

MEDITATION – PART I

SWAMI KRISHNANANDA

The Divine Life Society

Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, India

Website: www.swami-krishnananda.org

Generally, *asana* and *pranayama* are considered by people as the whole of yoga. When you speak of yoga, you speak of *asana* and *pranayama*, and breathing exercises. Mostly this is emphasised, with a little bit of meditation at the end of it. It is very important to know the significance of *asana* and *pranayama* in the practice of yoga.

There are things which are known as non-essentials, yet they are necessary things. A non-essential may be a necessary item. In a similar way, *asana* and *pranayama*, from the point of view of true yoga, are non-essentials—but they are necessary. Though the hand does not contribute anything to the digestion of food by the stomach, the hand is necessary so that the food may go into the stomach.

There are different types of yoga *asanas*: those which are directly connected with meditation, and those which are indirectly related to it. The postures which are known as meditational poses are directly connected with yoga practice; but the other ones— *sirshasan*, *sarvangasan*, and so many, hundreds and hundreds—do not play an active, direct role in the practice of yoga, though they are essential in order to bring about flexibility of the body.

The body is usually rigid; it maintains one posture only. That it may be enabled to adjust itself to any kind of eventuality calls for such exercises as may keep the body fit and agile. That much is of course the credit that you have to give to other kinds of *asanas*; but the meditational posture is the crucial one.

You have to be seated in meditation. You cannot stand and meditate. You cannot lie down and meditate either, because if you lie down and then start meditating, you are likely to dose off because of the relaxation of the body. If you stand and meditate, you may fall down due to the legs not being paid sufficient attention to at that time. *Asinah sambhavat* (B.S. 4.1.7) is the *sutra* in the Brahma Sutra. The Brahma Sutra has one small prescription—*asinah sambhavat*—sitting is the best position.

When you are seated, it is expected that the spine should be straight, because the spine is the vehicle through which certain nerves pass, affecting the general posture of the whole body. The spinal column has much influence on the health, as well as the satisfaction of even the mind, because of the confluence of varieties of nerves through the column of the spine. It is not very comfortable to sit straight with head, neck and spine kept in a straight line, because generally nobody sits like that. If there is a difficulty in maintaining this posture as prescribed, the suggestion given is that, in the initial stages, sit leaning against a wall that is perpendicular to the ground. It will enable you to free yourself from aches which may unnecessarily be caused by straining in the sitting posture.

When you are well-equipped with this technique of sitting, you may not need to have the wall or anything else

to recline or lean against. The purpose of this meditational posture, *dhyana asana*, is to bring about a balance in the functioning of the nerves and the muscles of the body, so that any kind of agitation, friction, or discomfort that one may usually feel may be eliminated by a harmonious positioning of the muscles, which are connected with the nervous system also, at the same time. The advice of Sage Patanjali in this connection is: that is the suitable posture which is comfortable. The *sutra* is very generous in its prescription and does not say that you must sit only in this posture. Whichever is comfortable and easy, that may be the posture that you may choose.

The purpose behind this seatedness, practiced for a long time, protractedly, is to bring about a rapprochement between nature outside and the physical condition of one's own self. There is, generally, in daily life, an opposition between nature's operation and the physical body's whims and fancies. You are irked by the operations of nature. You do not like it when it rains, or when it is hot, or it is cold, or it is blowing—nothing of the kind is pleasing to you, but you cannot give any order to nature to behave only in this manner. You have to, somehow or other, adjust yourself to what you may regard as the whim and fancy of nature's behaviour, though it has its own system and method—very scientific indeed. When you are seated in this posture, perfectly poised, the impact of natural forces is not felt so intensely as you generally feel otherwise. You may not feel even hunger and thirst as acutely as you would feel when you are in a normal condition, if the posture is steady.

The *asana* is not merely a physical exercise; the mind has direct connection with the posture. To give an example,

suppose you are in *sirshasana* but you are thinking of some problem such as tomorrow you have to book a ticket for the railway train or you have to fly on such and such a date; if these thoughts are in the mind while you are physically doing *sirshasana*, etc., it is not only useless but it is even dangerous. The mind and body go together. We are not physical beings; we are psychophysical beings. The mind is not somewhere, outside the body, unconnected with it. They are juxtaposed integrally, so that you cannot know where the body is and where the mind is.

Hence, it is the mind-body action that is taking place in *asana*, not merely the body. It is very important to remember that the mind has to be calm at that time. If the mind is agitated, the body cannot be calm. This is the reason why, in the Yoga Shastra, *asana* comes as a stage after *yamas* and *niyamas*. No yoga scripture says that first of all you must do *asana* only. *Yama* and *niyama* are the first and second stages, and *asana* is the third, with *pranayama* afterwards. The reason is that when the emotions are not still, the body also cannot be stilled. A torn feeling cannot get on with the attempt at positioning the body in a perfect way. We generally do not believe that mind and body go together. There is no mind and body, really speaking—there is no ‘and’ between them. The mind is the body and the body is the mind, in one way. They are organically related, so to say. They are one and the same thing appearing as two phases of performance.

Therefore, do not imagine that you can think anything in your mind and go to the yoga class. You will be harming yourself. The conflict between the harmonising of the body in *asana* and the mental disturbance will be a harmful thing

in the long run. The mind and the body should not be in a state of conflict. You are positioning the body, in the *asana*, to keep it in a state of balance, but your mind is disturbed at the time. Then the yoga *asana* will not bring you any benefit; it may even harm you afterwards.

Yoga is a spiritual exercise, finally. It is not a mechanical behavior of the body. Inasmuch as it is spiritual, it is integral; it is all things put together. You cannot say, "I will do yoga *asana* only, and later on I can do other things." There is no later on; they are all interconnected in a successively advancing evolutionary process of yoga, and you cannot disconnect one bit of process from another bit. An organic movement in the process of evolution is made up of bits of process, no doubt, for casual vision, but they are vitally connected. There is a life permeating through every bit of the process of evolution, and all the eight stages of yoga mentioned are organically related. You cannot say, "I will do *asana* only for two years, then afterwards I will do *pranayama* for three years." You should not think like that, because you are a whole being and your *prana*, your physical body and sense-organs, and your mind and reason do not stand apart from one another. So, even the first attempt at yoga *asana* is a crucial and important process.

When you are seated in a meditational pose, the jerk that the body feels on the impact of natural forces gets diminished gradually. You can do it yourself and see what happens to you. Sit leaning against a wall, because you should not strain yourself even in the posture. Do not move at all, and slowly, imperceptibly, carry on the breathing process without thinking about the breath. Let the breath

go on as it is accustomed to do; you should not think of the breath at that time. Breathe as you are normally accustomed to. Be seated, and breathe normally. Do not think that you are doing yoga and then interfere with the breathing process. You are just sitting comfortably. If you sit for a half an hour like this, the biting cold will be felt lesser in its intensity. Even hunger and thirst will not be felt at that time, because the metabolic process is also, to some extent, controlled when you are seated so calmly. The feeling of pain of any kind is due to the action of metabolism taking place inside. That is subdued by the positioning of the body in meditational pose. *Tato dvandvah anabhighatah* (Y.S. 2.48) is a *sutra* of Patanjali. *Sthira sukham asanam* (Y.S. 2.46): Comfortable posture is the suitable *asana*. Then what happens? *Tato dvandvah anabhighatah*: The dualities of the forces of nature will not attack you as they do generally because, in this positioning of the body, you are trying to be in harmony with the natural forces and not set yourself in opposition to them. This is the reason why you feel subdued, calm and quiet, even merely by sitting quietly. But again it has to be repeated: what is the mind thinking? Your desires will tell what kind of person you are. As yoga is a total approach of yourself to the total reality of the universe, your mind also should be in a total position, together with the total posture that is maintained by the body. Otherwise, there would be a jarring note created by certain aspects of your personality not going hand in hand with the other attempts that you are attending to. This much regarding the *asana* in meditation is quite enough information for you.

There are a lot of things told about the breathing process. Rightly or wrongly, people go on interfering with the breathing process, thinking that it is a kind of yoga by itself; and most people, in one kind of technique that they are initiated into, think that breathing itself is all-in-all. There is a great truth in saying that the breathing process, carried on harmoniously, has a very important role to play in the positioning of your personality. But, you have to be properly initiated into this technique. There are varieties of ways of breathing called *pranayamas*, and eight of them at least are mentioned in the Yoga Shastras. These are not necessary, even as many of the *asanas* are not essential in meditation.

In the beginning what you should do is, while you are seated in this required posture, breathe normally, slowly, comfortably, allowing the *prana*, the breathing process, to move as it would like to move without your pressure on it. Never command the breath to move only in a particular manner. As you are breathing now, for instance, you are not thinking of the breath at all in your mind; your mind is thinking of what I am speaking and you are not thinking of the breath. Yet, at the same time, the breathing process is going on very comfortably and you are happy. Let it go on. This is the first stage: just allow the breath to move as comfortably as possible, without interfering with it in any manner whatsoever.

The next stage is, think of the breath—feel that you are breathing. What do you feel at that time? You feel the nostrils act as a passage for the movement of breath. Watch, first of all, whether the *prana* or the *vayu* is moving through the right nostril or the left nostril. Sometimes the

breathing may take place through both the nostrils, though very rarely. Often, in a disturbed condition, the *prana* moves through one nostril only. When the right nostril becomes the avenue of the movement of the *prana*, you will feel warmth. When the *prana* moves through the left nostril, you will feel cool, and if it continues for a very long time, not allowing the right nostril to operate, you may even catch a cold. In the night, when you are sleeping, usually Ayurveda Shastra and systems of this kind tell us to sleep on the left side, because when you sleep on the left side, the right nostril will start operating. When you sleep on the right side, the left nostril will start operating. As the usual heat in the body, which you feel during daytime, normally gets diminished in the state of sleep, it is good to keep the body warm by allowing the *prana* to move through the right nostril which is the *surya nadi*, as they call it, the solar breath which will heat up the system when otherwise all the activities are subdued to a large extent in the state of deep sleep. But if you sleep on the right side, you will feel chillness, and you may even sneeze. Generally when you have a cold, you will find that the right nostril does not operate at all. There will be sneezing, and then liquid coming out from the left nostril due to the *surya nadi* not operating. This is by the way.

So, watch the breath—how it moves through the right or the left nostril. Whatever be the way the breath is moving, allow it to move in that way. Take a deep breath inside. Now you are sitting. In the same posture as you are sitting, start deliberately inhaling and not just inadvertently breathing as you are doing usually. Deliberate, conscious attempts should be made to breathe slowly, inwardly and

outwardly. You generally breathe in a shallow manner; your breath is shallow, it is not deep. It has to become as deep as possible. You cannot make it deep in ordinary life. Therefore, sufficient oxygen is not going into the lungs. It affects the health, because more carbon dioxide may be there in contrast with the less quantity of oxygen due to shallow breathing, and that is why you yawn sometimes—that is, the carbon dioxide pushes itself out, as you are not allowing it to function normally in its own way.

When this is carried on, take an inhalation—deeply, slowly, not with a jerk—and for one, two, three seconds, hold the breath. Not more than that—tic, tic, tic—for three seconds, hold the breath and then slowly bring it out. I am not talking of alternate breathing through the nostrils. It is a natural, spontaneous breathing in the way it is carried on by the organism according to its convenience and practice. The only thing that you have to do at that time, with your effort, is to see that the breathing is a little deep. As much as possible, draw the breath inside, without making a jerk or anything—very slowly—and hold it for three seconds, and then breathe out. Every day, early in the morning, please do this, if not for yoga, at least for your health. For fifteen minutes before you take your tea, coffee, milk, breakfast or whatever it is, after a bath if possible, sit like this in a comfortable pose, and deeply breathe in without putting effort on the breath, allowing it to move as it would like to do, but with the consciousness that it should be as deep as possible, and retain it in the form of a *kumbaka*, as you may say, for a few seconds only, and then breathe out gradually. You will feel very much energised if you do this. You will also be happy, because you are cooperating with the natural

ways in which the body and the mind have to function for maintaining good health. Usually you are disturbed in your mind; you have got anxieties of a hundred types. At that time you gasp, and oftentimes breathe heavily. This is a sign of total disturbance in the physical and mental system which upsets everything, including digestion and good sleep. Fifteen minutes in the beginning—this practice will be sufficient. Deeply inhale through both nostrils, or through either nostril, and retain it for a few seconds, and breathe out. Let this practice go on for days together; perhaps for your lifetime you can do this practice in order to maintain health.

Later on, when you are well-equipped with this technique, you can increase the retention from 2-3 seconds to a double or triple quantum of retention without causing discomfort. You should never feel suffocation when the breath is held. If suffocation is felt and there is discomfort, it means you are not for that purpose. Be happy and comfortable, always, even in the breathing exercise.

People generally say alternate breathing is good. This is called *sukapurak pranayama*. You are all acquainted with this process very well, so I need not go into the details. Your yoga class, your instructor must be telling you all these things—the proportional breathing, proportionate retention, and so on. You may do that. But for the purpose of meditation, that alternate breathing is also not necessary; normal breathing is sufficient. This will contribute to maintaining good health. The harmonisation of muscular and nervous activity with the breathing process is the main point in question. But all this effort of yours—physically and in terms of breathing—depends much upon how you

think in your mind, how you feel, and what you actually want.

Before you start doing yoga, ask yourself—what do you want? Most people cannot answer this question. What do you want? It is a terrible question. You cannot say what you want. Here, a little bit of philosophy is good. Philosophy is the art of finding the ultimate causes of things; not immediate causes only, but the final causes. You want something just now. But why do you want that? You want it because if you do not get it, some trouble arises. That trouble arises because of a cause behind this feeling of immediate necessity. There is cause behind cause, cause behind cause, until you reach a point where you cannot think of any further cause. A causeless cause is the state you reach, which is a state of perfect rest.

In this condition adjust yourself gradually, and you will find that the agitations of the sense organs also cease, to a large extent, because the *pranas*, the breathing, constitute the dynamo discharging energy for the sense organs so that they may move in the direction they like for the fulfilment of their desires. All desire is a disturbance of the system. Every desire is an attempt to move away from one's own self, and there cannot be a greater disease than the pressure to move out of oneself and become other than one's own self. In all desire, or fulfilment of desire, you become other than what you are, and it is a wretched condition. So every person who has any kind of desire is unhappy. This clamouring of the sense organs to jet forth outwardly into the objects outside is also controlled by the subdual of the breathing process, because the energy for the sense organs to activate themselves comes from *prana*, or breathing.

You cannot maintain a posture of peace of mind, which is the necessary background for the practice of yoga, unless your desires are stilled. To do something or not to do something, to have something or have not something—this is the desire. This must be stilled and brought to a position of poise. How is it possible? Either you fulfil all your desires, in which case of course there will be poise of the sense organs, or you have the understanding to feel that it is not necessary to fulfil these desires. These two aspects you have to consider very well. Are you going to fulfil all your desires so that you may have peace, as you call it? Do you believe that the fulfilment of desires will bring peace of mind? This is a moot question. A person who drinks liquor feels that he is in a state of satisfaction, but that satisfaction creates another agitation to repeat that process of drinking more liquor, so that he may expect greater satisfaction. It goes on like this until the whole body croaks, and he ruins himself. Desire is a devil. It wants to extract blood from your body, and wants to see that you remain as a corpse, though you do not know that this process is taking place.

A metaphysical meditation, in terms of the ultimate causes of things, will make you realise that you are a fool in allowing desires to move along their own lines. Desires are deceivers and thieves of the first water. Either you realise this by your acute understanding, or you go along the lines of fulfilling desires. You will be between the horns of a dilemma as to how you will handle this difficulty. For awhile you will feel that it is impossible to fulfil all the desires, just as if you dig a cave, more and more mud will fall and it will never end, and the cave will become wider and wider, and there is no end for this mud falling down.

The cave of desire will go on expanding until it yawns to swallow you up. There is no end for your desire. Though you may unintelligently feel that you have only one or two desires, they are only the tip of the iceberg of your uncontrolled ocean of desires lying down, sleeping, in your subconscious and unconscious levels.

I have been telling you again and again that you cannot do this practice without some guide who has trodden the path and who knows what the difficulties are. Do not dabble with your *prana* or with your desires and imagine that you can have austerities of your own without proper guidance. You want a light ahead of you to move along the path. You cannot move in darkness, not knowing what is ahead of you.

Thus, there is to be seen a living connection between your thought process, your desires, your longings, your positive and negative attitudes, and the muscular activity and *nervous* function and breathing process and sensory activity—all are a simultaneous movement of hundreds of waves of the same ocean of your personality. This is a brief introduction to you on the very important subject of *yama* and *niyama*—control of desire, behavioural pattern to be set in poise—*asana*, *pranayama* and the restraint of desires by what is generally called restraint of contact of the senses with the objects, known as *pratyahara*, which is a very difficult process indeed. Then comes meditation. So, do not think that suddenly you can meditate on that. Unless the ladder is firm, you cannot climb up to the pedestal of meditational process. This is the foundation of yoga, of which you have to be fully aware and exercise great caution, move very slowly but perfectly, and be sure that all is well

with you inside and outside also—everywhere, all is well
with you.