

Meditation: A Perspective of a Thoughtful Beginner

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Introduction

There are many such moments in our childhood when we see elder people talking which according to their tone seems something serious but we just don't get it! We keep on wondering what is it so important and crucial but which makes no sense to me? The thought is let go at the next moment until you grow up to an age where it starts making some sense. The term *moksha* was such to me. My grandma used to say, "God, please grant me moksha in some soon lifetime." And then, I used to ridicule her and say, "Why would you want to renounce living? Do you not want to enjoy ice cream?" My biggest tension was not being able to have ice-cream if I get *moksha*. She used to laugh and say, "Go and play outside, you will not understand what I am talking at this age." I used to shrug my shoulders and exit out of the not so entertaining situation. But now that I am at an age and a wisdom which has overcome the world of ice cream, I can see why my grandma used to say so.

Journey to Awareness from Unawareness

I was introduced to meditation at the age of 17. To me at that time, it was nothing more than sitting calmly with eyes closed and without talking. I did not have any world experience. I used to feel nothing more than like sitting on a relatively silent beach. It did not intrigue me for a year until one day when I was on a tour to Ladakh. There was a strange feeling inside me when I saw the idol of a meditating Buddha in one of the monasteries. The rumbling sea inside me stopped for a while when I caught a glance of the statue. And then, it came to my mind that meditation has a lot more to offer than what I thought. With reading literature about meditation and practicing it on a regular basis, I have come across some beautiful experiences, which I will illustrate in a subjective view, also citing the thoughts of some great men, which influenced my view.

Firstly, What Is Meditation and Why Is It Practiced?

The scope of meditation is very extensive. Meditation is based on a philosophy; or more precisely a spiritual philosophy. It is an effort towards letting oneself know that I am everything and everything is inside me. In more common words, it is an art of forgetting oneself; forgetting our bodily or physical existence and remembering our true nature. It is practiced to know the ultimate consciousness within us. The ultimate reality is the existence of the highest source of energy and we are its derivatives with a bodily existence and a mind, which imparts us the power of thinking. It is this power of thinking which makes us aware of our presence. This awareness is ego-awareness. A small amount of ego is necessary to carry out physical actions, which constitute our duties in the world. But beyond a healthy limit it ensues misery. When ego overpowers, the ability of a person to distinguish between a true and a virtual world dissolves. Swami Vivekananda says:

When the mind is studying the external object, it gets identified with it, loses itself. To use the simile of the old Indian philosopher: the soul of man is like a piece of crystal, but it takes the colour of whatever is near it. Whatever the soul touches ... it has to take its colour. That is the difficulty. That constitutes the bondage. The colour is so strong, the crystal forgets itself and identifies itself with the colour. Suppose a red flower is near the crystal and the crystal takes the colour and forgets itself, thinks it is red. We have taken the colour of the body and have forgotten what we are. The practice of meditation is pursued. The crystal knows what it is, takes its own colour. It is meditation that brings us nearer to truth than anything else.... (Parlato, 2013).

Practicing meditation invokes the question within us, "Who am I really?" The answer to this very question is unfolded consequently with sincere practice. We are connected to every fundamental particle of the universe. This oneness is experienced in meditation. Our definition of ourselves no longer depends on the environment we live in, or our name, or gender. The common purpose of this contemplative technique is to make oneself feel relaxed, to get rid of negative thoughts or just to feel happy. When I was on tour in Ladakh, our tour guide told us that while in an initial stage towards becoming a monk, he was rebuked (I do not know by which medium though) if he had fallen asleep while meditating. Again, there are some food restrictions as well. At this stage and as of now I do not see meditation as a practice going through hardship and endeavour because I feel it is a natural process, which anyone can practice if s/he has that consciousness (but of course, there are limits in every field impossible to cross). So, when an effort comes, then meditation starts seeming looking like a duty. The fun part is gone. Thus plainly speaking in this context, meditation is an art of an effortless journey towards thoughtlessness.

Meditating Techniques and Its Flow

There are many techniques for meditating, some of which include repetition of a mantra (Transcendental Meditation, for example), observing the breath,¹ visualization,² concentrating on an object,³ or simply sitting. Meditation is a highly creative action. Traditionally, it is a formal act of sitting with legs crossed in a position and doing the aforementioned, i.e. meditating. However, I would say that meditation could take any form like singing, dancing, chanting, painting and so many things. Any activity that makes you forget your bodily existence could be called meditation. It does not always have to be a serious and formal affair (views may vary from person to person). Forget yourself and enjoy. Shiva's Ananda Tandava⁴ is an epitome of this kind. A dancer then merges into the divine. I would like to cite Osho here:

Sing and dance, and completely merge yourself into the dancing and singing. The moment the dancer has disappeared and only the dance remains, you have entered. The moment the singer has disappeared and only singing has remained, you have entered. Forget the dancer, the centre of the ego. Become the dance. That is the meditation. Dance so deeply that you completely forget that you are dancing and begin to feel that you are the dance. The division must disappear. Then it becomes a meditation (Osho, 2013).

The art of chanting and singing has been carried out since ages. Tibetan chanting is known for its certain kind of tone, pitch and rhythm to take one in the state of trance. The Indian traditions of *bhajans*, *kirtans*, *shlokas* etc. help to achieve the same purpose. When one paints with a brush or sketches with a pencil, in a deeper mental state, you become one with the brush or pencil. One might say that to perform any activity like painting, one has to make use of one's organs like eyes and hands. So how is it possible to forget the bodily existence? What I want to say is, the person starts losing the perception of being the doer. Instead s/he starts seeing him/herself as a medium, thus recognising him/herself beyond body, blood and flesh. Meditation is nothing different.

¹ See the essay of Dorothy Figen about Vipassana. Figen, Dorothy (n. y.): Beginning Insight Meditation. Buddhist Meditation in the Theravada tradition. Retrieved 25th Aug. 2013 from http://www.vipassana.com/meditation/beginning_insight_meditation.php.

² For more insight, peruse through Weiss, Brian L. (2000): Appendix B. in *Messages from the masters: Tapping into the Power of Love*. London: Piatkus, 251-262.

³ For more on this, have a look at "How to Meditate - Focus and Meditation". Retrieved 12th July 2013 from <http://www.ramataalks.com/tantric-buddhism/focus-and-meditation.html>

⁴ According to Hindu mythology, this dance form as performed by God Shiva signifies five divine acts of creation, preservation, evolution by dissolution, illusion, and grace (freedom from bondages).

I have personally observed that exercising and doing *pranayama* prior to meditation helps slip more easily into the meditative state. With exercise and/or *pranayama*, the blood flow of the body improves and along with it the oxygen supply to all the body parts. The body gets filled with positive energy. Also, the frequency of thought eruption diminishes. Thus, it conditions the mind before meditating. My flow of practice⁵ involves firstly exercising and/or doing *pranayama*. Then I chant OM 4-5 times, which clears my mind to a certain extent. I prefer listening to a set of Buddhist chants (which I bought from Ladakh) thereafter. I observe the tip of the flame of a candle while listening to the chants. It imparts in me a soothing feeling, a feeling that I am imperturbable. The meditative vocals of the Tibetan Buddhists intoned on the same note induce the vicarious feeling of divinity in me. I close my eyes when I feel calm. And thereafter the process of dissolution of thoughts begins.

When one starts meditating, there is no sudden stoppage of thoughts. Nor should one force oneself to suppress whatever thoughts one is getting in one's mind. That is because trying to suppress thoughts is a thought in itself. Let the thoughts flow without letting yourself getting engrossed into it or analysing them. We come across a thousand things in a day and it is an obvious tendency of a human brain to recall them, so there is nothing to worry about when thoughts keep on flowing. But when the concentration⁶ of the mind intensifies, whether while dancing, singing, chanting or in due course of concentrating on a body part, breath or an object, the thoughts slowly begin to wane. This first stage wherein the meditator is aware of practicing meditation is called *dhāraṇā*. Subsequently, the thoughts begin to disappear along with the thought of meditation. You feel very light. This stage is called *dhyāna*. It is a state of trance. A sudden rush of a carefree nature ensues. You begin to enjoy whatever is going on within you. You begin to enjoy the thoughtless existence. The experience of being both, infinitesimally small as well as infinitely large is sensed simultaneously. You are not in the position even to tell whether you are a male or female. But you can still perceive your presence. In the final state of *samādhi*, the ego dissolves com-

⁵ I have fused my creativity with the method prescribed by Dr. Fredrick Lenz. To know more about that method, go through the audio segment of Lakshmi Series. "Introductory and Intermediate Meditation - Lakshmi Series - Free MP3 Dharma Talks". Retrieved 12th July 2013 from <http://www.ramatalks.com/lakshmi-series/introductory-and-intermediate-meditation.html>

⁶ Concentration as mentioned here should not be confused with formal concentration, which involves a sentiment that I am concentrating. Some people prefer to meditate with an initial step like observing the tip of a candle flame. It helps to shift the mind from thoughts churning the mind and eventually the candle and the observer become one. The action of observing, which was previously present as a medium, vanishes.

pletely. Basically, the you and I vanishes. The cosmic connection is felt. Seers have been stressing on the state of *samādhi* during which all the energy flows through the spine to its base and at that moment, the *Kundalini* rises. There is a realization that everything is the One and I am a part of that One. You witness the innate power and capability within. There are no more secrets, no more mysteries. There is only Enlightenment.

I don't actually conceive what *moksha* means. But I feel it might be an end of the birth and death cycle of a soul and achieving a state which is actually stateless as experienced in *samādhi*. Thus, *moksha* could be an endless and infinite *samādhi*.

Benefits of Meditating

Meditation not only has outcomes on a spiritual level, but also in our day-to-day life. Unless meditation is practiced on a regular basis, you cannot reap its benefits. Though it is true that you will gain a lot through meditating, you should never sit to meditate with expectations in your mind. It never works with a result oriented mind. Keep an objective in mind, but not expectations or results. Be curious, not demanding. When meditation is practiced with a sense of surrendering to the highest source, you will get the most. I would like to share the pearls of wisdom given by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: "When you sit to meditate, say to yourself, 'I want nothing' – if you want enlightenment, you are not going to get it" (Shankar, 2012).

I have closely observed that meditation reaps us many benefits some of which are illustrated by Dr. Mani Bhaumik as follows:

The physical effects of meditation include reducing the heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen consumption; lowering production of stress hormones and blood lactates; and bolstering the immune system. These are the fringe benefits in this meditation compensation package. The real earnings are in the effect upon consciousness itself: during meditation a quantum leap into a different state with an associated feeling of immense bliss, and afterwards the ability to act with a great clarity of mind and an innate sense of fulfilment (Bhaumik, 2013).

The ability to take right decision reinforces with long-term practice. It becomes easier to discern between right and wrong. I always chant OM again for 4-5 times or more as per my wish after meditating. There is a considerable difference between the OM chanted before and after meditation. The OM after is deeper and more coherent which signifies a stable mind. More importantly, one feels happy after meditating. In his before cited book, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar says: "Deep and continuous meditation roots out boredom. If you are unable to meditate because your mind is chattering too much, just feel that you are a little stu-

pid, and then you will be able to sink deep into meditation. Meditation erases the impressions and improves the expression” (Shankar, 2012).

We as normal people live our lives mechanically, but when you start meditating, you get a deeper sense of your life. Life no longer is perceived only through views like career success, marriage, money and so on. We start seeing the big picture; the prime goal of our life.

On a personal note, I have gone through physically evident as well as subtle effects of meditating. In the first few months, I experienced changes inside my body but which were evident outside like looking confident, relaxed and yet enthusiastic. I started having a smile on my face throughout the day (but sometimes circumstances like the traffic of my city, or an impossible assignment given to me by a teacher of my disliked subject in college, still produces a rancour on my face, because of which I cannot call myself a person who has completely absorbed meditation inside herself; but yes, I have at least taken a step on this journey). I remember one of my friends asking me one day: “Have you decided to talk to everyone with a smile, be it the person you detest?” It was happening so unconsciously that only after hearing this question, I was aware of my countenance. Smile and let smile. Later, deeper transformations took place inside me. The journey of meditation is not always greeted by positive gains. One cannot expect a tree to provide you shade constantly throughout a year; it will shed its leaves at least once a year when you have to experience the scorching heat of the sun. It is because of this that we start valuing good things since we know what is bad. I do not know if this was a coincidence or if it was a test laid in front of me to grade my spiritual progress. I had been one of the highest grade holders in academics as well as in other fields like athletics in my school days. And then I came to college. I was confident that my study pattern is going to give me the highest grades. I achieved them in my first year but, to the contrary, I got average or even below average grades in a semester of my sophomore year. I could not digest it. And then I tried really hard in the following semester, but I could not achieve my goal even in the consequent two semesters. My study style was the same but the results were dwindling. I also started witnessing problems in family relation during this period. We never had experienced a single obstacle in family relations until now. It was at this point that I realised that the success, which I had been getting, the love present among my family members, the physical fitness of my body, the uncompromised life that I was living until now was taken granted by me. I was not grateful for what I had. Meditation taught me the meaning and ways to be grateful. Only knowing to be grateful is not necessary, but maintaining that thought in your mind forever and putting it into action is necessary which can be achieved by meditation. Now I try not to pre-

sume the outcome of any event but only be hopeful for a good one and putting efforts accordingly. Additionally, I have realised that grades, career, money are no doubt necessary to make a living, but those should not be the primary goals of life. To be a good and balanced human being obtains a higher place in my goal perspective now. Another aspect I realised was that of faith. It opened the secret of happiness for me. I started finding solace in the most difficult situations because I knew and I had a confidence that the ultimate outcome is going to be positive and I am going to get help from somewhere, someone, or some other medium. And believe me, it does happen. If you have sincere faith on the One, then help does come to you and miracles happen. It need not always be a grand show of help coming in the gravest situation. It can be as subtle as someone emerging accidentally to guide you to a place you want to be in an urgent situation but have no clue of directions nor do you have any GPS tracking system. We just have to observe things happening around us with more keen and spot the nuances. It is not that after knowing and realizing these things, only fortunate and good things happen to me. The huge difference that I can see here is the change in perception looking at different outcomes and situations.

Conclusion

Thus, I believe that one should practice meditation more than anything but to be a better person. At the same time, it is true that overdoing anything is bad for oneself. One should not do too much practice. Go gradually with say 15 minutes a day for a month and then extending it to 20 minutes for the next few months and likewise. Monitor your body, and see how much you can take in. Also, it would not be called wise if you practice meditation but not incorporate healthy habits, moral demeanour, humility and selfless service in your life. Practicing meditation in the evening but getting up at 10 am in the morning, slandering people around you, boasting, indulging in addictions is the same as taking a step forward and then stepping back its double or even more. Striking a balance is of utmost importance. We should try to be in such a likeminded company. Be patient in order to receive and recognize the gracious effects of meditation. It is our duty to keep the health of the body given to us in a right shape because if health is with you then only can you perform your duties and learn lessons from life needed to transcend to a higher spiritual level. If it is followed, then life will take such a turn that you would have never anticipated.

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