

Swami Bhajananda

Concentration and Meditation

An in-depth look at
the theory and practice of Hindu meditation,
including an overview of Yoga psychology.

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Vedanta Study Circle
Athens, Greece 2005

Source:
www.realization.org
www.vedanta.org

This paper originally appeared in *Prabuddha Bharata*, a monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order, in five consecutive editorials starting in July 1980. *Prabuddha Bharata* was founded in 1896 by Swami Vivekananda.

The author, Swami Bhajanananda, then editor of *Prabuddha Bharata* from 1979 through 1986, has contributed many articles to various Vedanta journals. He is now an Assistant Secretary and Trustee of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

As an Acharya (Teacher) at the Training Centre of the Belur Math (the Monastic Order's Headquarters) he taught Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, very insightfully. He posthumously compiled and edited *MEDITATION AND SPIRITUAL LIFE*, containing class-talks on spiritual practice given by Swami Yatiswarananda (1889–1966), his guru.

The subject, a methodical science in its own right, has its particular terminology, which is explained in the text. The interested reader will eventually need to consult the original *Yoga Sutra* with traditional explanations, an introduction to which is the work *RAJA YOGA* by Swami Vivekananda (Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata).

This Printing
January 29, 2005

Circulated as a service by:

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CONCENTRATION AND MEDITATION

By SWAMI BHAJANANANDA

PART ONE

Concentration and Meditation

Today “meditation” is enjoying unprecedented popularity in the East and the West alike. A form of spiritual practice once restricted to a small number of fairly qualified aspirants is now being followed by large numbers of people and applied to a wide variety of human situations. To satisfy the spiritual needs of different types of aspirants, ancient techniques of meditation are being modified and new techniques are being evolved by spiritual directors. Indeed, so diverse has meditation become that it now stands for a generic term denoting several forms of concentration rather than a specific spiritual technique.

The various types of meditation now prevalent all over the world may be divided into two broad groups: secular and religious. To the former group belong all forms of concentration practised for the sake of health. It has been scientifically proven that certain types of meditation relax the body, reduce blood pressure and mental tension, and cure psychosomatic disorders. They have thus become a boon to a large number of people living under conditions of stress, especially in the West. There is nothing wrong in practising meditation for its therapeutic effects, but one should not think this is all that meditation means or can do.

Here we are concerned only with the other group of meditations, called *upasana* in Vedantic literature, which aim at spiritual illumination. This again is of two types: anthropomorphic (*sakara*) and non-anthropomorphic (*nirakara*). In the first type, followed in the path of devotion (*bhakti*), meditation is done on a form of the deity known as the aspirant’s Chosen Ideal of God, or *Ista Devata*. In the second type, followed in the path of knowledge, (*jnana*) meditation is done on a non-anthropomorphic object like light or space or on some attribute of Qualified (*saguna*) Brahman.

This kind of spiritual meditation which requires a higher degree and quality of concentration, need not necessarily be a relaxing experience, especially for a beginner. The term used by Patanjali (1300 BCE)— the father of Hindu psychology — for meditation is *dhyana*, and according to him it forms only the seventh step in a graded scheme of yoga. With the exception of a few fortunate people born with natural calmness and purity of mind, most people find that the higher types of spiritual meditation entail effort, struggle and strain. Sri Aurobindo points out: “The road of yoga is long, every inch of ground has to be won against much resistance and no quality is more needed by the spiritual aspirant than patience and single-minded perseverance with a faith that remains firm through all difficulties, delays and apparent failures.” (*Bases of Yoga*, 1973)

There is at present a good deal of confusion about the true nature of meditation. This is mainly caused by the mistaken belief that meditation is nothing but a form of concentration. Everyone has the capacity to concentrate his mind on something or other, and it is with this confidence that most people attempt to meditate. But when they find that they do not succeed, they ask in surprise, “Why am I not able to meditate?” The truth is that meditation is not just an ordinary type of concentration. Spiritual aspirants must understand this. They should know the difference between ordinary concentration and meditation.

Ordinary Concentration and Meditation

In ordinary concentration the mind is focused on an external object or a mental idea. From childhood we have been practising concentration on external objects as a part of the natural process of perception.

What is perception? According to the Samkhya, Yoga and Advaita-Vedanta schools of philosophy, the mind goes out through the eyes and takes the form of the object, and this is how we see it. According to Ramanuja and Madhva, it is the self that issues forth and directly perceives the object. Either way, concentration on external objects is a natural process. The *Katha Upanisad* says that the Lord, as it were, struck the sense organs and made them outgoing. (2.1.1) So we find no difficulty in concentrating on external objects.

Real meditation is a complete reversal of this process of per-

ception. It means turning the mind or the self back upon its source. Sri Ramakrishna explains this by the parable of the police sergeant who goes about his rounds in the dark with a lantern (which has dark glass on three sides) in his hands. With that light he can see others but they cannot see him, unless he turns the lantern towards himself. (*Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p.107)

In the same way, with the light of the self we can see external objects and movements of thoughts, but if we want to see God, we must focus this light inward. And this is what meditation means. To turn the habitually outgoing mind inward to its source is an admittedly difficult task.

This, then, is the first difference between meditation and ordinary concentration: meditation is the result of the focusing of consciousness on its true source or centre. The Tantras speak of different centres of consciousness but the Upanisads point to the spiritual heart as the true centre of one's consciousness. Though the beginner can to some extent hold the mind in the region of the physical heart, he has usually no idea of what the spiritual heart — the true centre of consciousness — means.

In most people this higher centre remains dormant or veiled, but through continence and prayer it can be developed. Unless the aspirant discovers this spiritual centre, his mind will wander during meditation.

It should be understood that trying to drive the mind inward, as a shepherd drives sheep into the pen, is not meditation. True meditation is the result of the natural inwardness or interiority (*pratyak pravanata*) of the mind caused by an inward pull. This inward "pull" comes from one's higher centre of consciousness. And the higher centre will exert this pull only when it is open and active. Then the mind comes to rest in its own source, as a bird comes to roost in its own nest. This resting or fixing of the mind is called *dharana*, without which meditation is difficult.

Secondly, in most forms of ordinary concentration the sense organs are active and contact with the external world is not cut off. But during meditation, which needs a higher degree of concentration, the mind alone is active and contact with the external world is cut off. The yogis call this state *ekendriya* — the state in which one *indriya* or sense organ (namely the *manas*, or mind, which the yogis regard as the sixth sense organ) alone is active.

According to Patanjali, before one attempts *dhyana* (meditation), one should gain proficiency in *dharana* (fixing the mind) and *pratyahara* (withdrawing the mind from external objects). This withdrawal is defined by Patanjali as a state in which the senses, detached from external objects, become one with the *manas* or mind. (*Yoga-Sutra*, 2.54) When this is practised for a long time, the mind alone remains active — the *ekendriya* state. Only then is true meditation possible.

We now come to the third difference between ordinary concentration and meditation. What we call thought is only a wave-like movement of the mind which is called *vritti*. *Vrittis* are produced either by external stimuli or by the sprouting of *samskaras* (latent impressions of past experiences). When we are absorbed in a book or a job, several names and forms occupy the field of consciousness and the mind moves in a circle. Whereas in meditation the mind is, as it were, fixed on a point and there is only a single *vritti* in it. Then only a single name (*mantra*) and form (usually the form of the Chosen Ideal) will occupy the field of consciousness. All other names and forms are consciously suppressed. This is, however, difficult as the *samskaras* are continuously sprouting into waves. Unless at least the major desires and impulses are eliminated, the practice of meditation will become an inner battle.

This takes us to the fourth difference. Ordinary concentration is the result of attachment to various external objects, whereas meditation is the result of detachment. To get absorbed in an undertaking which one likes because it satisfies one's desires is easy. But to get absorbed in something through detachment is difficult. This becomes possible only when detachment is supported by intense aspiration.

Meditation is not an exercise in passive withdrawal, an escape from reality. It is an intense seeking of Truth in the only place where Truth ought to be sought. It is an eager search for God in the unknown depths of the heart. Just as a man in darkness gropes about by stretching out his hands, so does the meditator seek God within by stretching his intuitive faculty, the pure *buddhi*. Though meditation is usually practised on an image, true aspirants know that the image upon which they meditate is not the true Reality. Their meditation is in fact a search for that Reality

of which the image is only a symbol. To seek an intangible unknown Reality in the unknown depths of the soul becomes possible only if there is intense aspiration and faith.

Then there is the fifth difference. The human mind has two powers: to experience and to create. Most of our normal thinking is a creative process—we are always trying to create something: new objects, new relationships, new meanings, new ideas, etc. If we cannot create anything real, we create unreal things and try to live in a dream world. All the great achievements of science, technology and art are the result of people's stupendous efforts in creative concentration. But creation of this type gives rise to diversity and conflict.

Meditation is an attempt to make the mind stop creating by seeking the source of experience. Though experience is also a function of the mind, its real source (consciousness) is in the *Atman* or the self. Meditation is an attempt to isolate the self and discover the Uncreated or the Absolute, which is what humanity is trying to seek through creative activity. Meditation is a movement towards unity and peace.

Another difference, related to the above, is that ordinary concentration is a movement in time. Meditation is an attempt to remain in timelessness. The more we think, the more we move with time and get caught in the ever-flowing stream of life.

There are two types of time. One is external time, determined by the movements of the earth with reference to the sun. The second is internal time, determined by the movement of thoughts. In very small children these two times remain distinct; as they grow up they learn to correlate the two. But this correlation is lost during deep sleep and dreaming when we live in an entirely different world of time. In the normal waking state a certain co-ordination between inner time and outer time is maintained as a kind of ratio. This ratio varies from person to person: for some people time flies, for others time hangs heavy.

To live constantly in time, to be under the tyranny of time, to "run with the hare and hunt with the hound" all the time causes great strain on the nerves. People want to escape from this oppressive time awareness. So they go on vacation and try to forget themselves by getting absorbed in books or movies. But they find that this does not work all right, for time haunts them like a

ghost wherever they go or whatever they do. Meditation is an attempt to free humanity from the tyranny of time by first slowing down the inner clock and then lifting the mind to a timeless dimension.

However, the most important difference between ordinary concentration and meditation is that the former is an unconscious process involving self-forgetfulness, while the latter is a conscious and self-directed process. What we generally call conscious activity is mostly unconscious or automatic. Freud discovered the unconscious and showed how it caused mental disorders. Jung showed that even normal healthy thinking and activity were mostly controlled by the unconscious. We talk, eat, work and walk without being simultaneously aware that we are doing all these. As Jung has pointed out, there is a world of difference between the two statements: "I am doing work" and "I am aware that I am doing work." We are rarely in touch with our own self, hence there is very little self-awareness in our normal day-to-day life.

This truth was discovered in India some three thousand years ago. Kapila, the founder of the Samkhya school, showed that everything in the universe, including the mind, is unconscious and that the *Purusa* (or the *Atman*, as the Vedantins call it) alone is truly conscious.

The mind is continuously breaking into waves and this makes the reflection of the self discontinuous. As a result we lose contact with our own centre of consciousness. Meditation stops all the waves except one, which makes the reflection of the self uniform and restores our contact with our true centre of consciousness. This is affected by exercising the will. Just as the cart driver controls the horses by holding the reins tight, so does a meditator control his mind through the will. This is what Buddha calls right mindfulness.

Meditation is thus a fully self-directed process. It is a struggle against mental automatism, it is an attempt to prevent mental waves from submerging the rock of self-awareness. This point distinguishes it from brooding, introversion and daydreaming.

In ordinary concentration the mind is swayed by the object. If you are reading a book, it is the book that determines your concentration; if you are working, it is the work that controls your

mind. In meditation the object usually plays only a passive part and control of the mind is effected by the self. The mind can be controlled, not by the mind, but by a faculty which is higher than it. This higher faculty is the *buddhi* or *dhi*, which is both a faculty of intuition and will. It is an impulse originating in the *buddhi* that controls the mental waves and directs the stream of consciousness towards the object during meditation. Unless this *buddhi* is to some extent developed and made active, meditation is difficult.

Yet another difference, eighth in order, is that meditation is not just looking at an object but is an attempt to enter into a living relationship with it. This is especially true in the path of *bhakti* where the devotee looks upon meditation only as a means of forging an intimate, everlasting relationship of love with his Chosen Ideal. One of the chief reasons why many people do not succeed in meditation is that they forget this important point and regard it as a passive act like looking at a picture or a flower.

A loving relationship can be established only when there is a certain degree of similarity of nature between the subject and the object. Vedanta holds that every human being is potentially divine: that is, his true self is a part of the Supreme Self. Spiritual life is the discovery of this eternal relationship. To discover this relationship spiritual aspirants must first of all discover their true self, the true divine centre within themselves, where alone they can feel the touch of the Supreme Spirit. It is only when the mental waves are stilled that the light of the self reveals itself. That is why calmness of mind is so important.

But meditation is not mere inner silence, it is the conversion of this silence into a means of uniting the individual self with the Supreme Self. That is why meditation of some kind or the other is enjoined in all Hindu scriptures. The Bible also says: "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalms 46.10)

Lastly, it should be remembered that ordinary concentration and meditation lead to quite different results. Proficiency in meditation makes it easy to do any work with concentration, but the reverse is not always true. Though doing secular work with concentration gives a good training to the mind – and is therefore better than idling about or working sloppily – it does not *ipso facto* enable the aspirant to do deep meditation. Ordinary activities, if not accompanied by discrimination, detachment, devotion

and a certain degree of meditative awareness, will only take us more and more away from the divine centre in us. Such concentration will only get us involved more and more in the unconscious stream of life. Meditation, on the contrary, takes us towards Reality directly.

Prayer, Worship, Meditation

From the above discussion it is clear that true meditation is not as easy as it is popularly supposed to be. In the path of *bhakti* meditation forms only the third step, for it should be preceded by prayer and worship. Those who have practised prayer and worship for some time find meditation easy and natural. How do prayer and worship help the aspirant in the practice of meditation?

In the first place, as we have shown, meditation is concentration of mind on a higher centre of consciousness and, unless that centre is to some extent awakened or made active, meditation is difficult. Prayer, when done with intensity, quickly awakens the heart centre. Says Swami Vivekananda, "By prayer one's subtle powers are easily roused, and if consciously done all desires may be fulfilled by it." (Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 5: 325)

Concentration is not the main problem in spiritual life. What is really difficult is to give a higher direction to the concentrated energies. A beginner cannot do this through meditation alone. Prayer and worship open the higher centres and direct the mind upward.

Secondly, meditation being a conscious and self-directed process can be successfully practised only when it is supported by the will. Pure will and pure consciousness are the dynamic and static aspects of the higher self. Through self-analysis and introspection it is possible to understand the true nature of the will and its workings. But a wayward will enslaved by emotions and instincts cannot be brought under control by self-analysis alone. That is the reason why meditation very often depends on the aspirant's moods. If we want to be independent of our moods, we must be able to direct our will Godward whenever we want. Prayer and worship gradually bring the will under control.

Further, it is seen that in many aspirants meditation affects

only a small — the conscious — part of the personality. The other parts of the personality, especially the unconscious part of the mind, which is a magazine of psychic energy, go on in their old ways. This kind of meditation lacks power. Prayer and worship rouse the unconscious, energize every part of the personality and gear them all to meditative effort. It is only when meditation is charged with power that it will act like a power drill and pierce the veil of *maya*.

We have also seen that meditation becomes meaningful only when there exists a living relationship between the soul and God. Some people are born with an inner sensitivity of the soul for the unseen, intangible Reality and feel a spontaneous love for God. For the others the only way is to cultivate devotion through long practice of prayer and worship.

Prayer and worship are of help in yet another way. They provide support to the mind even when one does not or cannot meditate. It so happens that on certain days aspirants find it difficult to meditate. When this happens many of them think, "Instead of wasting my time trying to meditate, let me do some work." But a true devotee does not think that way: he just switches to intense prayer and worship. True devotees are not discouraged by dryness of mind or other obstacles; in their case meditation is only an extension, a subtler expression, of prayer or worship.

There are, of course, other aids to meditation, but here we are concerned mainly with the path of devotion where prayer and worship play an important role.

Meditation During the Early Stages

If meditation is so difficult, does it mean that we should take it up only after attaining proficiency in prayer and worship? Indeed, if the aspirant could devote a few months or even years exclusively to prayer and worship, he would quickly advance and would find meditation easy and spontaneous. But today few people have the faith and patience to wait for such a long time. Nor is it necessary even for the beginner to abandon meditation. The practice of meditation along with prayer and worship can be taken up even in the beginning of spiritual life. For meditation, even when not perfectly done, helps the aspirant in several ways.

It helps the aspirant to understand the working of his own

mind. Meditation in the early stages may appear like waging an inner battle but the time spent in it is not wasted. Through that the aspirant gains understanding about his subtle desires and tendencies. Meditation of this kind “acts as a rudder in a boat,” points out the Holy Mother. “When a person sits in the evening for prayer, he can reflect on the good and bad things he did in the course of the day. Then he should compare the mental state of that day with that of the previous day□ Unless you practise meditation in the morning and evening side by side with your work, how can you know whether you are doing the desirable or the undesirable thing?” (Swami Tapasyananda and Swami Nikhilananda, Sri Sarada Devi: The Holy Mother, p. 408.)

The practice of meditation during the early stages is important for a second reason: it gives the mind a good training in inwardness (*pratyak pravanatha*) and introduces a sense of interiority into the life of the aspirant. These effects may not be immediately noticeable, but after a few months or years the aspirant finds that the mind is turning inward without much difficulty. Even if the mind wanders, sitting motionless in a particular posture itself disciplines the body and the nervous system. Later on, when the aspirant becomes an adept in meditation, he will find this early training a great asset.

Furthermore, the practice of meditation helps the aspirant to integrate his personality. It provides a common inner focus for the will, intellect and emotions. Even when the aspirant does not succeed in having perfect meditation, the presence of a central focus within gives a sense of unity and integrity to his whole personality. And this helps the aspirant to remain unaffected by the changes and troubles of the external world.

These are the advantages of practising meditation during the early stages of one’s spiritual life. However, when the aspirant gains proficiency in it, meditation becomes a direct means for spiritual experience.

True meditation is a knocking at the door of the shrine within the heart. This higher meditation, intensely and persistently practised, will at last open the inner door to the world of divine light, knowledge and bliss.

We shall next discuss this higher meditation — its different techniques and the various mental processes involved in it.

PART TWO

What True Meditation Is

Dhyana or meditation is the conscious maintenance of a steady stream of the same thought about an object at a higher centre of consciousness.¹ What we call thinking is the manipulation of a series of thought-waves called *vrittis*.

The mind has two tendencies. Its natural tendency is to move constantly from one thought-wave to another. This tendency to grasp diverse objects is called *sarvarthata* — all-pointedness. But occasionally the mind holds on to a single object; this tendency is called *ekagrata* — one-pointedness. *Dhyana* or meditation is a special type of one-pointed activity of the mind.

The English word “concentration” is a general term which may mean either one-pointedness or the maintenance of a small number of thought-waves, as for instance takes place while playing chess. We have already shown how true meditation differs from ordinary forms of concentration. According to Patanjali, concentration must fulfil five conditions in order to become a means for liberation. The first of these is *sraddha* which means faith — faith in the supreme goal of life and the possibility of attaining it. This must be supported by *virya* which means energy or enthusiasm produced, not by the activity of instincts, but by the continuous exercise of willpower. The third condition is *smriti* or memory. This must be supported by *samadhi* or one-pointed absorption and *prajna* or self-awareness.²

Of these the most important condition is memory. To maintain a steady stream of the same thought means to maintain a steady memory. However, meditation is not an ordinary process of remembering. Normally a person remembers many things, and some people have wonderful powers of memory. But to keep the memory steady by fixing the mind on a single idea is difficult, and this is what meditation means. Again, ordinary memory is recalling a past experience. To remember is to dwell in the past. A good deal of a normal person's daily life is spent either in remem-

1. "The flow of one and the same thought-wave there (i.e., at a particular centre of consciousness) is meditation." Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, 3.2.

2. *Yoga Sutras*, 1.20.

bering the past or in expecting the future. The present is so momentary that, as soon as an experience comes, it rolls on into the past.

Meditation is not remembering the past but maintaining the memory of the present. It is not an attempt to call back to mind a past event, but an attempt to prevent the present from slipping into the past, into forgetfulness. True meditation is the fixing of the whole memory process at the present moment.

Very often spiritual aspirants forget the above point. What many of them do is this: they look at a picture of their Chosen Ideal of God then close their eyes and try to remember what they have seen. This holding on to a past event, regarded as a sacred act, does not essentially differ from other types of remembering past events. It makes meditation mechanical, repetitive. It tires the nerves. It opens the door to the past with the result that the aspirant finds a crowd of past memories rushing into his mind. Small wonder then, many people do not derive much benefit from this kind of meditation even after months and years of practice.

True meditation is directly encountering a living Image. When you see a person face to face, you live in the present. If meditation is to become something like this, you must be able to look into the unknown depths of your heart and directly “see” a living Image there. This becomes possible only when you succeed in focusing the light of your consciousness into the depths of your heart. Beginners find this difficult. That is why they are advised to practise prayer and worship. (Other methods of holding memory to the present are *vipassana*, the Zen technique of maintaining self-awareness in which the meditator constantly watches all movements and thoughts, *nididhyasana*, the Vedantic technique of enquiring into the nature of the Self, and the constant repetition of a *mantra*.)

Prayer and worship are acts which have meaning only in the present. Prayer cannot slide into the past without your notice. As soon as forgetfulness comes, prayer stops. Spiritual prayer is indeed an intense effort to hold the present moment. Prayer, even when addressed to an unknown Being, makes you live in the present. Worship makes that Being more real and enables you to hold on to the present longer still. When this encounter between

the soul and the Image in the present is internalised and intensified, it becomes meditation.

True meditation is thus an act which works against the very tendency of the mind to dwell in the past. Meditation is the movement of a steady stream of consciousness from the "I" (the subject) to a mental image (the object). When this movement is steady, the object does not change; when it wavers, the object too changes. It is an impulse or movement that originates in the self that determines whether the image remains steady or changing. This self-impulse is the will. When we try to meditate, a number of memories crowd into the mind and we feel helpless. But it is we who allow the mind to wander in this way. We can fix the mind on any object if we really want to. By training the will we can keep the inner image steady. When this happens our memory gets restricted to the present. And that is meditation.

Meditation always means meditation on an object. There is a popular notion that meditation means making the mind blank by purging it of all images. This is not quite true, for there must always be an object in the mind during meditation. Meditation, as already pointed out, means the maintenance of a single thought and the suppression of all the others.

The complete suppression of all thoughts takes place in deep sleep and some higher forms of absorption (*samadhi*) when the mind becomes free from all objects, and the objectifying tendency of the mind itself is suppressed.

If a person tries to remove all thoughts without acquiring purity and spiritual power, the usual results will be not *samadhi* but a kind of sleep or hypnotic stupor. "When persons without training and preparation try to make their minds vacant," warns Swami Vivekananda, "they are likely to succeed only in covering themselves with *tamas*, the material of ignorance, which makes the mind dull and stupid, and leads them to think that they are making a vacuum of the mind."³ It should be pointed out here that the word "meditation" is often used, especially in the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, to mean not only *dhyana* but also the next higher state of *samadhi* or absorption. This does not,

3. Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1977) I: 212.

however, mean that *samadhi* is only a prolongation of *dhyana*; there is a qualitative difference between the two, as we shall see later on.

It is possible to meditate on the subject, the “I”: this kind of meditation is called *aham-graha upasana*. But the subject in this case is not the pure *Atman* but only the empirical self, a reflection or image of the true *Atman*. The existence of the self is self-evident and does not need any proof, but its real nature as the *Atman* is not self-evident.

The pure *Atman* can never become the object of meditation. During higher *samadhi*, when all thought-waves are stilled, that pure *Atman* shines by itself. There is a method of penetrating straight into the pure self through inquiry, but this does not come under meditation. It is a direct path followed by those who practise *jnana yoga*.

Sometimes a person may spontaneously get into a state of consciousness in which the mind becomes calm and alert. The person feels a deep inner silence in which every movement is noticed and every thought appears fresh and meaningful. The mind does not hold a particular image but calmly witnesses thoughts coming and going—like clouds moving across the sky or travelers going through a silent countryside. The person then lives in the present. He observes the silent flow of life without being carried away by the stream. This is a state in which the self becomes aware of the whole mind itself, rather than an object or an image. It is like a fish suddenly becoming aware of the water in which formerly it had noticed only other fish, worms, etc. When this mood is consciously cultivated, the mind becomes fit for meditation.

In the path of *bhakti* this meditative awareness is attained through love. The devotee thinks of the Deity with so much love that his whole being vibrates with that single thought like a gong struck with a mallet. There is no room for any other thought in the mind which gets rooted in the living presence of the Deity and riveted to the present moment.

In true meditation the mind becomes like a violin string stretched between the self and the object, and vibrates in the present moment producing ever-renewing melodies in consciousness.

Psychological Basis of Meditation

The human mind is perhaps the most wonderful thing in the whole universe. All the knowledge and mystery of the universe are hidden in its depths. Those who wish to practise meditation should know how their minds work. The mind is not a machine which we ourselves have built and can operate in any way we like. It has come to us ready-made, and it started influencing us long before we became conscious of its working. The individual mind does not work in isolation. Each is a part of the vast cosmic mind, works in accordance with certain universal principles, and is impelled by the same cosmic energy called *prana*. In his famous lecture on “The Powers of the Mind” Swami Vivekananda says, “All minds are the same, different parts of one mind. He who knows one lump of clay has known all the clay in the universe. He who knows and controls his own mind knows the secret of every mind and has power over every mind.”⁴

Just as physics and chemistry are based on precise laws of the physical world, the working of the mind is also based on certain universal laws. The credit for first discovering these is attributed to the sage Kapila. They were well known in India long before Buddha’s time. Later on Patanjali codified the principles of mental science into his system of yoga which is now gaining worldwide attention. Perhaps in the twenty-first century humanity’s main preoccupation will be not with science but with yoga.

In India itself, owing to the obsession of the people with metaphysical speculations for the past thousand years, much of the knowledge concerning yoga has been lost. Fortunately, however, enough of it has been incorporated into the system of Vedanta to survive as a living tradition to this day. Those who attempt meditation must have a clear understanding of five fundamental principles of yoga psychology which form the basis of Vedantic meditation.

The first principle is that consciousness belongs to the true self known variously as the *Purusa*, *Atman*, *jiva*, etc. It is its very nature. Everything else in the universe—the entire material universe and all individual minds—belongs to *prakriti* which is unconscious (*jada*). *Prakriti* is neither material nor mental stuff; it is

4. Complete Works (1976), 2:17.

the unmanifested primordial stuff of which mind and matter are only two different manifestations.

Prakriti is unconscious but is not dead or inert. It is an unconscious power animating the whole universe. It is not self-luminous. It is known only when the light of the *Purusa* falls on it. But the *Purusa* or *Atman* is self-luminous and does not need anything else to reveal it.

The distinction between consciousness and unconsciousness, one of the great discoveries made in ancient India, is an important point in spiritual life. Those who want to practise meditation must have the basic knowledge that the self alone is conscious and that, in the absence of self-awareness, all mental and physical activities go on unconsciously. The circulation of blood, digestion and assimilation of food, and other physiological activities go on without our being aware of them.

If we study our mental life we find that a major part of it goes on automatically. We talk, read, eat, walk and play, hardly being aware that we are doing these activities. When we sit for meditation the same automatism continues within us. Having spent a major part of the day more or less unconsciously, we find we have very little control over the mind during meditation.

The more we hold on to the self, the more conscious we become. And the more conscious we become, the greater becomes our control over our thoughts and actions. This kind of self-awareness, popularly known as alertness, is essential not only for those who follow the path of *jnana* but also for those who follow the path of *bhakti*.

The self is the abode of consciousness. Spiritual aspirants must learn to open its doors and allow consciousness to flow into their mental activities more and more. It is desires and other impurities of mind that obscure the self and drive us through unconsciousness. As the mind becomes purer, the light of the self manifests itself more, giving us greater self-awareness and self-control.

The second basic principle of yoga psychology is that knowing is the result of a mental modification. In order to know an object the mind must take the form of that object. This modification of the mind is called a *vritti*.

Cognition or knowledge is the relation between the self and the object. The pure self or *Atman* cannot directly know an object. Between the self and the object must intervene the mind. Even this is not enough; the mind must take the form of the object. When the light of the *Atman* falls upon this *vritti* or thought-wave, knowledge results.

Vrittis are of different types. When you look at a tree, the mind goes out and takes the form of the tree. That is how you know the tree. When you close your eyes, the mind reproduces the image of the tree, and that is how you remember.

What we call life or existence consists of worlds within worlds. Just as there is an external physical universe, so also there are subtle inner worlds peopled by gods, goddesses, spirits and disembodied beings. When the mind is projected towards those beings we come to know about them. All these modifications of the mind are *vrittis*.

There can be no knowledge without *vrittis*. In deep sleep, the mind being overpowered by *tamas* does not produce any *vritti*. So in deep sleep we know nothing, and upon waking say, "I did not know anything." But according to Patanjali and some Advaitins, during deep sleep a particular kind of *vritti* called *nidra vritti* exists. In the highest superconscious state called *nirvikalpa samadhi*, the mind gets absorbed in the Self and the *Atman* alone exists. It is not a state of "knowledge" but one of pure existence. Except this non-dual experience, every form of knowledge — from the feeling of emotions to the highest spiritual vision — is the result of *vritti* or thought-waves.

True knowledge is called *prama*, wrong knowledge is called *bhrama*. A thought-wave which produces true knowledge is known as *pramana* and one which produces wrong knowledge, *viparyaya*. According to Patanjali, attachment, hatred, fear and other emotions are all *viparyaya-vrittis*. There is also another kind of knowledge, which is neither true nor false. Abstract ideas like goodness, beauty, infinity, etc., do not have an objective content. Nevertheless, they are not wrong but serve a practical purpose. A thought-wave which produces this kind of knowledge is called *vikalpa*.⁵

5. Cf. *Yoga Sutras*, 1.6-11.

When you sit for meditation and try to visualize your Chosen Ideal, your knowledge is not true because you do not actually see him or her. At the same time, it is not false either because your imagination is not about something which does not exist. Strictly speaking, most of our meditations should be classed under *vikalpa*, though they depend on memory. When through prolonged meditation you get a direct vision of the Deity, the *vikalpa* changes into a *pramana*, true knowledge. This true knowledge of supersensuous Reality is called *saksatkara* or *yogi-pratyaksa*, and to attain it is the goal of meditation.

The mind has different levels or layers and each of these has its own *vrittis*. The *vrittis* that occur in the outer layers are gross and are concerned with external objects. Poetic intuition and philosophic insight have their origin in higher layers. In the deeper layers of the mind exist subtle *vrittis* through which one knows supersensuous truths of the spiritual world. Most people are aware of only gross forms of thought. When, through purification and meditation, the spiritual aspirant learns to go deep into the mind, he becomes aware of subtle thought-waves.

We have seen that what is called knowledge is the reflection of the light of the *Purusa* or *Atman* on the *vrittis*. Gross *vrittis* reflect very little light and there is little self-awareness associated with them. Subtle *vrittis* reflect more light. The images they produce are brighter and there is greater self-awareness associated with them. As the aspirant goes deeper into the mind, he gets closer to the *Atman* and sees more and more of its light.

The *Atman* is the same in all people. The difference between one person and another lies in the types of *vritti* that dominate their minds. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, each soul is potentially divine but the degree of manifestation of this divinity varies from person to person. Those who are pure and spiritual have pure *vrittis* in their minds and reflect more of the inner light. The Sanskrit word for "god" is *deva* which literally means "the shining one." Gods are those beings whose subtle bodies are so pure and transparent that in them the light of the *Atman* shines in all its dazzling brilliance. Through purification and meditation every person can attain to that state.

Why should we know all these details about *vrittis*? The fundamental problem in meditation is to produce and maintain the right

type of *vritti*. If you want to realize or “see” your Chosen Ideal, you must produce the pure *vritti* that will reveal his true nature. The purpose of meditation is to produce that particular *vritti*. Until you succeed in doing it your meditation is only a form of imagination. As soon as you succeed in producing the right *vritti*, meditation terminates and direct experience begins.

Here a question naturally arises: Why is it so difficult to produce the right type of supersensuous *vritti*? This question leads us to two important concepts (which form the third and fourth basic principles of yoga psychology with which we are dealing here).

One concept is that there is an invariable relationship between word and knowledge. You cannot think without words. Suppose you suddenly wake up from deep sleep: you at first notice “somebody” standing before you. Then you understand that it is your mother. Your first experience is cognition; it is just sense-perception. Your second experience is recognition: it is the result of thinking. And thinking needs the use of words: recognition of mother comes from the word “mother.” Similarly, when you hear or utter within yourself the word “mother,” the image of your mother rises in your mind. From childhood we have learned to associate objects or forms (*rupa*) with names (*nama*) so much so that we cannot think without words.

The exact relationship between names and forms is a matter of controversy among Indian philosophers. According to some, this relationship is artificial, being based on convention. But according to ancient Sanskrit grammarians (like Bhartrhari), Mimamsakas and Tantric philosophers, the relationship between names and forms (*nama-rupa*) is eternal. They believe that the basic structure of the human mind is verbal. Knowledge is the result of an inner formulation in words. When you look at (or try to remember) an object, you know it by formulating the words corresponding to that object.

In meditation special words called *mantras* are usually used. *Mantras* differ from ordinary words in an important respect. If you hear the word “rhinoceros,” but have never seen that animal (or at least its picture), it makes very little sense to you. In that case, even if you go on repeating that word all through your life, you are not going to know that animal. When you sit for meditation

and repeat a divine name or *mantra*, it brings to your mind only an image of the real Deity, for that is all that you had experienced. But — and this is where the *mantra* differs from ordinary words — if the *mantra* is repeated with faith and purity, it will gradually awaken the subtle, pure *vritti* which will directly reveal the reality which it symbolizes.

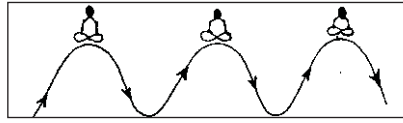
Here it is enough to understand that our normal thinking is impossible without both forms and names. What is called *vritti* consists of two parts: the form of the object and its name. Meditation is the maintenance of a single *vritti*, which means the maintenance of a single name and form and the exclusion of all other names and forms.

We now come to the fourth principle of yoga psychology: every experience leaves behind an impression called a *samskara* which has the power to produce that *vritti* again. The unconscious cellars of the mind are the storehouse of countless *samskaras*. These latent impressions are continuously sprouting into desires, emotions, memories and ideas which go on disturbing the mind all the time. That is why it is difficult to maintain the right type of single *vritti* during meditation. Considering the important role that *samskaras* play in the life of a spiritual aspirant, we shall discuss this topic in greater detail later on.

What we need to note at present is that *vrittis* produce *samskaras*, and *samskaras* produce *vrittis*. This cycle can be broken only by destroying *samskaras*. *Samskaras* can be destroyed only by the light of higher spiritual illumination. But their power can be reduced and kept under check through purificatory disciplines. Without purification of the mind true meditation is difficult.

The fifth fundamental postulate of yoga psychology is that the mind is continuously changing and can never be stopped completely. According to all schools of Hindu thought, everything in the universe except the self is always in a state of flux. *Vrittis* are continuously appearing and disappearing in the mind. When the mind is distracted different *vrittis* appear and disappear, but when the mind is concentrated, one and the same *vritti* appears and disappears continuously. In deep meditation the image of the Chosen Ideal appears to be stationary, but this is because the same *vritti* is continuously reappearing in the mind with uniform frequency. Meditation is not the stopping of all the *vrittis* but the

maintenance of the steady rise and fall of the same *vritti* over a long period of time.



*Vrittis in
uninterrupted
meditation*

It is only in some of the highest forms of *samadhi* that all *vrittis* are stopped. But even then the mind does not stop. According to Patanjali, even when all the *vrittis* are stopped, the *samskaras* go on changing in the unconscious depths of the mind. If this change of *samskaras* also is stopped, if the whole mind is stopped, the mind will not last long as mind. It will get resolved back into its cause, which is *prakriti*. But this happens only at the time of final liberation.

A proper understanding of the above mentioned five principles of yoga psychology will enable spiritual aspirants to understand the workings of their minds and make meditation a fruitful spiritual practice.

PART THREE **Dissociation and Conflict**

When you sit for meditation and close your eyes, almost the first thing you notice is that your awareness is not continuous. It does not consist of a single, homogenous stream but flows as different, sometimes disconnected, streams of thought. Psychologists call this phenomenon “dissociation.” By dissociation is meant not the appearance of various pictures in the mind, but the emotional sectioning of the mind and the identification of the self with each division.

Dissociation of awareness is the human response to the diverse challenges of life. An average person has to play a number of roles in day-to-day life: as a child, parent, spouse, worker, boss, taxpayer, citizen, artist, thinker, etc. In a normal person all these diverse activities are held together by the common bond of self-awareness. There is in us a unifying centre known as the self which gives identity to our existence, continuity to our experience, and wholeness to our personality. In the Upanisads the self is often compared to the hub of life to which the spokes of life-ac-

tivities are attached.⁶

However, under certain abnormal conditions produced by stress and emotional conflicts, dissociation becomes so strong that the self is unable to integrate the contradictory streams of thought. The person in whom this happens develops a divided personality and lives in mutually incompatible worlds. When this process is carried to an extreme, it may result in neurosis or something worse. It was as an explanation of neurosis that the phenomenon of dissociation was first discovered by the French psychologist Pierre Janet in the middle of the nineteenth century. However, as already mentioned, mild forms of dissociation occur almost every minute in a normal person and are a big problem in meditative life. Spiritual aspirants must understand the nature and cause of dissociation.

The immediate cause of dissociation is the presence of obstructions in the mind which prevent the free and uniform flow of awareness. What are these obstructions? Western psychologists call them by various names: instincts, drives, impulses, complexes. In Indian psychology these are called *samskaras* and are regarded as latent impressions produced by earlier experiences, including those of previous births. These "impressions" are not like dots on a paper. They are rather like fields of mental forces. Just as a river is divided into different branches by big rocks or sandbars, so the stream of thoughts is divided into different branches by *samskaras*.

Investigation into the way compulsive emotional drives operated led Freud to two important discoveries. One is that the mind is not fully conscious and a major part of it consists of the "unconscious." The other discovery is that most people are unaware of the operation of their own emotional drives because these are excluded from the conscious mind and are kept in check in the unconscious by a process which Freud called "repression." When a person controls his emotions and impulses consciously, it is called suppression. But when the control is effected unconsciously, the process becomes repression.

These basic ideas of Freud were known to the ancient Indian sages. They regarded the whole mind as intrinsically uncon-

6. Cf. *Prasna Upanisad*, 6.6.

scious and the *Purusa* or *Atman* as the only source of consciousness. Only that part of the mind which is illumined by the light of the *Purusa* was regarded as the conscious mind (*manas*), the remaining part of the mind with a preponderance of *tamas* being regarded as the unconscious (*citta*) which was understood to be the storehouse of *samskaras*. A higher part of the mind with a greater degree of *satva* was further marked off as the *buddhi*, the source of spiritual intuition and true will, and the empirical (*vyavaharika*) self of human beings.

Two Types of Samskaras

Samskaras or latent impressions are of two kinds: those which give rise to desires, emotional impulses, instinctual drives etc., and those which give rise to concepts, ideas, etc. In most of our normal thinking, ideas and concepts are found linked to desires or emotional impulses.

An idea or concept normally consists of one or more images and corresponding words, respectively known as *rupa* and *nama* in Indian psychology. In abstract thinking (such as philosophical speculation, mathematical calculation, etc.) the mind deals almost exclusively with words, symbols and images.⁷ But in ordinary thinking, words and images are invariably linked to desires, impulses or drives. In Vedanta, impulses, desires, etc. are known as *vasana* or *bhoga-vasana*; (Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutras* refers to them as *klesas*, a term obviously borrowed from Buddhist sources.)

Normally we cannot think of persons or things without simultaneously feeling some emotion or desire. Every emotion is linked to a large number of ideas. Love for a person brings to the mind many pictures and words about him. Similarly, anger produces many pictures and words in the mind.

How does this linking between ideas and desires or impulses take place in the mind? It takes place through a process of willing known as *samkalpa* or intention. From our childhood we associate persons and things with different desires or emotions. This association is generally made at first through conscious willing or

7. It may be mentioned here that Patanjali has used the term *vritti* chiefly to mean cognitive knowledge in the form of ideas and concepts.

samkalpa. Later on it becomes unconscious and automatic.

Every day we make so many *samkalpas* or intentions, such as, "I will do this," "I will eat that," "Let me think of him," and so on. Once a *samkalpa* is made, several ideas and emotions rush into the mind. When we sit for meditation we may make the *samkalpa*, "I will think of God alone; I will not think of anything else." But owing to the action of past *samskaras*, so many ideas and desires or impulses rise in the mind and cause distractions during meditation. This is generally referred to as "wandering of the mind."

Control of the Vrittis

Patanjali uses the term *vritti* mostly to mean a cognitive modification of the mind such as an idea or a concept. He defines yoga as the control of *vrittis* (*yogascittavrtti nirodhah* 1. 2). But before control of the *vrittis* becomes possible, they should be freed from the hold of impulses and drives.

By themselves, images and words are harmless. It is the impulses connected to them that create all the trouble. Take, for instance, the case of a person addicted to smoking. Every time the memory of the pleasure of the experience or even a cigarette comes to mind, the smoker feels an urge to smoke. But if through medical advice and fear of cancer he succeeds in controlling that impulse, that person can think about smoking or cigarettes without feeling the urge to smoke. Or suppose person B is rude to person A. Later on A finds that whenever the memory of B arises, the impulse of anger also arises in his mind. But suppose A pardons B. Then when the picture of B arises, it no longer creates anger in A's mind.

It is the hooking of instinctual impulses to memories that is the root cause of all our emotional problems. This linking is of the nature of an invasion. Like surface-to-air missiles, impulses from the unconscious invade the memories which appear in the conscious mind. When this happens we act without thinking about past experiences or future consequences. Says the *Yoga Vasistha*, "*Vasana* is the sudden seizing of an object without thinking about the past or future owing to deep-rooted habit."⁸

8. *Laghu Yoga Vasistham*, 28.48.

The first struggle in meditative life is to break the connection between memories and impulses. This is what purification of the mind really means. In a purified mind instinctive impulses do not operate. Memories in the form of pictures and ideas appear but they are not tied down to impulses. Like white clouds which do not rain but disappear in the blue sky, these memories disappear after remaining in the field of consciousness for a short while.

Purification of Samskaras

The purification of the mind really means the purification of *samskaras* which, as we have seen, means breaking the connection between impulses and ideas. How can one do this?

One method is to weaken the power of the impulses through abstinence, avoidance, withdrawal and other forms of *tapas* or austerity. Another method is to increase the number of good *samskaras* through virtuous *karma*. Something like what physical chemists call the Law of Mass Action operates in mental life also. When *dharma samskaras* (good impressions) increase, they keep in check *adharma samskaras* (bad impressions). These two methods — *tapas* and virtuous *karma* — are unavoidable disciplines during the early stages of meditative life.

Patanjali speaks of a third method, which may be practised along with the other two. This is to change the connection between impulses and mental images. Images exert a great influence in the mind. If bad impulses, when they arise in the mind, are connected to the image of a holy man or holy woman, they immediately get controlled. Similarly, bad images cease to appear bad when connected to good emotions. This process of changing the connections between mental images and impulses is called *pratipaksa-bhavanam*.⁹ This is to be done through proper self-analysis, but this becomes effective only when the new connections are tested in action.

A fourth and higher method is to detach the will. The connection between images and impulses is consciously made by exercising the will. This connection is supported by the will. If the will is detached, the *samskaras* break apart. However, detachment is not easy. It becomes possible only when supported by other dis-

9. *Yoga Sutras*, 2.33.

ciplines. A story is told about the great French impressionist painter Matisse. A visitor to his studio pointed to some unholy pictures hanging on the wall and asked Matisse: "Don't you think these have a demoralizing effect on people?" The artist calmly replied, "My dear man, it is not a woman, it is only a picture." An artist sees only a picture in a woman, whereas an ordinary man sees a woman in a picture — this is the difference between the two. This does not of course mean that all artists are holy sages. But in them the creative urge becomes so strong that it produces a certain degree of detachment — aesthetic detachment as it is called. However, owing to a lack of systematic moral discipline, most artists are not able to sustain this detachment for long.

All impulses can be reduced to three types of instinctual reactions: "towards," "against" and "away from" — *raga*, *dvesa* and *bhaya*, as Indian psychologists call them. The terms *dharma* (virtue) and *adharma* (vice) can be applied only to these impulses and the actions that result from them. Memories, that is the various images and ideas that rise in the mind, are neutral. By themselves they are neither good nor bad; it is their association with impulses that makes them good or bad. When we speak of purification of the mind, what we really mean is freeing the memory from the hold of impulses, or *smṛti parisuddhi*, purification of the memory, as Patanjali calls it.

When bad memories appear, one should not get upset but should calmly proceed to free them from bad impulses through self-analysis. Further, one should understand that mental images appear living only because they are charged with consciousness through association with the self. When the self is disconnected from the mental images by detaching the will, they get deflated and disappear.

The Action of Samskaras

Normally the action of *samskaras* can be noticed only when they sprout into *vrittis*. Memories and impulses are all different forms of *vrittis*. Says Swami Vivekananda: "These feelings have to be controlled in the germ, the root, in their fine forms, before even we have become conscious that they are acting on us. With the vast majority of mankind, the fine states of these passions are not even known — the states in which they emerge from the sub-

conscious. When a bubble is rising from the bottom of the lake, we do not see it, nor even when it is nearly come to the surface; it is only when it bursts and makes a ripple that we know it is there.”¹⁰ By the practice of purification and meditation, the spiritual aspirant comes to have greater insight into the subtle workings of the mind and the way *samskaras* sprout and operate.

How do *samskaras* sprout into *vrittis*? What activates the *samskaras*? Just as the recording in a magnetic tape is activated by the electric current in the tape recorder, the *samskaras* are activated by the cosmic energy flowing through the mind. Regarding the nature of this cosmic energy Indian sages hold different views. According to the Samkhya Yoga school it is *rajas*, the mobile element of the three *gunas*, that manifests itself as all movements in the cosmos. The *Gita* says, “This lust, this anger, arises because of *rajas*.”¹¹ Commenting on this line, Vedanta Desika says, “Watered with *rajas* the seeds of subtle impressions left by the experience of objects of senses sprout into desire and anger.”¹²

In the Vedas and the Tantras the cosmic energy is called *prana*. By *prana* is meant not the air we breathe, points out Swami Vivekananda, but “the sum total of all forces in the universe, mental and physical, resolved back into their original state.”¹³ The *Yoga Vasistha* says, “The tree of the mind has two seeds: one is the latent impression, the other is *prana*. When one of these is weakened, both get quickly controlled.”¹⁴

According to yogis, the movement of *prana* in the psycho-physical system depends upon the activity of two main channels known as *ida* and *pingala*. *Pranayama* is an exercise for controlling these channels. When the activity of these channels is controlled, the mind becomes calm. However, it should be noted that *pranayama* only stops the sprouting of the *samskaras* but does not destroy them. When the effect of *pranayama* wears off, the *samskaras* sprout again.

10. Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1977), 1.241-42.

11. *Bhagavad Gita*, 3. 37.

12. Tatparyacandrika on *ibid*.

13. Complete Works, 1. 148.

14. *Laghu Yoga Vasistham*, 28, 34.

Prana activates the *samskaras* of both ideas and impulses. Ideas produced by *samskaras* affect only the surface of the mind like ripples, whereas the impulses and desires produced by *samskaras* affect the whole mind and split it into different streams. Patanjali makes it clear that meditation can control only the gross *vruttis* that appear on the surface of the mind.¹⁵ The deep division in the mind caused by emotional conflicts are to be overcome by controlling the *samskaras* of desires.

The Five States of Samskaras

In order to control the activity of *samskaras* we must know how they operate. All *samskaras* do not exist in the same state. According to Patanjali a *samskara* may exist in any one of five states.¹⁶

The first state is called *prasupta* (dormant) in which the *samskaras* remain undeveloped. A child is born with hundreds of *samskaras*, but most of these remain dormant during childhood. As the child grows older, more and more *samskaras* become active. According to Patanjali, in each birth only those *samskaras* become active for which favourable conditions exist in that particular birth.¹⁷ The rest of the *samskaras* remain dormant. This shows that environment is also important in the operation of *samskaras*. Good and favourable conditions at home and in society awaken the best *samskaras* in people.

In the second state called *udara* (expanded) the *samskaras* are freely expressed. When conditions are favourable our latent tendencies get free expression, provided they are approved by society. Many of our normal, simple desires belong to this category.

When certain desires become strong but are disapproved by society, they are repressed, that is, kept in check in the unconscious. This repressed condition of the *samskara* is called *vicchinna*. In this state the *samskaras* are in a turbulent condition but are prevented from sprouting by the powerful influence of other *samskaras*. Repression is one of the important discoveries of Freud, but he could not correctly explain how it takes place.

15. *Yoga Sutras*, 2.10, 11.

16. *Ibid.*, 2.4, and Vyasa's commentary on it.

17. *Yoga Sutras*, 4.8, 9.

According to Yoga psychology, a strong *samskara* can repress a weak *samskara*. For instance, fear *samskara* may repress lust or greed *samskara*. Since this process goes on in the depths of the unconscious, the person does not become aware of it.

Repression caused by conflicts raging in the depths of the unconscious drain a lot of mental energy and weaken the mind which becomes unfit for meditation. Through careful self-analysis and constant mental alertness, spiritual aspirants should get rid of repressions by finding out the hidden conflicts and their causes.

The fourth state in which *samskaras* exist is called *tanu* (attenuated). If desires and impulses are consciously and intelligently controlled, the concerned *samskaras* lose their impetuosity and become weak. Without intruding into the conscious mind they then remain in seed form in the known depths of the unconscious, always within the reach of the conscious mind. This conversion of *samskaras* into the *tanu* state is the result of long practice of disciplines and purification.

In the repressed (*vicchinna*) state, *samskaras* remain powerful and active and are beyond the reach of the conscious mind. But in the attenuated (*tanu*) state, the *samskaras* lose their power and are always under conscious control. In the yogi most of the desires and impulses have been reduced to the *tanu* state. As a result the mind of the yogi remains calm and he enjoys *sama sukham*, the joy of self-control.

Repression is unhealthy and leads to mental disorders. But yogic suppression conserves psychic energy and enables the aspirant to rise to higher levels of consciousness, though during the early stages it may entail a certain amount of struggle.

The change of *samskaras* into the *tanu* state does not mean their destruction. Just as seeds sprout when the ground is watered, so also the attenuated *samskaras* will become active if they are stimulated. However, if the seeds are roasted in fire, they will not sprout again. In the same way, if the *samskaras* are subjected to the light of higher consciousness, they will be reduced to a deactivated condition known as *dagdha-bija* ("burnt seed"). Such *samskaras* cannot sprout again even when the mind is brought into contact with sense objects. Through repeated spiritual experience the yogi burns up desires and impulses and reduces them

all to the *dagdha-bija* state. There is no other way to destroy *samskaras* completely.

Stages in Purification

Breaking the connection between images and impulses represents only the first stage in the purification of mind. In the second stage, the *samskaras* of impulses and drives are reduced to the attenuated (*tanu*) state. In the third stage, the *samskaras* are reduced to the burnt or deactivated (*dagdha-bija*) state.

In a fully illumined soul, all the *samskaras* of impulses and desires have been irreversibly deactivated, and so he is free from desires and impulses. But the ideas and concepts produced by *samskaras* will remain. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that just as a burnt rope may retain the shape of a rope but cannot bind anyone, so a fully illumined soul has only a semblance of desires.

Dissociation and the Three States of Consciousness

We began with a discussion on the phenomenon of dissociation of awareness and how it is caused by *samskaras*. There is yet another type of dissociation of consciousness which is more radical and at the same time a natural one. It is the division of consciousness into the three states: *jagrat* (waking), *svapna* (dreaming) and *susupti* (deep sleep). This dissociation is not caused by *samskaras*. It is a spontaneous process connected to the rhythms of life, the exact cause of which is one of the great mysteries of life.

Waking, dreaming and deep sleep represent three entirely different states, each with its own notions of time, space and the self. The dream state is not a continuation of the waking state any more than the deep-sleep state is a continuation of the dream state. Between the two states a rupture in the continuity of consciousness takes place. Consciousness seems to undergo cycles of projection and withdrawal. What is common to all three states is the awareness of "I." This shows that the self has different dimensions and, corresponding to these, there are different levels or layers in the human personality structure.

In ancient India the three states provoked deep interest and were the subject of much study and investigation. Spiritual aspirants must have a deep understanding of the three states, for these have a direct bearing on meditative life. True spiritual expe-

rience is regarded as a state different from the above three states. It is a state which reveals the real nature of the self and its relation to the Supreme Spirit. The light of this experience burns up worldly desires. As in the case of other experiences, spiritual experience too leaves its impressions or *samskaras* in the mind which act as a check on worldly *samskaras*. The residual impressions left in the mind by spiritual experiences are called *prajna samskaras*. Even after the spiritual experience has ceased, the *prajna samskara* helps to maintain higher knowledge.

PART FOUR

The Five States of the Mind

Meditation is the bridge that connects the lower mind with the higher mind. Through that the aspirant crosses over from the din and distractions of the sense-bound world to the world of stillness and silence, from the world of darkness to the world of everlasting light. All preliminary spiritual disciplines end in meditative awareness.

Preliminary spiritual struggles lead the aspirant to the boundaries of the discursive mind. There the aspirant encounters the thought barrier. Take the case of sound: It is nothing but air waves. Yet an ordinary airplane cannot go beyond the speed of sound. Only specially constructed planes with powerful engines can break the sound barrier. Similarly, though thoughts are apparently feeble, non-substantial things, one cannot easily go beyond thoughts. It is through meditation that the aspirant pierces the thought barrier and reaches the higher plane of intuition.

The Five States of the Mind

We have already seen that consciousness pulsates through the three states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep. Even during the waking state the mind does not always remain in the same condition. According to the commentators on the *Yoga Sutras*, the human mind may exist in any of five states: *ksiptam* (restless), *mudham* (dull), *viksiptam* (preoccupied), *ekagram* (concentrated) and *niruddham* (closed).¹⁸ Bhoja says that in ev-

18. Compare the commentaries of Vyasa and Bhoja on *Yoga Sutras* 1.1 and 1.2

ery person one of these states of mind predominates, and this determines his behaviour. Spiritual aspirants may find their minds going through the first four states repeatedly. This is a big problem especially during the early years of spiritual life, and those who want to lead a meditative life should have a clear understanding of the five states.

Ksiptam or the restless state of mind is one in which the mind is totally under the sway of the senses. It flits aimlessly like a butterfly. This is the predominant state of mind in children and those who lead a purely sense-bound life. It is a state in which *rajas* predominates. Restlessness of the mind can be controlled through disciplined work, deep studies, yoga exercises, etc.

In the state called *mudham*, the mind remains dull and inactive owing to a preponderance of *tamas*. It may be caused by physical factors like fatigue or disease. But more often it is caused by conflict of emotions. When the conflict between two opposing desires becomes too strong, the mind enters an impasse. The problem becomes worse when, owing to repression, the person is unable to detect the cause of the conflict. The blues, depression, spiritual dryness, etc. also come under this category, and their origin can usually be traced to the building up of tension in the unconscious.

The third state is *viksiptam* in which the mind remains active but not restless as in the first state. It becomes preoccupied with different ideas. This is the predominant state of mind in scientists, artists, philosophers, scholars, social workers and other cultured people. This condition is brought about by the prevalence of both *rajas* and *sattva* in more or less equal measure. This is a state in which concentration can be practised, for concentration is impossible in the first two states. However, this concentration is only a sort of preoccupation with ideas or activities and is something quite different from true meditation, as has been pointed out elsewhere.¹⁹ Spiritual aspirants should learn to keep the mind at least in this state through work, studies and deep thinking.

We now come to the fourth state of mind known as *ekagram* in which alone higher spiritual experience becomes possible. In

respectively.

19. See Concentration and Meditation, Part I

this state the mind remains calm, concentrated, and free from mental automatisms; the will is free from the hold of desires, and the *buddhi* or intuition is awake. It is a state in which *sattva* predominates. Whereas the first three states are natural to humanity, the fourth state has to be acquired through years of purification and discipline, especially continence or *brahmacharya*. Complete continence increases the spiritual force known as *ojas* as a result of which the brain becomes cool, a new power like an electric charge develops in it, and the whole subtle body becomes luminous. By *ekagram* is meant, not ordinary concentration, but a state of higher contemplation. This becomes a permanent attribute only when the psycho-physical system is made ready.

The fifth state of mind, known as *niruddham*, is a super-conscious state. Whereas in the previous state the *vrittis* — waves of the mind — are only restrained, here the mind remains completely closed. No *vritti*, and hence no experience, arises in the mind; *samskaras* (latent impressions) alone remain in the unconscious depths. In this state the mind ceases to be mind, as Gaudapada puts it.²⁰ Yogis call this state *asamprajnata* or *nirbija*, while Vedantins call it *nirvikalpa*. Only a person who is fully established in the fourth state can really attain this highest state. If others attempt to “close” their minds by suppressing all *vrittis* artificially (e.g. by certain exercises of *Hatha Yoga*), the usual result will only be a kind of hypnotic stupor or a state of suspended animation.

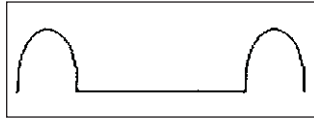
Functions of the Mind

What is the mind? It is difficult to find a right answer to this question. Air cannot be seen with the eyes; we can only feel its presence when it moves. Similarly, when the mind is perfectly still, its presence cannot be detected. The mind is known only by its functions.

We have already discussed several functions of the mind. Before proceeding further it is necessary to restate these synoptically. According to Pancasikha, a very ancient authority on Yoga, the functions of the mind are of two types: those which are perceived (*pari-drista*) and those which are unperceived

20. Gaudapada, *Mandukya Karika* 3. 31, 32.

(*apari-drista*). Various *vrittis*, which produce names, forms and emotions, belong to the first type. The second type of functions, which cannot be directly perceived but can be inferred from their effects, has been divided into seven groups.²¹



**Gap between
vrittis can be
widened**

The first of these, *nirodha* (suppression), is the capacity of the mind to be free from all *vrittis*. In fact, between every two thoughts the mind remains free of *vrittis* for a split second. This interval is normally so short that it is seldom noticed, but by practice it can be prolonged. The second and third functions are *karma* and *samskara*, which respectively mean *karmasaya* and *vasana* explained in the last editorial. The fourth function is *parinama* which means the various mental transformations to be discussed soon. The fifth function is *jivanam*, life-activities or the movements of *prana*, for it is the mind which controls and guides the movements of *prana*, which in turn animates the body. The sixth function, *cesta*, is the unseen action of the mind which makes the senses work. When the mind is elsewhere we will not see an object even if we are looking at it.

The seventh unseen function of the mind is *sakti* by which is meant the various mysterious psychic powers like clairvoyance, clairaudience, thought-transference, psycho-kinesis, etc., which remain undeveloped in ordinary people. Patanjali calls these powers *vibhutis* and has dealt with them in detail in his *Yoga Sutra* (*Aphorisms*). Swami Vivekananda in his lecture on "The Powers of the Mind" speaks about the miraculous powers of certain people which he personally tested and found to be true.²² It is commonplace to condemn these extraordinary powers as bad or dangerous. But it should be remembered that what is really harmful is not the powers themselves but the way they are used. Great saints and sages in all countries have used them with dis-

21. See Vyasa's Commentary on *Yoga-Sutra* 3.15

22. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1976), vol. 2, pp. 10-12.

crimination for the welfare of suffering humanity. Says Swami Vivekananda, "The powers acquired by the practice of Yoga are not obstacles for the yogi who is perfect, but are apt to be so for the beginner."²³

We should not look upon the mind as a source of sin, conflict and sorrow. The human mind is a storehouse of great powers. But owing to various obstacles and limitations, only a fraction of these is manifested in normal life. And it is with this small fraction that all the great discoveries of science and the achievements of art have been made. A yogi looks upon his mind as a source of power, peace and goodness. The *Gita* says that a properly cultivated and purified mind acts as one's friend and an undisciplined mind acts as one's enemy.²⁴ Instead of looking upon oneself as a weak, miserable, worthless sinner, a spiritual aspirant should constantly remember the infinite possibilities that remain hidden in the mind waiting to be discovered and developed. This is the central point in Swami Vivekananda's message to the modern world. Such a bracing yogic attitude is a necessary precondition for the practice of meditation.

The Will and Its Function

All the powers and functions of the mind are really the powers of *prakriti*, its unmanifested cause. However, the powers of *prakriti* are not manifested in all beings in an equal degree. Knowledge, skill, talents, strength, emotions, virtue—all these vary very much from person to person. How does this variation come about?

The answer is given by Patanjali in two important aphorisms which, according to Swami Vivekananda, provide the whole rationale of evolution. These aphorisms are: "Evolution of species is caused by the filling in of *prakriti*" and "Individual effort is needed, not to produce changes, but to remove the obstacles to the manifestation of *prakriti*, as in the case of the farmer."²⁵ Explaining these aphorisms, Swami Vivekananda says, "The water for irrigation of fields is already in the canal, only shut in by gates. The farmer opens these gates, and the water flows in by itself by the

23. Complete Works (1972), vol. 7, p. 65.

24. *Bhagavad-Gita* 6. 5, 6.

25. See Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras* 4. 2, 3.

law of gravitation. So all progress and power are already in every man, perfection is man's nature, only it is barred in and prevented from taking its proper course. If anyone can take the bar off, in rushes nature."²⁶ *Prakriti* does all work. All the changes going on in the universe are the working of *prakriti*. Individual effort is needed only to remove the obstacles to the working of *prakriti*.

Where does this individual effort come from? It cannot be from *prakriti* itself, as the Samkhya philosophers hold, for then it will not explain the part played by the farmer. Nor can it be from the true Self or *Atman* which is of the nature of pure consciousness. The volitional impulse must therefore come from the empirical self, which is the reflection of the true Self on the *buddhi*. It is the agent-self (*karta*) whose chief characteristic is will. Consciousness and will are the higher and lower aspects of the self. Sri Ramanuja and other dualist thinkers do not accept the distinction between true (*paramartha*) and empirical (*vyavaharika*) selves. According to them consciousness and will are the static and dynamic aspects respectively of the same self. The self as the knower is consciousness, the self as the doer is will. For our purpose it is enough to know that will is a product of consciousness, as pointed out by Swami Vivekananda.²⁷ The self is endowed with both consciousness and power — power not to create but to remove obstacles, for *prakriti* does all creative work. It is significant that in ancient Yoga texts the *Purusa* is referred to as *citi-sakti* (consciousness-power), and Vyasa uses this term throughout his commentary on Patanjali's aphorisms.

The mind can be controlled not by the mind but by something higher, namely the self. The self exercises this control through the will. But if the will is itself bound, the mind cannot be controlled. The more free the will is, the greater the mind-control. Only the yogis have free will. Says Swamiji, "Remember always that only the free have free will: all the rest are in bondage. Will as will is bound."²⁸

Pure consciousness is ever free, bondage applies only to the

27. Swamiji has thereby refuted the view of Schopenhauer and the Voluntarists that the will is superior to consciousness and that Reality is nothing but will. See Complete Works (1977), vol. 8, pp. 362-63.

28. Complete Works, vol. 7, p. 99.

will. It is the will that is bound, and so freedom applies only to the will. It is the will that is bound, and so freedom really means freedom of the will. It becomes free when it becomes one with the *Atman*. Swamiji says, "That which seems to be the will is really the *Atman* behind, it is really free."²⁸ In the vast majority of humanity the will is bound by desires, both good and bad. Freedom of will means freedom from both good and bad desires, freedom to remain as the pure *Atman*.

The popular notion of "free will" as the freedom to do anything one pleases is not true freedom. In fact, in the normal day-to-day life of the average person, free will rarely comes into operation. Most of our normal actions are controlled by good or bad desires. A good person's will is as much controlled by good desires as a bad person's will is controlled by bad desires. We understand how much bound our will is only when we try to meditate. The test of freedom of will is the ability to focus the mind on the *Atman*. This becomes possible only when the will is freed from bad as well as good desires and directed to its own source. One of the most pathetic things in spiritual life is the inability of even good people to turn to God freely.

How then does the will become free? Every person has a limited degree of freedom of will, somewhat like the freedom that a cow tied to a post has to move. It is by continually exercising this limited freedom that a person finally gets full freedom. Self-analysis and constant discrimination are great aids in this task. Another way is to pray to God intensely. What years of self-effort cannot achieve, grace accomplishes in a short time. It should also be noted that a good will is comparatively more free to turn towards God than a bad will. So one of the first tasks in spiritual life is to acquire a good will through good *karma*.

It is important to keep in mind the difference between will and desire. Will is the power of the self. Desire is produced by *samskaras* and is a power of mind. The will, being a spiritual faculty, does not directly act on the external world but does through the medium of the mind. When the will becomes connected to a desire, it becomes a *samkalpa* or intention. The actions of ordinary people are impelled by various *samkalpas*. The actions of a

28. Ibid., p.77.

yogi are impelled by the pure will, detached from desires. When the will is directed inward towards the *Atman*, it becomes meditation.

The usual Sanskrit term for will is *iccha*, but this is also used to mean desire. The *Gita* uses a more accurate term for will: *dhriti*. It classifies *dhriti* into three types — *sattvika*, *rajasika* and *tamasika* — depending upon the degree of freedom of the will." That will by which the activities of the mind, senses and *prana* are controlled through unflinching Yoga is *sattvika*. That will by which *Dharma*, wealth and pleasure are pursued and which demands immediate results is *rajasika*. That will by which the stupid man holds on to sleep, fear, sorrow, depression and lust is *tamasika*.²⁹

Stages in Concentration

Yogic concentration passes through three stages: *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*, of which the second stage alone is called meditation. All the three stages together are termed *samyama*.

The normal mental life of the average person is dominated by mental automatisms and impulses resulting in the preoccupation with certain ideas and confused awareness. The main cause for this is unsteadiness of the will. For clear awareness, the will must first of all be detached from desires and then fixed at a particular centre of consciousness within. This fixing of the will is called *dharana*. This becomes possible only when the centre of consciousness is developed through purification of the mind, prayer, worship, etc. An easier method of *dharana* is to fix the mind on an external object by gazing at it, steadily. Books on Yoga, Buddhism and occultism teach this kind of concentration on a *mandala*, a crystal or a point. Progress is quicker by this method but, since this may lead to the development of psychic powers, spiritual aspirants are usually advised to practise inner concentration.

The second stage is *dhyana* or meditation. It should be noted here that all the so-called meditation techniques are really techniques of *dharana*. Meditation is not a technique but a stage in concentration. When by following a particular technique of *dharana* a single stream of thought is maintained, it becomes

29. *Bhagavad Gita* 18. 33-35.

meditation. The door (i.e. *dharana*) to meditation may vary, the object of meditation may also vary, but meditation as a mental process does not vary in its basic nature. Indeed, meditation or meditative awareness may be regarded as a common highway shared, at least for a short distance, by all the different religious paths. It is therefore, important to know the mental processes involved in meditation.

Dharana is an attempt to reduce the number of thoughts. In *dhyana*, by the use of will-power, distracting thoughts have been eliminated and, like the wire in a one-stringed musical instrument, the mind remains stretched between the subject and the object. Owing to self-direction there is some tension in the mind, but this is not like the tension produced by stress and conflicts in ordinary life.

Meditation is the maintenance of a single meaningful thought. The mental process which produces a meaningful thought is called a *pratyaya*. It is the mental counterpart of a sentence. In fact, a sentence is only the verbal expression of a *pratyaya*. Just as words go to make a sentence, *vrittis* go to make a *pratyaya*.

The single *pratyaya* or meaningful thought that is maintained in meditation can be divided into three parts: *artha* (the object), *sabda* (its sound symbol) and *jnana* (knowledge). Cognition becomes complete only when all the three are combined in the mind. When you suddenly see an animal, your mind at first registers only its external form (*artha*). But when you hear (or mentally utter) the word (*sabda*) "cow", you will gain the knowledge "I know this animal." The sound symbol strikes, as it were, the self and produces the fire of knowledge. This connection of "I"-consciousness with the object produces what is called meaning. Thus the function of a word or sound symbol is to convey the meaning of an object to the self. Without words it is impossible to have meaningful thinking.

Actually the three — the object, the word and the knowledge — are distinct *vrittis* and are produced by different causes. In normal thinking these become united to form one *pratyaya*. Meditation is the maintenance of a single *pratyaya* in the mind.

In order to maintain the same *pratyaya* in the mind, you may have to repeat the corresponding word continuously; otherwise, another thought may arise in the mind. That is why in meditation,

when you visualize the form of your *ista-devata* (Chosen Deity), you are also advised to repeat the related *mantra* continuously. If after repeating the *mantra* for some time you suddenly stop it, you may still be able to visualize the form for a short while, but — especially in the case of beginners — the chances are that other words will produce other images in the mind. When the *mantra* is stopped and you are able visualize the form some time, it does not mean that the *mantra* has disappeared. It has only merged in the form, leaving its meaning behind. The *vritti* produced by the *mantra* has merged in the total *pratyaya* or thought about the Deity.

We now come to the third stage in concentration known as *samadhi*. This word has different meanings in different systems. We follow the simple but precise definition given by Patanjali, which is comprehensive enough to include the meanings given to it in other systems as well.

When a purified mind undergoes a high degree of concentration, the higher self emerges to the surface and its light illumines the object which alone now shines in the mind (*arthamatra nirbhasa*). It is now no longer necessary to produce and listen to the word (*sabda*) which merges in the object. As a result, the memory becomes clear of verbal confusion (*smriti parisuddhi*). The will has now merged in the awakened *Atman*. As a result, self-direction, the effort to hold the object constantly in the field of consciousness, becomes unnecessary. And so the awareness “I am meditating” is lost (*svarupa-sunyam iva*). Though the “I”-consciousness persists in lower *samadhi*, it becomes so identified with the object that its separate existence is not very obvious.³⁰

Even if one does not attain this experience, it is good to keep in mind the difference between *dhyana* and *samadhi*. The former is a self-directed (i.e. needing continuous exercise of will) state in which the object, the word and the knowledge together exist in the mind as a single *pratyaya*. *Samadhi* is a spontaneous state in which the object alone shines in the field of consciousness.

The type of *samadhi* described above in which the object alone shines in consciousness is called *samprajnata*. If the object also is dropped and if all the *vrittis* of the mind are stopped, the

30. See *Yoga Sutras* 3. 3 Also cf. 1. 43.

mind remains in a closed state and its presence cannot be detected. Then the *Atman* alone abides. This *samadhi* is called *asamprajnata*.

During all these stages the mind is continuously undergoing changes. Even in the highest *samadhi* when all the *vrittis* are stopped, the mind undergoes subliminal changes. The individual mind is only a part of the cosmic mind and oscillates with it. According to Samkhya and Vedanta, the whole phenomenal world is in a state of flux. Pancasikha says, "Every substance except the self is undergoing change every second."³¹ The movements of the mind cannot be totally stopped but can be controlled.

These continuous changes of the mind are called *parinama* or transformation. These are of different types. Here we are interested in only those transformations which take place during concentration. According to Patanjali, these are of three types: *samadhi parinama*, *ekagrata parinama* and *nirodha parinama*.

In the normal state the mind exhibits two tendencies: one is to get scattered or distracted (*sarvarthata*), the other is to get concentrated (*ekagrata*). When a person tries to practise *dharana*, he finds these two tendencies alternating in the mind. For a few seconds the mind gets concentrated, but again it gets scattered.

As concentration deepens, the scattering tendency of the mind becomes weak and the tendency for one-pointedness becomes strong. This is what happens during *dhyana* or meditation. This kind of mental transformation is called *samadhi parinama*, meaning a struggle for the attainment of *samadhi*.³²

As meditation gains in intensity, the scattering tendency of the mind gets completely suppressed, and the mind retains only a single *pratyaya* or thought. If the aspirant is meditating on his Chosen Deity, the divine image now remains steady in the mind. It appears to be still and unchanging, but actually it is not so, for the mind is changing even in this state. What really happens is the same *vritti*, the same image, alternately rises and falls so quickly that it appears to be stationary. This succession of the same *pratyaya* in which its rise and fall are equal is called

31. Yogasudhakara on *Yoga Sutras* 3. 10.

32. *Yoga Sutras* 3. 11.

ekagrata parinama.³³ Though this happens in the advanced stages of *dhyana*, it is the chief characteristic of *samprajnata samadhi*.

Between the fall of one *pratyaya* and the rise of another, there is a small gap. Between two thoughts the mind remains closed for a split second. In normal thinking this is usually not noticed. But in the advanced stages of *samadhi* when all *vrittis* disappear except that of "I", this gap becomes noticeable. Then the yogi experiences pure self-existence as a broken series: "I, I, I,"³⁴ The interval between two "I"-*vrittis* can now be prolonged. When this is done, a long time may elapse before the next *vritti* rises during which period the mind remains in a closed state. This is *asamprajnata samadhi*.

There are, however, *samskaras* in the depths of the mind which go on changing even when all the *vrittis* are stopped. This subliminal transformation is called *nirodha parinama*.³⁵ In it the *samskaras* of suppression (*nirodha samskara*) are struggling with *samskaras* of emergence (*vyutthana samskara*). As long as the former gain the upper hand, the mind remains in a closed state, but when the latter gain the upper hand, *samadhi* breaks and the person comes down to outer consciousness.

A right understanding of these three mental transformations provides the key to a right understanding of Patanjali's Yoga. It will also be of great help to sincere aspirants who are seriously practising meditation with the hope of getting some spiritual experience. Meditation to become a vehicle of transcendence must be practised with yogic attitude and knowledge.

PART FIVE

Prana and Samskara

Knowledge originates in two ways. One is direct perception in which the senses receive energy from the external world. The other is memory, which is the result of the sprouting of *samskaras* or latent impressions of past experience lying buried in the mind. Just as a tape-recorder when played back reproduces the origi-

33. *Yoga Sutras* 3. 12.

34. See Swami Vivekananda's poem "A Hymn of Samadhi" in the Complete Works (1978), vol. 4, p. 498.

35. *Yoga Sutras* 3. 9.

nal sounds, so also latent impressions in the mind when activated recreate the original experience.

Most of our thoughts are memories. Meditation deals with memory alone. It is a technique of controlling and fixing memory.

Every form of work needs the expenditure of energy. Memory is also a kind of work. It needs energy to activate the *samskaras*. What is the power that activates latent impressions? *Prana* or psychic energy. Where does this psychic energy come from? From the inexhaustible reserves of the *mahat* or cosmic mind. Just as physical energy comes from the physical universe around us, so also psychic energy comes from the vast mental universe. The way this inflow of *prana* is regulated and manipulated within the mind determines the mental condition of the person.

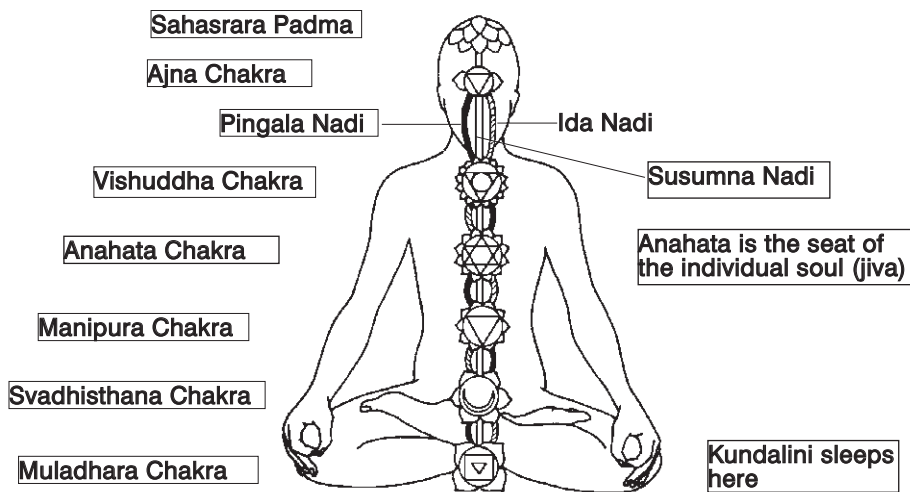
In studying mental life two factors are to be taken into account: *samskaras* and the *prana* which activates them. Even when the *samskaras* are good, if the movement of *prana* is defective, the mind becomes either restless or dull and thus unfit for meditation. But if the *samskaras* are bad, control of *prana* is of very little use. In meditative life both *samskaras* and *prana* are important. The nature of *samskaras* and how they change into *vrittis*, and the related mental transformations were discussed earlier. Now we take up the role of *prana* in psycho-dynamics.

Channels of Psychic Energy

Prana has two aspects: the cosmic and the individual. Here we are concerned only with the latter. In the individual there are three main pathways for the movement of *prana* which are situated in the subtle body. These are the two narrow side-channels called *ida* and *pingala* and the central larger one called *susumna*. In normal life only the *ida* and *pingala* remain active. Every time you think, a little *prana* moves along these side channels rousing the *samskaras*. In meditation also only these two channels are involved.

In ordinary thinking only a small quantity of psychic energy is utilized. The rest of the *prana* lies "coiled" or dormant as a store of reserve energy called the *kundalini*. The central main channel called the *susumna* is meant to carry the *kundalini*. But in the vast majority of people the *susumna* remains closed or inactive, and hence the major portion of the psychic energy remains un-

tapped. Along the *susumna* are situated six special centres called *chakras* described as lotuses.



Prana mediates between the mind and the body. It is through *prana* that the mind exercises control over the body. A good deal of psychosomatic disorders are caused by the faulty movement of *prana*. By regulating the flow of *prana* through the exercises of *hatha yoga*, the yogis keep their body healthy. Here our interest is only in the effects of *prana* on the mind.

Normal mental life depends upon the activity of the *ida* and the *pingala*. When they work in harmony the mind remains alert, when they are overactive the mind becomes restless, when they slow down the mind becomes sluggish. Finally, when their activity totally stops, the mind enters into deep sleep. Again during dreaming the channels become active.

Every time we think or imagine something, a little *prana* flows along these channels and activates the *samskaras*. When both the channels are clear and working harmoniously, the mind remains calm and there is a steady flow of thoughts in it. This is the condition necessary for meditation. But owing to conflicts, strong desires and other internal and external causes, the two channels

seldom work in harmony: one will be more active than the other. An irregular working of the *ida* and *pingala* results in irregular thinking and restlessness.

The working of these two side channels seems to be coupled to *biorhythms*. Scientists have found astonishing cases of periodicity — often called “biological clocks” — in the physiological activities of plants and animals. In human beings, blood pressure, body temperature, metabolism, sleep, etc. have been found to follow a cyclic pattern known as biorhythm. Most of these are daily cycles but some are monthly. These rhythms affect the mind profoundly. In some people the peak of mental alertness and work efficiency is reached early in the morning and decreases as the day advances; others hit the peak at noon or night. Studying this phenomenon at a deeper level, yogis have found that it is related to the movement of *prana* and the activity of the *ida* and the *pingala*. During the *sandhya* (the junction of day and night) these two channels work in harmony and the mind then attains a natural calmness.

These channels can be controlled and harmonized through *pranayama*. The lung is one of the few organs under the control of both the voluntary and involuntary nervous systems. By voluntarily controlling the breathing, one gains control over the autonomous nervous system and, through that, the *ida* and the *pingala*. When the *prana* is controlled, the sprouting of *samskaras* will be reduced and the mind becomes calm. The same effect can be obtained through intense devotion, self-inquiry or the rhythmic repetition of a *mantra*. In fact, rhythmic *japa* [repetition] may be regarded as “verbal *pranayama*” which is as effective as physical *pranayama* — though slower, but safer than it. Says Swami Brahmananda: “Practice *japa*, and your breathing will become finer and finer, and you will gain control of the vital energy in a natural way.”³⁶

Prana goes up through the *ida* and comes down through the *pingala*, thus forming a closed circuit. The *ida* acts as the negative current and, in yogic terminology, is described as the female or lunar current. The *pingala* acts as the positive current and is

36. Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1971), pp. 299-300.

described as the male or solar current. Normal mental life — conscious and unconscious — is maintained by the energy supplied by these currents, a part of which is also used up in physiological activities. A major cause for the drain of *prana* is sex. It is impossible to make the mind calm or practise intense meditation as long as sex is active. When *brahmacharya* — celibacy — is observed, more psychic energy gets stored at the base, more energy is made available for higher mental life and more energy flows into the brain. This extra energy, which is transmuted sex energy, is called *ojas*. It imparts a new retentive and grasping power to the brain known as *medha*. More important, it adds to the spiritual reserves of the aspirant and ultimately enables him or her to gain supersensuous perception.³⁷

Granthis or Knots

The *ida* and the *pingala* go up spirally, alternating from left to right and from right to left, forming a loop around each *chakra*. They originate from the common centre of *muladhara* at the base of the spine, but at the top their ends are free. However, there are three points called *granthis* or knots where they seem to anastomose or conjoin. These knots, which act as barriers to the free flow of *prana*, represent three levels of psychophysical life. The first knot is below the navel and is called *brahma-granthis*. When the flow of energy is restricted to this region, instinctive drives like hunger, thirst and sense pleasure dominate the mind. The second knot is below the heart and is called *vishnu-granthis*. This is the region of the emotional life of man. The third knot is below the eyebrows and is called *rudra-granthis*. This is the area of intellectual activity.

When lower desires and appetites become strong, *prana* gets as it were short-circuited at the first knot, and very little energy reaches the higher centres. When the mind becomes restless it usually activates the lower centres first. Even when a person does not consciously indulge in sensual pleasures, a restless mind is enough to rouse the lower centres, especially the sex-center. If one wants to be freed from the attack of lower thoughts, the first step is to attain a deep calmness of mind. A

37. For Swami Vivekananda's views on this see *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1978), vol. 6, pp. 130-31.

calm mind is the best safeguard against evil thoughts.

The second step is to activate the higher centres. Deep studies and thinking stimulate the higher centres. Intense prayer and meditation lift up more psychic energy through the *ida* and the *pingala* to higher centres, and thus make the lower centres less active.

The three *granthis* restrict human life to instinctive, emotional and intellectual levels. Spiritual life lies beyond these three levels. Therefore, an important task before the spiritual aspirant is to loosen these knots and make the *ida* and the *pingala* function smoothly. When instinctive drives, emotional conflicts and intellectual obsessions are overcome, the two side channels become clear for the free flow of *prana*. Only then can the aspirant detect and deal with the *susumna*.

The Chakras

If the two side channels are concerned with normal mental life, the central main channel called the *susumna* is concerned with supersensuous and superconscious experiences.

Along the *susumna* lie six *chakras* or centres usually represented as lotuses with varying number of petals. Each *chakra* is a centre of higher (supersensuous) consciousness and acts as a door to a new world of experience. Each petal of the lotus stands for a particular psychic power available at each centre. The whole phenomenal existence consists of worlds within worlds and, in order to attain each world, we must attain a particular level of consciousness. The *chakras* are these levels of consciousness. These doors open only when the full force of *kundalini* strikes them. Without the awakening of *kundalini*, the *chakras* and the supersensuous world that they open to remain unknown.

The six *chakras*, arranged in an ascending order from the base, are *muladhara* (4 petals), *svadhithana* (6 petals), *manipura* (10 petals), *anahata* (12 petals), *visuddha* (16 petals) and *ajna* (2 petals). According to Sri Ramakrishna, these *chakras* correspond to the seven *bhumis* or worlds mentioned in the Vedas: bhuh, bhuvah, svah, mahah, janah, tapah, satyam. They may also be taken to represent the five *kosas* or sheaths mentioned in the Upanisads.

As already mentioned, before the awakening of the *susumna*

the side channels must be purified and made to work in harmony. Along with this the loss of energy through restlessness and passions must be checked, and more energy must be lifted to higher centres through prayer, worship, meditation and other forms of spiritual practice. Energy lifted to higher centres gets transmuted into spiritual energy called *ojas* and gets stored at the base. This is true sublimation. When this process is carried on for some time, perhaps for several years, the awakening of the *susumna* takes place.

In books on Yoga and Tantra special exercises are described which are said to be capable of awakening the *kundalini* quickly. But if the mind is not purified and the psychic system not made ready, this premature awakening may lead to mental and physical disorders. Nor are such exercises necessary. There are other safer traditional forms of spiritual practice which are equally effective. Sri Ramakrishna assures us that intense prayer alone is enough for the awakening. "One's spiritual consciousness is not awakened by the mere reading of books. One should also pray to God. The *kundalini* is roused if the aspirant feels restless for God."³⁸ According to Swami Brahmananda, *japa*, meditation and constant remembrance of God are the best means for spiritual awakening. In reply to a question he says: "According to some there are special exercises by which the *kundalini* can be awakened, but I believe it can best be awakened by the practice of *japa* and meditation. The practice of *Japa* is specially suited to this present age; and there is no spiritual practice easier than this, but meditation must accompany the repetition of the *mantra*."³⁹

When the *susumna* opens it becomes the main channel for the flow of energy. In advanced stages of awakening, energy is completely withdrawn from the *ida* and the *pingala* which become inactive. When this happens, the person loses physical consciousness and all vital functions slow down. In deep sleep also the *ida* and the *pingala* remain inactive but then the *susumna* remains dormant. This is the basic difference between deep

38. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1974), p. 814.

39. *The Eternal Companion*, p. 275.

sleep and higher *samadhi* from the standpoint of Yoga.

Kundalini and Intuition

It is important to keep in mind the relationship between *kundalini* and consciousness. Pure consciousness belongs to the *Atman*, the witnessing self. According to Yoga philosophy, *Purusa* as pure consciousness is totally different from *prakriti*. *Prana* is the power animating *prakriti*, and *kundalini* is only the individual aspect of this *prana* lying dormant in ordinary people. The Tantras, however, look upon *prakriti* only as a *shakti* or power emanating from *chit* or consciousness. *Kundalini*, according to this view, is a higher, refined aspect of *cit-shakti* known as intuition.

There are three main views about intuition in Indian philosophy. The Samkhya-yoga view is that it is the removal of *rajas* and *tamas* from the *buddhi*, which is the determining faculty. Similar to this is the Advaita view, which regards intuition as the removal of veils covering the *Atman*. A second view, held by the Tantras, is that intuition is the awakening and growth of a dormant power known as *kundalini*. There is a third view which may be regarded as a reconciliation of the first two views. According to this view, held by Visistadvaita, intuition is the gradual expansion of consciousness, which follows the progressive removal of *karma samskaras* from the mind.

The concept of *kundalini* and the three channels is only one of the several ways of understanding mental life. There are other ways of picturing mental life. Patanjali in his Yoga aphorisms has discussed almost everything about the mind and its functions without mentioning the *kundalini* or the three channels. Nor do the major Upanishads and the *Gita* contain clear references to them, though some of the minor Upanishads discuss them in detail. In the recorded experiences of innumerable saints in the East and the West also there is no indication of *kundalini*.

This, however, does not invalidate the principle of *kundalini* power. One may use electricity in heating, lighting or in running a machine without bothering about the generation and transmission of electricity which are the concern of only the electrical engineer. In the same way, it is possible to use and control the mind without caring to know its hidden energy distribution system. When *kundalini* awakens, it does not go up like a rocket with a terrific explosion. Except in the case of a few, who follow the

path of Yoga, its action is not detected and can only be inferred from the experience it produces. Says Swami Vivekananda: "Thus, the rousing of the *kundalini* is the one and only way of attaining divine wisdom, superconscious perception, realization of the Spirit. The rousing may come in various ways, through love for God, through the mercy of perfected sages, or through the power of the analytic will of the philosopher. Wherever there was any manifestation of what is ordinarily called supernatural power or wisdom, there a little current of *kundalini* must have found its way into the *susumna*."⁴⁰ What is really important is the attainment of higher spiritual intuition. It does not matter whether one understands this as the awakening of *kundalini* or not.

Recent researches in para-psychology, Kirilian phenomenon, acupuncture, bio-energy, etc. have lent greater credence to the theory of *prana* and the three channels. One major difficulty about *kundalini* is its location. According to medical science, the brain is the controlling centre of all physiological activities, whereas the base of the spinal column where the *kundalini* is supposed to reside could be surgically removed without impairing the normal physiology of the body. But it is interesting to know that the region corresponding to the base of the spine is the seat of vital activities in the embryo. In the gastrula stage of the embryo this region is known as the "dorsal lip" or "primitive knot." The nerve cord (as well as the notochord) originates here and grows forward as a tube, the anterior end of which bulges into the brain. The brain takes over charge only later on.

Prana and Concentration

The Vedic sages saw every object in the universe informed and animated by the life-principle *prana*, which they visualized as *agni* or fire. All life-activities were believed to be done by *prana*. For that reason, before taking food it was offered to *prana* (*pranahuti*). At least twice a day everyone practised *pranayama* or breath control. The body was looked upon as the first means of practising religion (*sariram adyam khalu dharma-sadhanam*). In other words, there was an integral psychophysical approach to spiritual life.

40. Complete Works (1977), vol. 1, p. 165.

The integration of the forces of body and mind is one of the significant characteristics of Indian spirituality. Effort and struggle are no doubt unavoidable in spiritual life. But at least a part of the aspirant's difficulties comes from the wrong understanding of his energy system. This creates a wrong attitude towards the body. If the body is treated only as the seat of passions, a burden on the soul, a stumbling block on the path to God, and hence as something to be punished or fiercely dealt with, then it will only add to the troubles he already has. The body must be given its proper place in *sadhana*.

Says Swami Vivekananda, "How to transcend the senses without disturbing health is what we want to learn."⁴¹ This is precisely what Yoga teaches. Yoga treats the personality as one whole and tries to harmonize the functions of the body, mind and spirit. It is a unified discipline in which every value from bodily health to superconscious experience finds its respective place.

This integration of the forces of the body and mind is achieved by controlling *prana*. This is based on the insight that though a living being consists of different layers—the physical body, unconscious mind, subconscious mind, conscious mind, etc.—there is one energy system, the *prana*, running through all these. Hence *prana* is also called the *sutra* or thread. There is of course the *Atman* behind all this; it provides the static base. *Prana* provides the dynamic unity, though *prana* itself originates from the *Atman* and is connected to it like spokes to the hub in a wheel.⁴² Says Swami Vivekananda, "Mind is the great instrument for using *prana*. Mind is material. Behind the mind is the *Atman* which takes hold of *prana*. *Prana* is the driving power of the world and can be seen in every manifestation of life. The body is mortal and the mind is mortal, both being compounds, must die. Behind all is the *Atman* which never dies. The *Atman* is pure intelligence controlling and directing *prana*."⁴³

Health is a state of the body and mind in which *prana* flows freely and harmoniously through the systems. When this flow is disturbed, disease results. Swami Vivekananda says, "Some-

41. Complete Works, vol. 6, p. 129.

42. Cf. *Prasna Upanisad*, 3.3 and 6.6. Also cf. *Chandogya Upanisad*, 3.13.1.

43. Complete Works, vol. 6, p. 128.

times in your own body the supply of *prana* gravitates more or less to one part; the balance is disturbed, and when the balance of *prana* is disturbed, what we call disease is produced.”⁴⁴ The so-called faith healing, Swamiji points out, is actually effected by *prana*. “There is a mistake constantly made by faith-healers: they think that faith directly heals a man. But faith alone does not cover all the ground. . . It is by the *prana* that real curing comes. The pure man who has controlled *prana* has the power of bringing it into a certain state of vibration, which can be conveyed to others arousing in them a similar vibration.”⁴⁵

Even love, according to Swami Vivekananda, is a manifestation of *prana*. He says, “The last highest manifestation of *prana* is love. The moment you have succeeded in manufacturing love out of *prana*, you are free. It is the hardest and the greatest thing to gain.”⁴⁶ In human love *prana* is directed towards other people; in *bhakti*, *prana* is directed towards God. Either way, love is a flow, a giving, a sharing of the very essence of life. From a saint or a sage love in the form of *prana* radiates in all directions and elevates the minds of all who come into touch with it. When you love you give, similarly when you are loved, you receive the *prana* of others. Even if the other person lives hundreds of miles away, his love can sustain and enrich you. When the flow of love is broken, unhappiness results. That is how at least half the unhappiness in the world is caused. Through love one overcomes sorrow. Love is an important factor in establishing harmony not only between human beings but also within every person. And since meditation is impossible without inner harmony, spiritual aspirants should pay particular attention to the problem of love.

We thus see that *prana* is a universal energy principle governing every kind of life activity. Part of this energy is utilized in physical work and another part in mental work. The rest is stored up as a reserve force known as the *kundalini*. It is not necessary for the average spiritual aspirant to know the complex, and often contradictory, details about *kundalini*. But he should have some understanding of *prana*, for ignorance in this field could create

44. Complete Works, vol. 1, p. 155.

45. Ibid., p. 155.

46. Complete Works, vol.6, p. 129.

many obstacles.

Meditation is not an exercise restricted to a small part of the mind. It involves not only the whole mind but also the whole body. When you concentrate your conscious mind, your unconscious mind and nervous system and all parts of the body feel its effect. That means concentration affects the whole energy system. Concentration need not be on higher things; in fact it seldom is. When a person is watching a movie or listening to a song or when a person is roused by anger or greed, he is in a state of high degree of concentration.

There are two problems arising from lower types of concentration. One is that it dissipates psychic energy. Physical work and exercise normally involve only the use of energy received from food and are necessary for health. But worry, strong feelings and restlessness dissipate psychic energy. The second problem is that every time we concentrate, we create a new channel for the flow of *prana* within ourselves. As a result *prana* tends to flow in that way, and thus a habit is created. The channels created by wrong concentration produced by hatred, selfishness and greed are not straight. Wrong concentration creates eddies and whirlpools in the mind and body which obstruct the free flow of *prana*.

Meditation is higher concentration — concentration on a higher reality beyond body and mind. By its sheer power and magnitude it clears the eddies and whirlpools within. Moreover, meditation takes one to the core of one's being, the very source of *prana*, and thus restores the psychic-energy balance. In other words, it counteracts the bad effects of wrong concentration knowingly or unknowingly practised in day-to-day life.

End of
Concentration & Meditation
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