

Swami Bhajananda

# Types of Meditation

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# TYPES OF MEDITATION

by Swami Bhajanananda

## PART ONE

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Before we begin the study of different types of meditation it is necessary to keep in mind two important points. One is that meditation is not just ordinary concentration but a special type of internal concentration. [See "Concentration and Meditation—Part I", *Prabuddha Bharata* July 1980]

The second point is that meditation is not an entirely independent discipline but a stage in concentration common to almost all spiritual paths. Each path of *sadhana* or spiritual discipline begins in a different way. But every path has a stage which corresponds to meditation. The name given to this common stage varies from path to path. But whatever be the name given, it means some form of meditative awareness.

Patanjali's Yoga begins with purification of the mind, posture and breath control followed by withdrawal of the mind from external objects (*pratyahara*) and fixing the mind (*dharana*) at a particular centre. Then comes meditation (*dhyana*). The path of *jnana* begins with hearing scripture (*sravana*) and reflection (*manana*). This leads to inquiry (*nididhyasana*) which corresponds to meditation. In the path of *bhakti*, the aspirant moves from prayer, singing of hymns and worship to meditation which is known under different names like *abhyasa* (Ramanuja), *smarana* and *bhavana*. Even in the path of karma one finds the need to maintain self-awareness in the midst of work. In fact the Zen masters speak of "action meditation," "walking meditation," etc. Buddhism gives more importance to meditation than any other religion does. In Christianity the main spiritual discipline is called prayer. It consists of several stages or "degrees." First comes vocal prayer, then discursive prayer (which corresponds to *manana* or reflection in Vedanta), then affective prayer (prayer proper, done with intense longing). Then follows the fourth degree of prayer which is variously called prayer of simplicity, prayer of the heart,

etc. This fourth degree corresponds to Hindu meditation or *dhyana*. In Islamic mysticism (Sufism) also meditation, known under different names, plays a central role.

In every path the aspirant begins with a large number of thoughts in the mind. These gradually become reduced, and the aspirant reaches a stage when there exists only a single *pratyaya* or thought in the mind. This is the state of meditative awareness. It is the common highway which every aspirant has to travel in order to realize God or the Supreme Self. Beyond this common path lies the luminous realm of the Spirit.

Then why are there so many different techniques of meditation? These are really techniques of *dharana* or fixing the mind. They are like different gates which open to the same highway. These techniques only teach you how to begin meditation, they only open different doors to meditative awareness. But they do not teach you how to maintain meditation, which is something you have to learn through practice.

This does not, however, mean that the goal of meditation is the same for all. The goal is determined by the beginning, that is by the *dharana* technique that you follow. Each technique of *dharana* leads you through meditation to a certain experience. The beginnings and ends of meditation are different. But the process of meditation itself is the same in so far as a single thought is maintained. The nature of this single thought (*pratyaya* or *vritti*) may also vary from person to person. For instance, one may meditate on Siva or Krishna or Jesus or an impersonal object like light or the sky or the sun. Nevertheless, the essential meditative process—the maintenance of a single *pratyaya* or *vritti*—is the same whatever be the object meditated upon.

Meditation thus acts as a great junction where all spiritual paths converge, meet, go together for a short distance—and then diverge again to their respective goals. Meditation may also be compared to a broad road having several tracks or "lanes" marked on them for the guidance of motorists. Each meditator keeps to his own "lane" but all the lanes are parts of one great highway.

#### **Meditation—Subjective and Objective**

Meditation is of two types: subjective and objective. Objective

meditation is concentration of the mind on an object. The object may be the form of a deity, light, sky, etc. or some qualities like love, compassion, strength or one's own self objectified. Consciousness is focused on the object by an effort of will. Objective meditation is called *upasana*.

Subjective meditation is called *nididhyasana* or *atma-vicara*. Here there is no focusing of consciousness or effort of will. It is rather an attempt to seek the source of consciousness, to trace one's "I" back to its roots. It is a process in which the ego, instead of rushing towards objects as it constantly does, withdraws into its own original source—the Atman.

The majority of spiritual aspirants find *nididhyasana*, subjective meditation, difficult to practise. They succeed in tracing their "I" back only up to a certain point. To penetrate further backward is possible only for a mind which is properly sharpened through training and strengthened by the observance of continence. *Upasana* or objective meditation gives the mind the necessary training. After practising *upasana* for some time it becomes easier to practise *nididhyasana*. In fact, Madhusudana Sarasvati in his *Advaita Siddhi* classifies aspirants for *jnana* into two groups: *kritopasti* (those who have attained proficiency in *upasana*) and *akritopasti* (those who go directly to inquiry without practising *upasana*).

According to Mandana and some of the earlier schools of Advaitins, *upasana* can give rise to direct realization of Nirguna Brahman (the Absolute without attributes). But Sri Sankara and his followers hold the view that *upasana* will lead only to the realization of Saguna Brahman (Reality with attributes). Sankara states that the benefit derived from *upasana* is either worldly prosperity (*abhyudaya*) or "gradual liberation" (*krama-mukti*). In other words, *upasana* is only a preparation for *nididhyasana*. On the other hand, Sri Ramanuja holds the view that *upasana* can lead to full liberation. He even identifies it with *bhakti*.

The difference between *upasana* and *nididhyasana* as two different disciplines has also been clearly pointed out by Ramatirtha in his well-known commentary on the *Vedanta Sara*.<sup>1</sup> Vidyaranya

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1. *Upasananam jnanad bhedam darsayati manasavyapararupaniti / Nididhyasana bhedamaha saguneti// Vidvanmanoranjani on Vedanta Sara 1. 12.*

too has made this distinction by describing *upasana* as *vastu-tantra* (object-oriented) and *nididhyasana* as *kartri-tantra* (subject-oriented).<sup>2</sup>

A similar distinction is found in Buddhism. Buddhist meditations are of two types: One is *samatha* (*samadhi* in Sanskrit) or mental concentration of various kinds leading to different mystic experiences. Tibetan Buddhists are specialists in this kind of meditation. These meditation techniques existed even before Buddha who himself practised them. But he was not satisfied with them because they did not lead to total liberation. He regarded these mystic states only as "happy living in this existence" (*dittha-dhamma-sukha-vihara*) and nothing more. According to him mystic experiences are created or conditioned by the mind. He therefore went further and discovered the other form of meditation known as *vipassana* (*vipasyanam* in Sanskrit) or "insight." It is an analytic method which involves constant mindfulness and awareness of all experiences, good and bad. It is not a withdrawal from life but an attempt to understand life and thus enlarge one's self-awareness. The most authoritative scripture for *vipassana* is the *Satipatthana-Sutta* included in the Buddhist *Tripitaka*. (The "choiceless awareness" technique of the well-known contemporary teacher J. Krishnamurthy comes close to this method.) It was more or less a similar distinction between objective and subjective meditations that gave rise to the two schools of Japanese Zen: Soto and Rinzai.

What is common to both subjective and objective meditation is a distinct awareness of a higher centre of consciousness, the higher Self. In both, awareness is not allowed to move too far away from this centre. But whereas in objective meditation a circle of consciousness is created around the centre and there is a struggle to shut out distracting thoughts from this inner circle, in subjective meditation there is no such struggle: the aspirant just holds on to the "I" centre. Strictly speaking, *nididhyasana* is not meditation though it is translated that way. It is more correctly called "self-inquiry" and belongs to the path of knowledge (*jnana marga*). Here we are concerned only with *upasana*.

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2. Vastutantro bhaved bodhah kartutantramupasanam. *Pancadasi* 9. 74.

### Need for Combining Subjective and Objective Meditations

It is, however, important to keep in mind that these two types of meditation are not mutually contradictory. They actually complement each other and can be practised together.

Most of the meditation techniques taught to aspirants are *upasanas*. Spiritual initiation (*diksa* or *upadesa*) usually means initiation into some form of *upasana*. In the path of *bhakti* this is the only type of meditation practised. Even those who study books on Advaita seldom attempt self-inquiry in practise and remain satisfied with objective meditations. But though *nididhyasana* is mainly followed in the path of *jnana*, there is nothing wrong in following it in the path of *bhakti* also. Indeed it is better or even necessary to combine self-inquiry with *upasana*.

One of the aims of *upasana* is to establish a living relationship with God, "an eternal relationship between the eternal soul and the eternal God," as Swami Vivekananda puts it. The ordinary ego of which we are all so painfully aware is not eternal but is constantly undergoing change. Only the Atman, our true higher self, is unchanging and eternal. This means that, in order to establish a truly loving relationship with God, it is necessary to be aware of one's higher self. Self-inquiry leads the aspirant away from the ego towards the true self.

There is a second reason why a combination of objective and subjective forms of meditation is desirable. Meditation is usually done at a definite centre of consciousness, by which is meant the point where the aspirant is able to feel the higher self or Atman. It is there that the mind is to be fixed first, and it is there that the chosen deity is to be worshipped. What most aspirants attempt is to visualize a point of light or a lotus in the region of the heart or the head. But many people find this too unreal or abstract. A little *nididhyasana* or self-inquiry will, however, greatly help in locating the centre of the true self and make the lotus or light meaningful and real. Before the aspirant starts actual meditation, if he spends a few minutes in tracing the "I" back to its source, the aspirant will find it easier to fix the mind at the right centre of consciousness. And every time the mind wanders away from this centre, the aspirant may apply the same method. Once the mind is tied down to the true centre of consciousness, meditation on one's chosen deity becomes easy. This is a much better form of

mind control than the conventional ones. Those who do not feel intense devotion will find this combination of *nididhyasana* and *upasana* helpful.

Then there is a third point in favour of such a combination. *Upasana* increases one's power of concentration but does not necessarily increase one's power of self-control to an equal degree. As a result the aspirant may find it difficult to remain unaffected by the contact of other people and the cares and distractions of daily work. *Nididhyasana* enables the aspirant to abide in the real abode within and remain calm and unaffected by the environment.

Further, it prevents the aspirant from mistaking strong imaginations and hallucinations for genuine spiritual experience, as often happens in those who practise only objective meditation. A true spiritual experience transforms one's consciousness and produces some knowledge of the higher self. Self-inquiry is necessary to recognize this. Lastly, combining *nididhyasana* and *upasana* satisfies both the head and the heart.

#### Upasana in the Vedic Period

It is possible that even during the early Vedic period there were independent thinkers and groups of people who practised meditation as their chief spiritual discipline. That was perhaps how the Samkhya and Yoga systems developed independently of the Vedas.

In Vedic literature *upasana* first appears as a part of rituals in the Brahmanas (the part of the Veda which deals with rituals). The emphasis then was on sacrificial rites (*yajna*). In the Brahmanas we find a few meditations prescribed along with these rites. The sacrifice was regarded as most important and sufficient in itself to produce the desired results. The meditation that was practised along with it was only an auxiliary part of it and had no independent existence. The purpose of such meditations was to gain some additional merit and their omission in no way affected the sacrifices. This kind of *upasana* was called *angavabaddha* meaning "connected to parts (of the sacrifice)."<sup>3</sup>

Gradually, *upasana* became separated from the rituals. In the

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3. Cf. *Brahma-Sutra* 3. 3. 55.



Aranyakas we find meditations replacing actual sacrifices. But the meditations still resembled the sacrifices. They were mostly symbolic representations of external rituals. The whole external rite was, as it were, transferred to the mind. These *upasanas* may therefore be called "substitution-meditations." A well-known example is found in the very beginning of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad* which is an Aranyaka as well as an Upanisad. Here the sacrificial horse is to be meditated upon as identified with the Cosmic Being (*Virat* or *Prajapati*), the horse's head standing for the dawn, its eye for the sun, its *prana* for the air and so on.<sup>4</sup>

The next stage in the evolution of *upasana* is found in the Upanisads. Here meditations are in no way connected to rituals nor even symbolically resemble them. They directly deal with Brahman, the ultimate Reality. But Brahman is a transcendent principle which cannot be known through the ordinary senses and mind. So the great sages of the Upanisads used various familiar objects of the phenomenal universe like the sun, *akasa* (space), *vayu* (air), water, *prana* (the vital energy), *manas* (mind), words, etc. to represent Brahman.<sup>5</sup> However, what the sages attempted was not mere concentration of mind on one of these symbols. In that case it would have become only a form of the yogic exercise known as *dharana*. What they actually did was to connect each symbol to a certain framework of meaning—a spiritual formula. *Upasana* in the Upanisads are meditations on these spiritual formulas. These formulas are devices to guide the mind from the symbol to Reality. When a mind which is sufficiently purified meditates on such a formula, its true meaning—the ultimate Reality—will be revealed to it. These meditation formulas were called *vidyas*.

So then, *angavabaddhas* (in the Brahmanas), substitution-meditations (in the Aranyakas) and *vidyas* (in the Upanisads): these were the three stages in the evolution of *upasana* during the Vedic period. Sri Sankara says that lower *upasanas* do not deserve to be called *vidyas*.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Om usa va asvasya medhyasya sirah . . . *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad* 1.1.1.

5. See Paul Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanisads* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1966), pp. 99-125.

6. Sankara, commentary on *Brahma-Sutra* 3. 4. 52.

Therefore, *vidyas* represent the highest forms of *upasana*. The entire knowledge of the Upanisads came out of the meditations of the great *rishis* on these *vidyas*. It was through these meditations that they discovered the great truths that underlie the phenomenal universe. A scientist tries to understand the ultimate truth through a series of steps, meticulously analysing each step. But in ancient India the sages went straight to the Reality with the help of certain mental paradigms. Says Deussen: "That India more than any other country is the land of symbols is owing to the nature of Indian thought, which applied itself to the most abstruse problems before it was even remotely in a position to treat them intelligently."<sup>7</sup>

*Vidyas* are paradigms of Brahman. In ancient India each teacher developed his own concept model of Brahman and taught it as a meditation technique to his disciples. That was how so many *vidyas* came into existence. Some of the Upanisads, especially the *Brihadaranyaka*, *Chandogya* and *Taittiriya*, are a rich storehouse of these *vidyas*. The importance attached to the *vidyas* was so great that the *Brahma-Sutra* has a whole section dealing exclusively with them.<sup>8</sup> The *vidyas* really hold the key to the Upanisads, and no one can properly understand the Upanisads without understanding the *vidyas*.

The *vidyas* are said to be thirty-two in number,<sup>9</sup> but many more must have been known to the ancient sages. Among these *gayatri-vidya*, *antaraditya-vidya*, *madhu-vidya*, *sandilya-vidya* and *dahara-vidya* are well known. It is beyond the scope of the present article to deal with these *vidyas* in detail. They are to be learnt directly from competent teachers who have attained illumination through them. But long before the beginning of the Christian era the lineage of Vedic *rishis* had ended. And in the absence of a living tradition, the *vidyas* ceased to be practised and their true inner meaning was soon forgotten.

One major cause for the neglect of the *vidyas* was the rise of

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7. *The Philosophy of the Upanisads*, p.120.

8. *Brahma-Sutra* 3. 3.

9. Cf. K. Narayanaswami Aiyar, *The Thirty-two Vidyas* (Madras: The Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1962). Also cf. Swami Gambhirananda, "Upanisadic Meditation," in *The Cultural Heritage of India* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1965), Vol.1

Buddhism and its influence on Hindu thought. A second reason was the crystallization of Hindu philosophy into six schools or *darsanas* and the triumph of the Advaita system. Non-dual experience was originally sought through a gradual expansion of consciousness attained by the practice of *vidyas*. But gradually the goal became more important than the means. Vedanta neglected its mystical roots, became more speculative and polemical, and thus moved farther away from life and experience. A third reason for the neglect of the *vidyas* was the popularity of Yoga and, later on, of the Tantras.

Under the influence of Yoga and Tantra new techniques of meditation were developed during the Middle Ages which survive to this day. Meditation techniques in modern times are strongly influenced by Yoga and Tantra. We are now witnessing a great revival of mysticism, and ancient methods are being adjusted to suit the needs of modern aspirants. Some enterprising people are experimenting with new techniques of meditation.

We shall next discuss the traditional methods of meditation which are still surviving and are suitable for modern times.

## PART TWO

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### Upasana and Dhyana

Concentration can be practised on any object. In fact, in our daily life we are concentrating on something or other most of the time. This kind of concentration is more or less unconscious and is done under the compulsion of desires. True meditation differs from it in being a conscious process involving the detachment of the will from lower desires and its focusing at a higher centre of consciousness.

We have seen that meditation is a stage in concentration common to all spiritual paths. We have also seen that meditation is of two types: subjective and objective. Subjective meditation is of the nature of an inquiry into the Atman and is called *nididhyasana*. Objective meditation is concentrating the mind on an object. Objective meditation is known under different names. Patanjali calls it *dhyana*. In Vedanta a more common term is

*upasana*. Both these terms are, however, met with in the Upanisads.

In ancient India meditation was a subject of deep study, research and experiment. The followers of the Samkhya philosophy developed it into an independent science of mental life. When properly concentrated on an object, the mind undergoes certain changes. These changes are the same for a particular degree of concentration whatever be the object chosen. In other words, concentration follows certain universal laws. These laws were discovered by the great yogis of ancient India. Patanjali codified and compiled them in his famous *Yoga Aphorisms*. These laws form the basis of *upasana* also. So Sankaracarya defines meditation as "a process of unwavering application of the same thought on some object, such as a deity prescribed by the scriptures, without being interrupted by any alien thought."<sup>10</sup>

However, there are some important differences between Yogic meditation and Vedantic meditation.

The immediate aim of Yogic *dhyana* is to discover the functions of mind at higher levels of consciousness. Its ultimate aim is the separation or isolation of *Purusa* from *prakriti*. As Bhoja points out, Yoga is really *viyoga*, disunion.<sup>11</sup>

On the contrary, *upasana* aims at union. Its immediate aim may be to unite the meditator with a deity. But its ultimate aim is to unite the individual self (*jivatman*) with the Supreme Self (*Paramatman*).

Another difference is that in Yogic meditation the choice of God is optional. According to Patanjali, meditation can be practised on any object one likes.<sup>12</sup> Bhoja in his commentary points out that in Yoga the object of meditation (*bhavyam*) is of two types: God and the *tattvas* [elements of the differentiated universe—ed.]. The *tattvas* again are of two types: *Purusa* and the twenty-four categories of *prakriti*.<sup>13</sup>

10. Dhyanam nama sastrokta devatadyalambanesu acalo / Bhinnajatiyair-anantaritah pratyayasantanah // Sankara, Commentary on *Chandogya Upanisad* 7. 6. 1.

11. Patanjalamunerukthi kapyapurvat jayatyasau / Pumprakrtyorviyogo'pi yoga ityudito yaya //

12. Yatha'bhimatadhyanaad va / *Yoga Sutra* 1. 39.

*Dhyana* may be practised on any of the *tattvas*. But in *upasana* God alone is the object of meditation, and not the *tattvas*.

The third difference is that in order to practise yogic meditation it is not necessary to have any preconceived ideas about Reality. But *upasana* is based on the Vedantic conception of Reality and operates within a definite conceptual framework. What *upasana* does is to convert the conceptual or indirect (*paroksa*) knowledge into intuition or direct (*aparoksa*) experience.

#### Development of Upasana in the Post-Vedic Period

These two types of meditation—Yogic *dhyana* and Vedantic *upasana*—became united in the post-Vedic period. It was shown last month [see "Types of Meditation" Part One] how *upasana* evolved in the Vedic period from ritual-bound meditations (*angavabaddha*) into substitution meditations and finally into the *vidyas*. In the meantime the Yoga system was getting perfected. It was then that the Tantras arose, probably a few centuries after the Vedic period had ended.

The Tantras combined the monism of the Upanisads with the theism of the *puranas*. Secondly, they united Yogic meditation with Vedantic *upasana*. Apart from this, the Tantras made independent discoveries about *mantras*, *kundalini*, etc. The all-round harmony and synthesis effected by the Tantras opened a new era in the history of spirituality in India. This continues to this day. The meditation techniques now prevalent show the strong influence of the Tantras.

#### Form, Name and the Self

One of the important changes that the Tantras introduced was in the field of symbols. The images of different gods and goddesses have completely replaced the Vedic images of fire, sun, air, etc. In the Vedic period the approach to ultimate Reality was direct. The Tantras made it indirect: the aspirant *first* attains the vision of a god or goddess and *then* through him or her realizes the ultimate Reality. Again, in the Vedic period words were used

13. Bhavyam ca dvididham–isvarah tattvani ca / Tanyapi dvididhani jada-jadabhedat / Jadani caturvimsatih / Ajadah purusah / Bhoja, Vritti on *Yoga-Sutra* 1. 17.

primarily for their meaning (*abhidhana*). The Tantras have, however, shown that certain mystic words have an intrinsic power to produce changes in consciousness.

Symbols play an important part in human life. Other than pure consciousness, all our thinking is based on symbols. These symbols can be divided into two groups: *rupa* (form) and *nama* (name). These, along with the self, constitute the knowing process. Emotions are also of course a part of mental life. But they are not essential to knowledge. In fact, they very often distort the knowing process. A person overcome by anger, envy, fear and other emotions has a distorted view of other people. That is why Patanjali regards emotions as "false knowledge" (*viparyaya*).<sup>14</sup> They are great obstacles in spiritual life, and the aspirant is advised to rid himself of them before attempting real meditation. True knowledge arises only when the mind is freed from emotional disturbances. It is, however, important to note here that *bhakti*, love of God, which is a great help in *upasana*, is not an emotion and is therefore never regarded as an obstacle. True devotion is a property of the self, its longing for union with the Supreme Self.

When the mind is freed from the hold of instincts and emotions, there remain in it only three elements of pure cognition: form, name and the self. These are the only factors that constitute the meditative act. Spiritual aspirants show great variation in their ability to manipulate these three factors.

When we speak of differences among people we usually mean their emotional make-up. Some people are more loving and kind, some cruel and harsh. Some are arrogant, some humble. And so on. One of the important tasks in spiritual life is to level up these differences and make every aspirant pure, virtuous, calm.

However, these are not the only differences among aspirants. The very structure of the mind and the way names, forms and the self influence it vary from person to person. Some people find visualization of images very easy but find it difficult to manipulate abstract ideas, especially mathematics. Their thinking is a kind of inner seeing and they have what is called a "photographic mem-

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14. *Yoga-Sutra* 1.8 and Vyasa's commentary on it.

ory." The minds of these people are **form**-oriented. Some others find it difficult or even impossible to visualize forms and do their thinking mostly through sound symbols. These are the people who benefit most from listening to talks and lectures. Their minds are **name**-oriented. There are yet others who find both names and forms a great botheration and prefer to hold on to the **self** without any visual or ideational support. Their minds are self-oriented.

To meet the needs of these three different mental types, three kinds of *upasana* have been developed: *pratikopasana* (meditation on visual images), *namopasana* (meditation on sound symbols) and *ahamgrahopasana* (meditation on the self). Each aspirant should know which type of mind he is: form-oriented, name-oriented or self-oriented. This the aspirant can easily find out by a little self-analysis and practice in meditation. The aspirant must then choose that type of *upasana* which suits him most.

It may be surprising to know that there are some people who are totally incapable of visualizing forms. Such people find it very difficult to meditate on the image of a deity. When they close their eyes they only feel a blank with various ideas moving somewhere inside. It is like listening to the gurgling of a stream in the dark. They, however, find repetition of a *mantra* very easy and producing great harmony in them. Whereas there are others who find such repetition difficult, distracting and unrelated to their basic spiritual urge.

Fortunately, however, most people have a mixed type of mind. They can make their minds form-oriented, name-oriented or self-oriented as they wish. So they can easily combine all the three types of *upasana* in their practice. Nevertheless, during the early stages of spiritual life even they may find it easier and more beneficial to give more emphasis on one type of *upasana* according to their individual temperaments, while not neglecting the other two. Meditation is a difficult task for beginners but they can make it a bit easier by following the line of least resistance, their own natural orientation of mind. Once the aspirant acquires proficiency in any one method, he will find it easy to practise all the other methods.

### Pratika Upasana

*Pratika* means a symbol—literally, "going towards," something upon which the mind is focused. Though words are also symbols, *pratika* is generally used to mean visual symbols—images, pictures and natural objects used as symbols. During the Vedic period fire, the sun, the air, the mind, etc. were treated as *pratikas* to represent Brahman. How were the *pratikas* related to Brahman? There were two ways of doing this, and accordingly Vedic *pratikopasana* was of two types: *sampad* and *adhyasa*.

In *sampad upasana* an inferior object is used as a symbol to represent superior Reality.<sup>15</sup> The symbol is unimportant, the attributes of the higher reality dominate the meditative field. (To give a modern example, when a stone idol or *salagrama* is worshipped as Visnu, the worshipper forgets the stone and thinks only of the luminous splendour of Visnu. This may be regarded as a modern form of *sampad upasana*.)

In *adhyasa upasana* the symbol chosen is itself a superior object and dominates the meditative field. Upon this symbol the attributes of the Reality are superimposed, but the symbol is as important as the attributes. Meditation on the sun (one of the most beautiful meditations ever conceived) is an instance of this. The Upanisad teaches, "The sun is Brahman, this is the instruction."<sup>16</sup> The sun with its dazzling brightness has a striking resemblance to Brahman and can itself be directly meditated upon as Brahman. All that one has to do is to superimpose upon the sun the attributes of Brahman like infinity, consciousness, bliss, ultimate causality, etc.<sup>17</sup>

With the disappearance of the Vedic tradition these ancient *pratika* meditations are no longer in vogue. There is at present a great need to revive them.

In modern times the images of various deities and the symbols connected with them have almost wholly replaced the Vedic *pratikas*. Not only that. The conception of the connection be-

15. Cf. *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* 3. 1. 6 and Sankara's commentary on it.

16. Adityo brahma ityadesah | *Chandogya Upanisad* 3. 19. 1.

17. Cf. Swami Gambhirananda. "Upanisadic Meditation" in *The Cultural Heritage of India* (Calcutta: the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1970). Vol. 1, pp. 379-80.



tween the symbols and the Reality has also changed. Vedic symbols directly connect the meditator with the ultimate Reality. But in Tantric symbols this connection is indirect. First of all, the deity behind the symbol is to be realized, and then through the deity the ultimate Reality is to be attained.

*Pratikas* used in modern times may be divided into two groups: aniconic and iconic. The former group includes *yantras* (mystic diagrams), *mandalas* (psychic diagrams), *salagrama*, *siva linga*, water pot, etc. These are used more in ritualistic worship than in meditation. The lotus symbolizing a *chakra* or centre of consciousness, the flame symbolizing the self, the sky symbolizing space and similar impersonal symbols which are often used in meditation may also be included in this group.

The second group of *pratikas* includes the anthropomorphic images of gods and goddesses which are called *pratimas*. A *pratima* may be a picture drawn on paper or cloth (*pata*) or a three-dimensional idol (*vigraha*) made of stone or metal. The *Brahma-Sutra* clearly teaches that the *pratika* is to be looked upon only as a symbol of Brahman. God should not be lowered to symbols, but symbols are to be exalted to God.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the purpose of a *pratima* is to serve only as a visual aid (*dristi saukaryam*) to concentration. This may be true in the case of meditation but not necessarily so in the case of worship. The widely accepted belief is that a properly consecrated *pratima* which is daily worshipped, acquires a special sanctity and power and becomes a centre of divine grace. According to Sri Ramanuja there is a special manifestation of God known as *arca* in the idol.

In this context two points are to be kept in mind. The statement that *pratikas* are only symbols of God does not imply that the gods and goddesses of Hinduism are only symbols. Hundreds of illumined souls have directly realized these divinities. Even the great Sankaracarya has not denied their existence. Each deity represents a particular aspect of Saguna Brahman,

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18. *Brahma-Sutra* 4. 1. 4 and 5. See also Swami Vivekananda's comments in his "Bhakti Yoga." The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1973), Vol. 3, pp. 59-61.

the Personal God, and is at least as real as a human being, if not more.

The other point to note is that though *pratikas* are mainly used as aids to concentration, the purpose of *upasana* is not mere concentration of mind but the direct vision of the deity represented by the *pratika*. The *pratika* may be a picture or idol made by an artist. *Upasana* does not mean simply transferring the artist's imagination to our own minds. It is not merely an exercise in memory, trying to remember the picture we have seen outside. *Upasana* is an attempt to go beyond the symbol and meet the real god or goddess in the depths of consciousness. It is a search for the soul's eternal Beloved. For this a living image must first of all be implanted deep inside the heart. It is the continuous interior gazing at this living image in the depths of consciousness that really deserves to be called *pratikopasana*. As concentration deepens, the image sinks into consciousness drawing the mind with it deeper, deeper. . . until it touches the undercurrent of pure consciousness and bursts into ethereal phosphorescence.

True *pratikopasana*, then, is a process of converting imagination into Reality. It is a technique for the transformation of consciousness. How does this transformation take place? Three principles are involved in it: the principle of *khyati* [knowledge], the *yatha-kratu* principle ["As is one's will, so does one become." *Chandogya Upanisad*] and the theory of *mantra*.

#### Nama Upasana

If in *pratikopasana* meditation is practised on a visual symbol, in *namopasana* it is done on a sound symbol—the name of a deity or a *mantra*. This, however, is not the only difference between the two. There are much deeper differences based on certain basic properties of the human mind.

Here we wish to mention only two or three points. The repetition of a *mantra* or a name of God is called *japa*. When the words used are many, it may take the form of *stuti* (hymnody), *bhajan* (singing of songs set to music) or *samkirtana* (group singing). These are better regarded as forms of worship though, when properly done, they produce a meditative effect.

It should be kept in mind that mere mechanical repetition of a *mantra* hardly deserves to be called *upasana*. As true *pratiko-*

*pasana* is visualizing a "living image," so true *namopasana* is the repetition of an "awakened *mantra*." The *mantra* becomes awakened (*chetana*) when it becomes connected to the basic rhythm of consciousness in the depths of the heart.

Another point should be noted here. In popular usage only *pratikopasana* is known as meditation, while *namopasana* is known as *japa*. As a matter of fact, both come under meditation. To make the distinction between these two types of meditation more clear it is better to describe *pratikopasana* as *bhavana* (visualization), a term more commonly used in the Tantras and Buddhist scriptures. As a general rule *japa* is accompanied by *bhavana* (visualization) of a god or goddess. But several sects in Hinduism and especially the Sikhs practise *japa* without visualizing the form of any deity. They are pure *namopasakas*. In their case *japa* itself becomes meditation.

#### Ahamgraha Upasana

*Ahamgraha* literally means "self-grasping," that is "self-identification." Unlike the two types of meditation described above which are purely objective techniques, *ahamgraha-upasana* is a subjective-objective meditation technique. It is a meditation on the self as the object. But it is not mere concentration of mind on the object as the other two meditations are. It means the "grasping" of a vaster whole by the Self. It is an attempt of the self to identify itself with the Supreme Self.

Since the pure Atman cannot be an "object" of meditation, various symbols are used to enable the self to "grasp" the supreme Self. Thus like the other two *upasanas* described above, *ahamgrahopasana* is also a kind of symbolic meditation.

Objectivity and the use of symbols, these are precisely the two points which distinguish *ahamgrahopasana* and *nididhyasana* or subjective meditation. In *nididhyasana* no symbols are used, nor is the self objectified. It is a negative process of *neti, neti* ("not this, not this") by which the self cuts asunder all identifications and withdraws into its own locus. The distinction between these two techniques is important though it may not be so obvious to an untrained mind.

The simplest form of *ahamgrahopasana* is to visualize the Atman as a point of light and meditate on it thinking "I am this light."

However, as the individual self is part of the infinite Supreme Self, *ahamgrahopasana* usually means meditation on the union of the individual self with the supreme Self. Again, as the Supreme Self is all-pervading, this meditation necessarily involves an awareness of divine immanence in creation. Thus *ahamgrahopasana* actually takes the form of double meditation: meditation on the self as a part of God and meditation on God as present in all beings.

It is now clear that some of the *vidyas*, if not all, discussed in the Upanisads are really *ahamgraha* meditations. In fact this is the only way contemporary humanity can understand and practise the *vidyas*, for their original esoteric tradition has been lost. One of the most famous of these meditations is the *antaryami vidya*. Uddalaka, the son of Aruna asks the sage Yajnavalkya about the Inner Controller. In reply the latter describes the immanence of Brahman in the earth, in the sky, in the sun etc.

*He who dwells in the earth, but is within it, whom the earth does not know, whose body is the earth, and who controls the earth from within, is the Inner Ruler, your own immortal self.*

*He who dwells in water . . .*

*He who dwells in fire . . .*

*He who dwells in the sky . . .*

*He who dwells in the sun . . . etc.<sup>19</sup>*

Another important meditation is *Sandilya Vidya*, which runs as follows: (MISSING FROM SOURCE).

These passages are not meant to be understood theoretically. They are meant for actual practice. It is not possible to have the experience of Advaita all of a sudden. For this our consciousness must be gradually expanded. These meditations are meant to expand our consciousness. It is only when we try to practise them shall we understand how difficult they are. Those who have reduced Advaita to talking and writing will find these meditations a lesson in humility.

Apart from the *vidyas* there are many other splendid passages in the Upanisads which may be used in meditation. The four *mahavakyas*, "That thou art,"<sup>20</sup> "I am Brahman," etc. (which are

19. *Bṛhadarayanaka Upanisad* 3. 7. 1-23.

20. *Chandogya Upanisad* 3. 14. 2-3.

supposed to produce direct intuition of Brahman in highly qualified aspirants) may also be used for this purpose. It should be noted that these *mahavakyas* are not meant for repetition, for that would be a kind of *namopasana*. They are actually meant for the practise of *ahamgrahopasana*. Some of the great *sannyasa mantras* into which Hindu monastics are initiated also belong to this category. Apart from these, some of the well-known verses of Sankaracarya like the "Morning Remembrance Hymn,"<sup>21</sup> "Six Stanzas on Nirvana," etc. may also be used for the practise of *ahamgrahopasana* for which they are really intended.

#### Need for Synthesis

The three types of *upasana* discussed above could be practised independently. But they are not contradictory to one another. Each stands for a particular aspect of cognition and develops a particular faculty of the mind. A combination of the three types of meditation will lead to all-round development of consciousness.

There is especially a great need to include *ahamgrahopasana* in our daily spiritual practice. It reminds us of our real nature as the Atman. It is only when we understand that we are potentially divine can we establish a loving spiritual relationship with the Deity. Moreover, awareness of our higher self enables us to remain unaffected by the external influences and maintain constant remembrance of our chosen Deity and *mantra*. Even a devotee who worships an idol can practise *ahamgrahopasana*. He may think that the Deity dwelling in the idol dwells also in his own self and meditate on the union of the two. In fact, this kind of meditation is an essential part of Tantric worship.

To conclude: all preliminary spiritual disciplines end in some form of meditative awareness, and all meditation paths lead to spiritual illumination of some kind or other.

End of  
TYPES OF MEDITATION  
by Swami Bhajanananda

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21. Pratah smarami hrdisamsphuradatmatattvam / Saccitsukham paramahamsagatim turiyam / Yatsvapnajaagarasusuptamavaiti nityam / Tad brahmaniskalamaham na ca bhutasamghah // – Sankara, Pratahsmarana Stotra.