

Your Mind is Your World: Meditating with the Yoga Vasistha

Week 2: Meditation & Contemplations Homework

(including Journaling/Partner Questions for Discussion)

Meditation

Please meditate for at least 20 minutes a day, as last week. You can continue practicing the meditation on Awareness we did last week using the instructions from the last homework assignment.

For many of you, it would be skillful to practice your “normal” meditation and periodically pull back to notice the Awareness that is present even when the mind is active. As you do, take a moment or two to rest in Awareness as long as possible. Don’t force it or force yourself to stay there. As you ask yourself, “Where is Awareness?” you will find that when you locate a sense of what is aware, there will be a tendency to fixate on it, to make it an object. When you notice this happening, ask, “Where is Awareness?” or let go of fixing on a particular feeling of being aware and just notice the subtle state of being aware, which is both ever-present and impossible to pin down!

If you find it more natural to do this practice from the heart center rather than the center in the head, using the area in the back of the heart center (and behind the body, for many of you), that’s fine. You also may find that in meditation, your center of focus naturally shifts from one center to another.

Alternative Meditation: Practice I AM.

Inhaling, say I AM internally focusing in the heart. Notice the felt sense of the thought “I AM” as it touches your inner field of mind energy.

Let the exhalation be as it is, and focus on the space that remains at the end of the I AM. This space will eventually reveal itself as your own ground of being, the source of all experience which is also the “knower” of whatever you are experiencing.

Simple Sama Breath Practice: Focus on the breath at the nostrils

Those of you who would like to alternate it with the Sama Breath Practice we did in class can use these instructions:

After seating yourself, and going through the preliminaries, bring your attention to the tip of the nostrils, and follow the breath as it comes in and goes out of the nostrils, feeling it cool on the inhalation, warm on the exhalation. Sense the “touch” of the breath as you do.

After a few minutes, feel that you enter the breath. Your attention becomes a focused point or ball, and you flow (as attention) down with the inhalation as far into the body as it goes, then flow up with the exhalation.

As thoughts come up, remember that the thoughts themselves are made of consciousness or Shakti, and gently bring the mind back.

After a while, feel that the breath is expanding through your body on the inhalation and out through the pores on the exhalation. Be gentle with this; just let your awareness expand with the breath as much as it will.

Notice the effects of this on your inner body, your mind, and your breath itself.

If this practice creates a “clutch” in the breath, let it go and return to the touch of the breath on the nostrils.

Tip for those who have “tight” breathing: It’s often helpful to hold the thought, “Breathing is happening,” rather than “I am breathing.”

Open-Eyed Practices

(Do dip into these, and perhaps discuss your experience with your partner.)

Periodically during the day, pull your attention inward and imagine, feel, or understand that you are being “seen” by the air, the trees, and the furniture in your room. This is a way of beginning to feel the presence of Consciousness in everything.

Periodically, recognize that what you are experiencing as “outside” is being experienced by awareness—your awareness—and that everything you experience is happening inside your awareness. Then, notice the effects on your mood and relationships of holding this perspective.

Periodically, ask yourself, “Am I dreaming?” without giving yourself an answer, and notice this possibility’s effect. What if all this were a dream? This practice, often done by people learning lucid dreaming, can actually affect your dreams, not to mention your regular life!

Contemplations

During the week, consider how you practice the *Four Gatekeepers to Liberation* that we discussed in class. Are there some you emphasize? Are there some you neglect? Then, consider how a balance of these four practices can enhance the opening of your awareness and your freedom of mind!

The Four Gatekeepers to Liberation

Sama

Mind control or creating tranquility of mind

Sama is a prerequisite for working deeply with the mind because if the mind is chock-full of thoughts and impressions, it's hard to see behind the ripples of the mind field itself. Sama usually begins with concentrative practice, bringing the mind to one point—breath, mantra, bodily center—again and again. But we can also practice Sama as a type of open-ended mindfulness—letting the mind cycle between awareness of breath, sensations, thoughts, and sounds while consciously focusing successively on each aspect of your experience.

As we said in class, the usual practices for “pacifying” the mind contain a paradox. We need to practice these meditations seriously if the mind is ever to be peaceful and allow us to hold onto our awakening experiences. But if we try too hard to still the mind or focus, it creates a sense of struggle and often resistance. So, relaxation is key.

There's another secret, based on the tantras, which is having a subtle understanding of what the mind really is. As we said in class, your mind is a contracted form of absolute creative Consciousness or Shakti. In the process of manifesting individuality, Consciousness “contracts itself into the form of objects and thoughts” while retaining its capacity for creating (thoughts and images in our case, universes in the case of the original Shakti). So, thoughts and images will continue to arise in the mind by virtue of the mind's innate creative urgency. That means it is useless to fight the mind.

What is more effective is simply remembering that all thoughts are made of consciousness, of mind stuff. This awareness—which the tantras call “recognition” defangs the thoughts, so to speak, and allows the mind to relax. I have found that combining a concentrative or mindfulness practice while occasionally remembering that your thoughts are mind stuff will help the mind quiet down much more quickly.

The meditation sequences we do in these classes usually combine a sequence of practices, including mantra, pranayama, and whichever practice we are “featuring” in class. You get to choose which practice feels easy for you, and I believe it's important to have a repertoire of practices and experiment when appropriate. At least initially, the goal of all of them is to pacify the agitation caused by thoughts, emotions, and perceptions so that the mind's nature as a spacious presence can begin to reveal itself.

Practices for Sama include most of the common yogic practices for concentration and working with thoughts, such as

- Pranayama (such as the nine full breaths we do in meditation, or yogic pranayamas such as Ujayi and Nadi Shodhana)
- Focused meditation, as in the breath at the nostrils practice
- Visualizations
- Meditation in the Central Channel or other centers such as the Ajna, the heart, the belly, or any other chakras
- Looking into the space between thoughts or between breaths
- Mantra and chanting
- Identifying the thoughts that arise as “thinking” and letting them go.
- Understanding the real nature of thoughts, as in the practice we did during the live session of considering that all thoughts are made of consciousness, no matter what their content
- Mindful asana practice, walking, or other physical exercises

Contemplation and Discussion

Question 1: Regarding the practices you normally do, which ones tend to quiet your mind most easily? Which ones help the mind turn inward most effectively? Have you created or invented any Sama practices? What are they?

Question 2: See if you can combine a concentration practice such as a mantra or a breath focus with periodically noticing what part of your psyche is aware of thoughts and your practice and states. You don’t have to be aware of awareness at every moment. Still, if you keep periodically noticing what is aware of your experience, you will become progressively more connected to the field of awareness itself.

Santosha

Contentment or acceptance of what is

I prefer “acceptance” or “allowing things to be as they are” to “contentment,” which has misleading implications. Accepting reality as it is, and letting go of resistance to what is, creates equanimity. It’s often compared as a practice to wearing shoes on a rough road. Just as you couldn’t cover the earth with Astroturf or leather, you can’t arrange a life without difficulty, annoyance, or physical and emotional pain and upheaval. However, the practice of accepting what is as it is, and letting it be, will eventually give you the experience of remaining peaceful in trying circumstances. Of course, acceptance doesn’t preclude trying to change a difficult situation. But you approach it with an attitude of non-resistance, which can ultimately allow difficult states to dissolve on their own.

The true practice of acceptance is not pasting a positive feeling over a feeling of discomfort. It doesn't mean dismissing it with a thought like "It's all good." On the contrary, it's important to start by acknowledging the pain, discomfort, agitation, etcetera. Feel it. If the discomfort is emotional or a stress reaction, ask yourself, "*Where is this feeling coming from?*" "*What is this stress or discomfort related to?*" See if you can recognize the triggering event or thought. Breathe with the thought and let it go if you can, or just acknowledge its presence. Ask, "*Can I let this go?*" If the answer is "Yes," softly breathe it out, and softly breathe in a word or phrase like "*I accept myself just as I am*" or "*Let go*" or a phrase that helps you do that.

Vichara

Inquiring into the nature of what is real, what is true

You can do this at many levels. Vichara includes asking questions of yourself like the ones in the paragraph above or Big Questions, like

- "What is my true motivation?"
- "What's my highest priority?"
- "Am I acting in alignment with my conscious evolution, or do my feelings of limitation delude me?"
- "Is this impulse from my ego?"
- "Am I identifying with my limitations?"
- "How will I feel in five years if I go on the way I'm going."
- "What does it feel like to be caught in the ego identification with my limited self?"
- "What does it feel like to be free?"

You probably practice this kind of Vichara regularly and know it to be one of the best ways to get intuitive insight.

The ultimate Vichara is the question "***Who am I, really?***" asked without allowing yourself to settle for any answer that's a thought or an idea. Instead, you ask the question until you experience a shift in awareness, perhaps a sense of sinking past thoughts or simply a sense of your own being, Is-ness, or spaciousness.

Another way to ask the question, which often gives you an immediate response, is, "*Without thoughts, ideas, memories, or intentions, what am I?*"

Sadhu Satsanga

Sadhu means one who does spiritual practice, and Satsanga means "company of the Real, or company of Truth."

Spending time with people (such as each other!) who are focused on the truth and the path to truth, listening to teachers who can bring you into meditation or deep contact with reality, reading texts like *Yoga Vasishtha* and other books that help you awaken to your real nature— all these are forms of Satsanga.

Contemplating “Assignments”

Take time every day to consciously play with one or two of these practices. It doesn't have to take long—you can do any of them for five minutes at a time, and you'll notice a difference! In fact, some of these may already be part of your life. Here, we intend to make them a habit by creating neuronal patterns of freedom.

Practice Sama

This week, make a point of working with the pacification of your mind. Our meditation practice is the way to do that. When you meditate, make it a priority to do it with everything you've got. Apply yourself to the practice step-by-step. At the same time, remember that your mind is creative consciousness, so you, as an ego-self, can't control it. So ask for help—from God, from a deity form like Saraswati, your Higher Self, Buddha, or even your mind itself!

Also, notice those moments when your mind feels particularly agitated. Again, avoid critiquing yourself for being agitated; just notice it and use something from your practice repertoire to calm your agitation. For example, practicing with the breath at the tip of the nostrils, or mantra practice for those of you who use a mantra, can be done anywhere, even just for a few minutes and as most of you know, helps to calm the mind and body at the moment.

Practice Santosha through Consciously Accepting What Is

This practice only works if you actually try it. So take a little time every day to experiment with the practice of accepting what is. You'll discover how liberating it is when you actually do it (as opposed to just knowing that it's a good thing to do!) several times during the day or the week.

Here's the practice:

Invoking Santosha through Accepting What Is

When you're uncomfortable, or when you feel that there are things in your life that are challenging and don't seem to yield to your efforts, or when the people close to you seem intractable or annoying, or when you're angry at yourself, try saying to yourself, “What if it were ok for things to be just as they are? How would it feel if I just let go of how I think it should be, or how I think I should be or feel, and just noticed what is, and let it be without struggling or resisting? What if it were really true that everything is unfolding as it is meant to do?”

Also, when you feel upset or resistant about something going on in your life, consider your assumptions about how things are supposed to be. Notice where the “should” is in your feeling about what is happening. Then ask yourself a question like “Is it true that things should be different? What would I experience right now if I could just accept the situation as it is without resistance?”

This is an ongoing practice. So, we may have to return to it over and over again.

Remember that accepting what is doesn't mean you stop trying to change what you can! Instead, you might discover the secret paradox that accepting what is the first prerequisite for a true change!

Notice what happens in your body and mind as you get into the habit of doing this practice.

An Alternate Santosha Practice: Accepting and Letting Go

Here's a simple and elegant protocol for working with uncomfortable feelings, which some of you may be familiar with from the book *The Sedona Method*.

- Find the uncomfortable feeling. Feel it. Recognize it.
- Ask yourself, "Can I accept that this feeling is here?"
- Keep asking until you feel the slight shift that means "yes."
- Now ask, "Is there a story I'm telling myself that is helping to create this uncomfortable feeling? Is there a set of beliefs behind this feeling or emotion?"
- Once you've noticed them, ask, "Can I let go of this story or belief?"
- If the answer is yes (it isn't always, but sometimes its enough just to admit the possibility), then ask,
- "When?"
- This question, of course, invites you to answer "Now" and just by thinking that letting go can happen.
- Now repeat the process with the feeling—say anger, sadness, etc. You've already accepted it and realized that it's ok for it to be there. That may have been enough to ease your resistance. But at this point, you can ask yourself, "Can I let go of this feeling?"
- If the answer is "Yes," ask, "When?"
- And then, breathe it out. Gently. With no feeling of aversion.

Practice Vichara

Question your reality. Question it often. See if you can notice when you are acting from an assumption. Question that assumption. "Is this really true? Is what I think really true? Does it have to be this way? Am I acting from my best self?"

Then go deeper. Ask, again and again, "Who am I really?" or "Who or what is aware?" Don't settle for answers in words. Let the question take you to your deeper self! Journal about this practice.

Practice the Vichara from last week's homework, "From where does this thought arise?" focusing on your immediate experience of noticing the phenomenon of tracing a thought to its end and noticing where it disappears (*clue*: you will hopefully discover that it dissolves into the textured field of the mind) and from where thoughts arise. Eventually, the discovery will be that thoughts arise and subside in a felt space that is just there. In

other words, we eventually see that the mind field is spontaneously producing thoughts and feelings. At that point, it becomes possible to focus on that inner space from which thoughts arise.

Vichara for Dismantling Assumptions

(To be done with your partner or your journal.)

When you deliberately examine the hidden assumptions you live by, it is as if you are pulling them out of the shadows. Writing them down or speaking them out creates a distance between “you” and the belief or conditioned assumption. It’s very important when you practice this to identify with the one who observes the assumption rather than with the belief itself!

Below are some prompts to start with, but feel free to come up with your own.

If you are working with a partner, you can take turns sharing your sentence completion. Often your first instinctual answer is the true one. However, sometimes you need to go deeper as well to keep asking the question and uncover the beliefs under the beliefs. Your partner can help you do this by asking periodically, “Is there anything else?”

- In order to be loved, I need to...
- When there is conflict, I should...
- I deserve...
- I need...
- My parents taught me that ...
- To feel successful, I need to...
- My problem is...
- What I like about myself is...
- What I don’t like about myself is...

Practice Satsanga

Read the *Yoga Vasishtha*. Listen to the class. Share and answer questions on the discussion. Initiate a conversation about inner reality with a friend. Spend some time every day reading texts that remind you of the truth.

And if you’re inclined, invoke the presence of great gurus, saints, or deities. Or just ask that Being at the heart of reality be present with you. And notice how that affects your life!

When you spend a few minutes with the reading below, you are having deep Satsang!

As we did last week, try reading this before meditation. Then, tune into your own Awareness with the recognition that the awareness that is present in your experience, which exists as the foundational consciousness, the field of the mind, is this great consciousness referred to below. Just contemplate it for a moment and take the effects of it into meditation.

Reading Practice

“The infinite consciousness simultaneously pervades the three periods of time—past, present, and future—and experiences the infinite worlds. This consciousness experiences simultaneously what is sweet and what is bitter; it is tranquil and at peace. Because this consciousness is in itself free from all modifications (concepts and perceptions) and because it is subtle and experiences all things at the same time, it is ever at peace and homogeneous, even while apparently experiencing the diversity of diverse phenomena.

“When the apparently transformed becoming {that is, your mind!} resorts to or rests on that being which has not undergone any modification, the mind is freed from sorrow. When what is arising in the mind is seen by the innate awareness; and when what is seen by what is not (or by the mind in which there is no movement of thought), that which is abandons its wickedness. When consciousness abandons the perception of the three modes of time {that is, when it rests in the pure Now}, when it is freed from being tied to objects and concepts, it rests in utter tranquility....On account of the modification (thought), this consciousness is apparently veiled and is not realized.

“I salute the self! Salutations to myself—the undivided consciousness, the jewel of all the seen and the unseen worlds! You have indeed been reached! You have been touched! You have been gained!

“It is this self or consciousness that activates the mind even as wind rustles the leaves; it makes the senses function as the rider guides the horse.

“This self alone is to be sought, adored, and meditated upon.... It is attained in one’s own body without even the need to call upon it: it manifests itself and reveals itself even if it is contemplated for an instant!”

If you are working with a partner, discuss your understanding of these passages from pp 193-194 of *The Concise Yoga Vasishtha*

Reading 2: Finally, for those who are spending time with the text, you can read the whole story about Queen Lila and Saraswati. Then, you might discuss with your partner how you understand it and how it applies to you.

Some questions you might consider in a partner discussion based on this story:

- Have you ever had an experience of parallel realities? Describe it.
- Have you ever had a dream that was later seen to be referring to something that happened in the so-called ‘real world’? What was it?
- Have you ever seen or experienced another plane of existence in a dream or meditation? Describe it.

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?