



YOGA JOURNEY  
ADELAIDE

# Moving Towards Meditation

*“Nowadays, the practice of Yoga stops with just āsana-s. Very few even attempt dhāraṇā and dhyāna (deeper meditation) with seriousness. There is a need to search once more and re-establish the practice and value of Yoga in modern times”.*

*- T Krishnamacharya*

For many people the practice of yoga postures (āsana) is the gateway to Yoga. But did you know Yoga is a *mano śāstra*: a teaching for the mind?

In Yoga darśanam (the philosophy of Yoga), the mind is considered both the cause of suffering and the solution.

The reason the mind is the cause of suffering is because we confuse the mind with our consciousness (or puruṣa), believing it to be the main source of perception. What we don't realise is that the mind is a multi-layered lens through which our consciousness (or puruṣa) observes the external world. As such, if the mind is coloured, with emotions or past impressions for example, the observation is coloured. When the mind is clear, the observation is perfect. Since consciousness (puruṣa) can observe only through the mind, the quality of observation depends solely upon the state of mind. Ergo, the mind is also the solution. We must work with the mind, making it steadily clearer so that observation by the puruṣa becomes progressively clearer.

Yoga is the means for cleaning that lens through which puruṣa observes. In fact, every technique of Yoga, if applied appropriately, should bring a qualitative change in the mind of the practitioner<sup>1</sup>. Even when we work with the body using āsana techniques, the main focus is to apply our mind in the practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr N Chandrasekaran, First Four Yoga Sūtra-s, p. 54

And while every tool of Yoga if applied appropriately, has the potential to clean that lens through which puruṣa observes, meditation is the most potent tool. In the words of Krishnamacharya, “dhyānāt śuddham cittaṁ nityam”<sup>2</sup> - practice meditation, purify the mind.

## What is Meditation?

Research shows there is a lot of uncertainty and mystery around meditation: what it actually is, the process and what happens during meditation.

For many, the word conjures up images of people sitting very still, in silence, with closed eyes, actively trying to empty their mind of the thousands of thoughts wizzing around.

Meditation is not a technique, it is a journey<sup>3</sup>. It is the ultimate state of mental discipline achieved by pulling back the mind to a chosen point of focus. Through regular practice and discipline the mind ascends in levels of concentration until only one thought is present. When we arrive at a state of meditation, the object of focus and the mind become linked and a relationship is created. In the words of Frans Moors, “The meditator makes himself open to the energy of his chosen object of focus; it permeates him, and he allows this object to resonate through him”<sup>4</sup>.

## Preparing the Mind for Meditation

For many people, focusing their mind for even a few minutes without proper preparation can be quite challenging and frustrating. In the Bhagavad Gīta, Arjuna confesses to Kṛṣṇa that he finds the mind as difficult to control as the wind<sup>5</sup>. Most people who have ever ‘just sat down and tried to meditate’ will agree with this. In his conversation with Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna describes the mind as unsteady and turbulent, tenacious and powerful<sup>6</sup>. This is because the mind is constantly active with thoughts, emotions and memories. It is also constantly bombarded with new information coming in through the senses.

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<sup>2</sup> T Krishnamacharya, Yogāñjalisāram, p. 64

<sup>3</sup> TKV Desikachar, <https://yogastudies.org/2019/05/meditation-is-not-a-technique-it-is-a-journey/>

<sup>4</sup> Frans Moors, Liberating Isolation, p. 132

<sup>5</sup> Bhagavad Gīta, ślokaḥ 6:34

<sup>6</sup> Bhagavad Gīta, ślokaḥ 6:34

To be able to focus the mind and sustain that focus, we need to replace patterns of distraction with patterns of attention and stability. To facilitate this we need to clean the mind and bring the senses under control.

To help us, Patañjali gives us aṣṭāṅga yoga which, when appropriately applied, elevates and refines the mind, progressively moving us towards the practice of meditation.

The first five limbs - known as bahiraṅga sādhana- prepare the mind for turning inwards for the practice of meditation.

## Yama-s and Niyama-s

The Yama-s are attitudes that we cultivate towards our external environment while the Niyama-s are attitudes that we cultivate towards ourselves.

When applied to our day-to-day activities, the yama-s and niyama-s help reduce distractions and unnecessary involvement with the outside world, and help us avoid self-inflicted suffering (physical, emotional and mental) thereby reducing mental activity.

The yama-s and niyama-s form the foundation for the practice of Yoga. Indeed, Krishnamacharya argues that none of the tools of Yoga will be useful if we do not observe the yama-s and the niyama-s<sup>7</sup>.

## Āsana

Āsana not only helps to prepare the body for sitting in a comfortable position for the practice of meditation, but also helps prepare the mind. In the practice of āsana, the body and breath become the objects of focus for the mind, and when we synchronise the movement of the body with the breath, we train the mind to become more focussed.

## Prāṇāyāma

When we practice prāṇāyāma the breath becomes the focus for the mind.

The breath is intrinsically connected to the mind and this relationship flows both ways. As stated in the Haṭhayogapradipikā (II:2): When the breath is agitated, the mind is unsteady. When the breath becomes steady, the mind also is steady.

Prāṇāyāma, or regulation of the breath, is considered the highest tapas (cleansing technique) that can, through appropriate practice, reduce the obstacles that inhibit clear perception.

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7 T Krishnamacharya, Yoga Makaranda, p. 26

These two qualities - steadiness of mind and clarity - are the reasons prāṇāyāma is considered an important pre-requisite for meditation, and are essential for progressing forward on the path of aṣṭāṅga yoga.

## Pratyāhāra

Pratyāhāra is restraint of the senses. In the Bhagavad Gīta, Kṛṣṇa likens pratyāhāra to a tortoise which withdraws its limbs in response to a threat.

Pratyāhāra is not a practice per se, but a state that occurs spontaneously as a result of appropriate practice. Pratyāhāra develops over time: with continual observance of the yama-s and niyama-s and appropriate practice of āsana, prāṇāyāma and dhāraṇā the senses begin to faithfully follow the direction of the mind, disregarding the different objects.

In terms of reaching a state of meditation, Kṛṣṇa, in the Bhagavad Gīta, tells Arjuna repeatedly of the importance of controlling the functions of the mind and senses<sup>8</sup>, of drawing back the restless and fidgety mind from all those objects after which it runs<sup>9</sup>, and of completely renouncing all desires arising from thoughts of worldly desires and fully restraining all the senses<sup>10</sup>. Without pratyāhāra the mind remains restless and reaching a state of meditation remains out of our reach. Regular practice of the first four limbs of aṣṭāṅga yoga, particularly prāṇāyāma, pave the way for bringing the senses under control.

## The Practice of Meditation

*Respecting yama and niyama start āsana, refine the body, lengthen the breath.*

*Then through pratyāharā, discipline of the senses, begin the first step of dhāraṇā.*

*- T Krishnamacharya<sup>11</sup>*

Once the the body is steady and easeful, the breath is long and smooth, the mind is steady and the senses have been brought under control, the practitioner is ready for the first stage of meditation.

The practice of meditation comprises dhāraṇā, dhyānam and samādhi, the last 3 limbs of Patañjali-s aṣṭāṅga yoga. Together they are known as antaraṅga sādhanā which means

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<sup>8</sup> Bhagavad Gīta, ślokaḥ 6:12

<sup>9</sup> Bhagavad Gīta, ślokaḥ 6:25

<sup>10</sup> Bhagavad Gīta, ślokaḥ 6:24

<sup>11</sup> T Krishnamacharya, Dhyānamalika, ślokaḥ 12

'internal practice'. Understanding these 3 aṅga-s shines a light on the process of meditation and what happens when we meditate.

Movement between these three aṅga-s becomes much more subtle compared to the first four limbs. Demarcation between them is blurred and the practitioner will oscillate from one to another until he or she becomes well established in practice.

## Dhāraṇā

Dhāraṇā comes from the root word 'dha' which means 'to hold'. Often translated as concentration, it means 'to hold the mind on the object'.

Without dhāraṇā, the next step of dhyānam is not possible. We must first train the mind to focus on a chosen object and sustain that focus for a certain period of time without distraction before we can move to the next stage.

Like everything in Yoga, the practice has to be appropriate. We must begin simply, at a level that is suitable for the practitioner, using objects of focus that support the mind and propagate positivity. Here the guidance of a teacher is essential because it is important to choose an object of focus that helps us advance on the path of Yoga.

As we progress, we can increase the complexity of the object of focus, making the transition from the gross (that which has form and which can be seen by the mind), to more subtle concepts (the formless).

## Dhyānam

Dhyānam is the outcome of the practice of dhāraṇā. One leads to the other. With prolonged focus on one object, concentration becomes meditation.

When we reach a state of dhyānam, the practitioner is able to direct the mind exclusively towards an object and sustain focus in that direction without any distractions<sup>12</sup>. The object of focus shines radiantly and only one thought is present in the mind.

## Samādhi

Just as dhyānam is the outcome of the continuous practice of dhāraṇā, it is only through the continuous practice of dhyānam that we will experience samādhi.

Samādhi is a state of complete absorption. The meditator, linked with the chosen object in a state of dhyānam, is so involved in his or her object of focus that nothing except its awareness exists.

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<sup>12</sup> TKV Desikachar, Reflections on Yoga Sūtra-s of Patañjali, p. 19

Often considered elusive and out of the reach of most practitioners, Samādhi is not so much a destination but a process in itself which has many subtle layers. With practice the mind is refined and ascends in levels of clarity and discernment. What starts as perfect contemplation with full consciousness of an object, becomes reflective contemplation, then intuitive, then beatific, until finally the practitioner experiences full consciousness of self<sup>13</sup>. The lens that the puruṣa looks through has become so clear that it reflects what is inside of us: our true consciousness.

## Parameters for Success

Just like Arjuna, Patañjali recognises that attempts to bring the mind to a state of focus are fraught with obstacles of varying potency. To be successful we require discipline in practice, detachment from the results of our actions and a healthy dose of faith in our ability to succeed against all odds.

And while meditation culminating in a state of deep absorption in the object one meditates upon (samādhi) is the pinnacle of Patañjali's aṣṭāṅga yoga, it cannot be the initial goal. We must start simply and increase in complexity slowly over time. For this we need the guidance of an experienced teacher.

Yoga is both a sādhanā and a siddhi: a practice and the result of that practice. Yoga should lead us somewhere new, help us achieve something we have not achieved before - in our daily lives as well as our Yoga practice. So while the practice of āsana is an excellent way to start our journey with Yoga, if our practice of it is appropriate, it should gradually and imperceptibly lead us beyond.

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Polly Holmes is both a teacher of Yoga and Vedic Chant. She began her own Yoga journey in earnest almost twenty years ago. A teacher in the tradition of T Krishnamacharya, Polly has had the privilege of studying with Barbara Brian at Āgama Yoga Centre in Melbourne as well as at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram in Chennai. Polly is passionate about all aspects of Yoga and offers workshops and training as well as regular group classes. She has an aptitude for Yoga Philosophy, Vedic Chanting and the use of mantra in āsana, prāṇāyāma and meditation.

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard Bouanchaud, The Essence of Yoga, p. 25