropriate, discuss the implications of this teaching with your partner. How could it impact your relationships with others. For instance, if the “gold” is Consciousness, consider how to be aware that the same consciousness is in another person as in yourself.

As you practice with your partner, see if you can do it with the understanding: The same consciousness is in them as in me. How does that impact your conversation? If you are practicing alone, journal about how applying this teaching impacts your experience of someone you like, someone you dislike, and someone towards whom you feel neutral.



## Passage III

(In this passage, *Vasistha* speaks of that Consciousness as a supreme being. He will describe the ultimate Consciousness in many ways—as the Creator, as pure Awareness, and as God or Brahman. In the following passage, he speaks of the Source in both impersonal terms and as a “he”. But it should not be assumed that ‘he’ refers to a personal deity. “He” means the vast Consciousness, or Brahman, which is the ground and source of all that is.)

“The mind...arises within the vast eternal great light of consciousness. From within him emerge infinite worlds as ripples arise from the surface of the ocean. He is the cosmic intelligence into which countless objects of perception enter. He is the light in which the self and the universe shine. He ordains the characteristic nature of everything in him the worlds appear and disappear, even as a mirage appears and disappears repeatedly. His form (the world) vanishes, but his self is unchanging. He dwells in all. He is hidden and he overflows. By his mere presence, this apparently inert material world and its inhabitants are ever active. Because of his omnipresent omnipotent omniscience, his very thoughts materialize.

“This supreme self cannot be realized by means other than wisdom, not indeed by exerting oneself in religious practices. This self is neither far nor near; it is not inaccessible nor is it in distant places. It is what in oneself appears to be the experience of bliss and is therefore realized within oneself.”

### Contemplation Question:

Try reading this passage before your daily meditation, after you’ve taken your posture, and before you do the breathing. Notice how the reading affects your meditation.

## **Question for Journaling or Discussion with Your Partner**

What does it mean to you that the Self cannot be realized except by wisdom? The text implies that wisdom comes from beyond the mind. How does wisdom relate to intuition or “just knowing”? Consider times when the wisdom to know the Self arose in you. How do the practices like mantra and meditation affect your capacity for discerning the presence of the Self as Awareness?

## **Journaling**

Please record your experience of each of these meditations in your journal. Questions to answer in journaling:

- What did you practice?
- What did you experience?
- What insights or questions arose?
- How do you feel now?