



Are you meditating or daydreaming?

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Abstract: While meditation has its roots in spirituality, it is also a technique to enhance health, wellness, and performance. It is probably also one of the techniques that can answer several of the questions raised by quantum physics, such as quantum entanglement, quantum field theory, wave-particle duality, the block universe, quantum consciousness, superposition, and so on. Most literature on meditation, however, focuses on its worldly benefits,

such as health, wealth, and wellness. Spiritual benefits of meditation, such as out-of-body experiences and self-realization, are central to Patanjali's approach to meditation. Science answers quantum questions through laboratory experiments, and meditation answers them through self-observation, achieved by elevating one's own consciousness to a level that illuminates physical phenomena, which cannot be seen by the naked eye or its extensions. This article makes a passing reference to science-spirituality entanglement but delves deeply into how meditation is misunderstood and misused, what true meditation is, and how to practice it correctly so that both worldly and spiritual benefits can be achieved without wasting too much time.

Keywords: Meditation, what is, What not, worldly benefit, and spiritual benefit.

Declaration: There is no conflict of interest. This viewpoint article integrates personal experiences with scholarly reflection, and all consulted materials are duly referenced at the conclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

Meditation is an ancient practice used for spiritual growth that leads to enlightenment, which is the experience of the ultimate truth behind our own existence, as well as the existence of our world and the cosmos. However, numerous studies have shown that meditation offers many health benefits, both physical and mental. Meditation also offers several other benefits, including enhanced performance, self-improvement, and the attainment of happiness and mental peace.

Unfortunately, meditation has become a wellness fad these days, and many exercise studios and *gurus* teach it, promising various health benefits, even though they themselves have not fully mastered the technique. As a result of their incomplete or inaccurate guidance, we, as their customers, either practice meditation for years without any growth or settle for minimal benefits. I myself suffered this fate for many years and have seen my colleagues deceived in the same way. This article aims to dispel some of the most common misconceptions about meditation and explain how to practice meditation correctly so that both worldly and spiritual benefits can be achieved without wasting too much time.



2. WHAT IS NOT MEDITATION?

These days, various internet *gurus* and meditation studios promote practices that look like meditation, but they are rarely true meditation. This happens because these competing *gurus* and studios that teach meditation for profit or followership feel a need to differentiate their product, and they do so by distorting what true meditation is. What they promote may yield superficial, short-term benefits, but not the long-lasting transformation that true meditative practices are supposed to bring about. One anecdote accurately highlights this phenomenon: According to the story, Mahesh Yogi, the founder of Transcendental Meditation in the USA, returned to India after many years. When he met his colleagues, they asked him, “Why did you distort meditation”? He answered, “I gave them what they wanted, so one day I will be able to teach them what I want”.

Ancient *rishis* explain meditation in terms of a specific process and a purpose. These modern *gurus* have distorted both the process and purpose in their efforts to make their products more sellable. They have ensured that processes appear like meditation but are short and easy to follow. Instead of transformative change, they promote short-term, superficial benefits and pleasures of day-to-day life. As a result, we, the followers, end up daydreaming instead of meditating, self-hypnotizing instead of self-realizing, and resting rather than transcending. Not only the close followers of these *gurus*, but also many independent practitioners have fallen victim to this populist culture. I also have become one of the victims: I meditated for over twenty years, hoping for transformation and transcendence, but I remained pretty much at the same place from where I started. This forced me to question what meditation is and what it is not. How do I make sure that I am progressing with every meditation session? What is the correct process? What do I want to achieve from meditation? The following paragraphs are my notes to myself. But I am sharing with you, hoping that it may be helpful to you too.

I realized that to ensure I am progressing in every meditation session, I needed to practice ensuring my purpose and process are correct. Several popular practices masquerade as meditation (a list is below) because, in the process, they look exactly like meditation: sitting with a straight spine, closed eyes, spending 20 to 30 minutes, and so on. But if you analyze them from the perspective of their purposes, they are usually either superficial or counterproductive. Here are some examples of these pseudo-meditative practices:

2.1. Daydreaming: Fantasy and daydreaming may give you temporary pleasure and relief from stress, but they can also draw you more actively into the drama of life, which may make your mind overactive, more desirous, and more passionate. On the contrary, meditation should calm the mind, reduce emotional outbursts, and enhance dispassion.

2.2. Thinking: Sometimes thinking is equated with meditation, particularly when people say, "I am going to meditate on this problem for a while." While contemplation is part of meditation, pure thinking and inquiry aimed at finding a solution are not meditation. This thinking process can be tiring and exhausting, whereas meditation should refresh and energize you. In meditation, there is no pressure to find a solution; you do not do a thing; you just observe or cease all mental activities.



2.3. Repetitive affirmation: Also called positive thinking, it may give some people temporary relief. However, our habits and beliefs, particularly negative ones, are usually so deeply rooted that repetitive affirmations hardly scratch the surface. Positive thinking usually turns out to be a superficial solution. Meditation reaches the depths of our core.

2.4. Self-hypnosis: By relaxing our bodies and using imagination, we can achieve a light trance, rehearse upcoming competitions, or reprogram and condition our brains. This has its own benefits, but it is not meditation because in meditation, you let go of your conditioning.

2.5. Sleeping: Sleeping is very refreshing to the body and mind, but this is not meditation. In meditation, our attention or consciousness must be fully active and aware. In fact, meditation can be explained as ‘deep sleep plus consciousness’.

2.6. Praying: Many people consider praying a form of meditation. However, most prayers and other rituals that aim to please the gods and ask for worldly pleasures in return are not meditation. Meditation is a journey towards our inner world, not the external world. However, prayers that do not seek worldly gains but rather desire the union of the soul with the divine can be recognized as meditation.

2.7. Resting: While meditation can give you deep rest, its purpose is to achieve far more than just rest for the body and mind. Meditation is for transformation, not just for temporary relief from daily stressors. If the purpose is rest, there may be better options than meditation.

If you look closely at these practices, you will find that they either do not follow the right process, or do not align with the purposes of meditation, or are counterproductive. To better understand this, let us look at what is expected from meditation.

3. WHY DO WE MEDITATE? WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

There are at least seven reasons why people practice meditation: Pleasure, Performance, Health, Happiness, Peace, Preparation, and Self-realization. In the literature, you will find hundreds of benefits associated with regular practice of meditation, but they are basically the various extensions of these seven benefits.

3.1. Pleasure: Some of us are attracted to meditation simply for worldly pleasures, and indeed meditation can provide rest and short-term pleasure. A few pseudo-meditative practices, such as daydreaming, are popular because they provide momentary pleasures. However, in the long run, they can be counterproductive or harmful. If we are happy with our practice because we receive short-term rest and pleasure, we may be practicing something other than meditation. While this may be counted as one of the benefits of meditation, worldly pleasure will not lead to progress in meditation; instead, it will deepen our conditioning.



3.2. Performance: Some of us are attracted to meditation because it helps improve our performance in our jobs, sports, or hobbies. If the purpose is to enhance performance through meditative practice, we are generally asked to repeat the practice in our minds. This is akin to contemplation (*Dharna*) and thus appears like meditation. Although this is a useful practice, it is not meditation, either in its process or its purpose, as defined by Patanjali. In terms of process, it multiplies thoughts rather than ceases them, and in terms of purpose, it increases conditioning, attachment, and passion. Some contemplation is considered meditation only if the purpose is to achieve a long-term cessation of mental fluctuations, which can be achieved by identifying and resolving the thoughts and behaviors arising from our conditioning. While contemplation directly improves performance, true meditation does so more subtly. For example, a better understanding of the self, as well as patience, faith, and acceptance that develop from a deeper understanding of Mother Nature, certainly influence our priorities and performance. In short, it is fine to practice this type of “meditation” but understand that this will not bring transcendence.

3.3. Health: One of the major attractions of meditation is its health benefits. Research studies have shown several health benefits of meditation, such as lowering cholesterol and blood pressure, reducing stress, and boosting levels of hormones, neurotransmitters, and enzymes. However, understand that while very useful, these are only the positive side effects of meditation. If health is your main concern, there may be more effective practices for health benefits than meditation. For example, Hattha yoga may be more useful than meditation (*Dhyana*). One good thing is that we do not need to distort the process and purpose of meditation to gain health benefits. All the purported health benefits can be achieved as side effects of true meditation.

3.4. Peace and lasting happiness: Many of us are drawn to meditation because it offers us rest and peace amid our hectic lifestyles. During the meditation session, rest and peace are achieved and persist for a few more hours as residual effects. If you are content with this type of peace, you may not be practicing meditation correctly. This type of peace is no different than the rest and the peace you get from drinking beer - a temporary peace, which requires repetition of the same process for another bout of peace. However, true meditation can provide long-lasting containment, happiness, and peace, not just by managing thoughts but also by bringing more wisdom (*pragya*) about the self, nature, and the cosmos. This wisdom comes not from doing, but from watching and experiencing, which is true meditation.

3.5. Preparation: Several meditative practices are recommended as preparation for deeper meditation. For example, activities such as enhancing our ability to concentrate our attention (or focus) prepare us for deep meditation. A good example is the *Ana Pana* practiced in Vipassana, which is practiced before starting to scan the body for sensations. Several of the *Dharana* activities (contemplative meditation) fall under this category. For example, contemplating on your thoughts helps you permanently eliminate them. Patanjali suggests that eight supernatural powers (*Asta Siddhis*) can also be achieved through some contemplative meditation techniques. However, he does not suggest pursuing that path as it is a distraction to true meditation.



3.8. Self-realization: As per Patanjali, the purpose of meditation should be self-realization, which and only which guarantees lasting peace, containment, and pleasure. True meditation consists of observing and experiencing, focusing on one subject/thought (*alambana*) first, and reaching a state of thoughtlessness. At the beginning, the subject (your perception of yourself), the object (the subject of meditation or *Alambana*), and consciousness coexist. As you go deeper, first the subject disappears, then the object (*alambana*) disappears, and only pure consciousness remains. At this stage, the meditator attains cosmic consciousness, which allows high-level experiences such as an out-of-body experience, the realization of the self or atman, a deeper understanding of the cosmic constitution, and the experience of *brahman*.

4. WHAT IS MEDITATION?

The above descriptions, "what meditation is not" and "why people meditate," shed some light on what meditation is and what it is not. Since we need to be absolutely clear on our purpose and precise in our process, so that we do not meditate for decades only to find ourselves in the same place, we need to understand exactly what meditation is. The following paragraphs, therefore, shed further light on what meditation is.

Patanjali, the sage who wrote about meditation over 3000 years ago, defined meditation as "cessation of mental fluctuations (*Chitta vritti nirodha, yoga*). In other words, ending, ceasing, or stopping all mental activities is meditation. However, over the years, there has been a significant misinterpretation of how mental fluctuations or thoughts ought to be controlled. Many *gurus* suggest that we gently bring back our attention to the subject of our meditation. Some of us, in our desperation, try to forcefully control our thoughts or stop our minds from wandering to unwanted thoughts. But forcing the mind, abruptly or gently, is counterproductive.

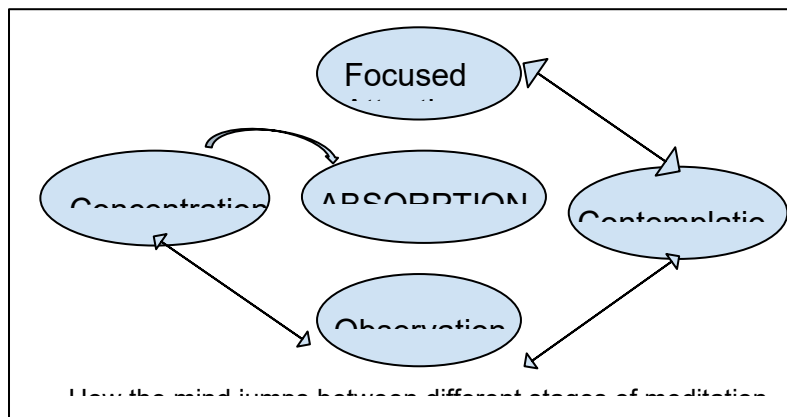
In Yoga terminology, the mind's functions are divided into four: 1. Manas (gathering data from the outer world), 2. Chitta (memory), 3. Buddhi (distinguishing right from wrong), and 4. Ahankar (Ego). While meditation begins with the cessation of the Chitta's Vrittis, it reaches perfection when all four functions of the mind cease.

Controlling mental fluctuations, or thoughts, must be done in more natural and subtle ways. One such method is by letting the mind wander through the emerging thoughts and waiting until the mind naturally comes back to the thought of your object of meditation (*alambana* - mantra, object, or breath, etc.), and let it stay there. Another method is to contemplate those thoughts and address their root causes so they no longer appear in our meditation. Still another method, also suggested in the *Geeta*, is to develop dispassion toward worldly attractions, knowing that they are impermanent and that seeking permanent happiness in them is futile. Most thoughts emerge from our desires for worldly attractions, in the forms of happiness at getting them, sadness at not getting them, greed, anger, passion, attachment, and so on. If we develop dispassion toward the sense objects, many of our thoughts will stop at their sources. Answering Arjun's question, Krishna in the *Geeta* suggests dispassion and regular practice of meditation to achieve the cessation of mental fluctuations, or the thoughts.



In short, meditation is the cessation of thoughts, achieved naturally rather than by force. The natural ways are: Observation - let the mind wander and return naturally; Contemplation - reflect on stubborn thoughts and resolve them; Dispassion - develop detachment from world objects, attractions, and distractions; Regularity - practice meditation regularly as a ritual.

For a minute, remember your last meditation session. You will notice that your mind, or your attention, in that meditation session jumped back and forth among these five states of meditation: Focused Attention, Contemplation, Observation, Concentration, and Absorption. Probably your mind didn't follow a particular sequence either. Some call them the five types of meditation, while others call them the five stages of meditation, and they are discussed in detail below. But before getting to the explanation of these five stages, let me speak a little about how the mind jumps back and forth between these five stages/types of meditation.



Beginners usually spend most of their time focused attention, contemplation, and observation. As we progress in meditation, our minds stay more focused and absorbed.

A beginner may start meditating by training the mind to stay focused on a particular subject, such as breathing, a physical

object, or a *mantra*. While doing so, the mind may wander to various thoughts, which he/she may observe. Then he/she may find some thoughts particularly important or educational, and he/she may contemplate them. When the meditation is long enough, the mind may settle into unbroken attention on a single object of thought (meditation) and finally attain absorption, in which the sense of self and the object of meditation disappear and only awareness remains.

4.1. THE FIVE STAGES OF MEDITATION

4.1.1. Focused Attention (Dharana): Draw your full attention to what you are doing at the moment.

4.1.2. Contemplation (Dharana): Focus on one (or a few) thoughts, analyze, conclude, and learn from them. Subject (the meditator), object (subject of thought or *Alambana*), and attention/consciousness coexist.

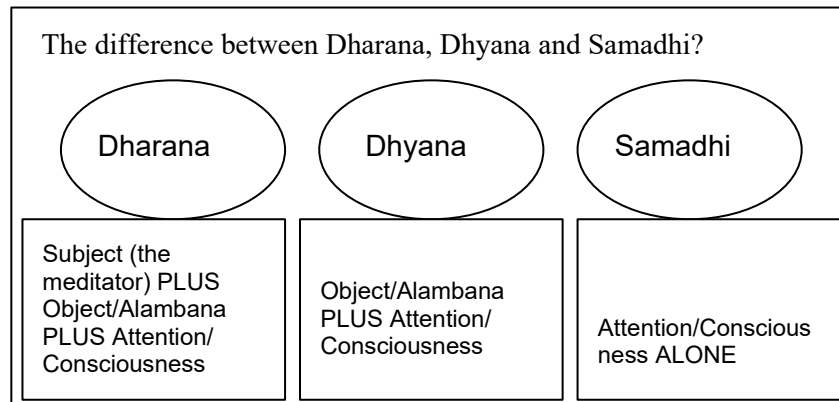
4.1.3. Observation (Dharana): Watch what is happening - outside you, your body, and thoughts. Subject, object, and attention/consciousness coexist.

4.1.4. Concentration/meditation (Dhyana): Unbroken attention on only one subject (*Alambana*). The subject disappears. Object and attention/consciousness remain.

4.1.5. Absorption (Samadhi): Subject and object (meditator and *alambana* disappear, only consciousness/attention remains.



Focused Attention: Also known as mindfulness, this primary stage of meditation is paying attention to, or remaining fully conscious of, the present experience from moment to moment. You may keep your attention on your body's experiences or on the thoughts appearing in the present moment. This technique is useful in two main respects: first, it can be used to train the mind to become focused. For example, at the beginning of Vipassana meditation, we are asked to train our minds to focus by maintaining unbroken attention on the breath.



Second, it can be useful for calming the mind and achieving peace during meditation. The mind gets agitated most of the time, either because it recalls past events and regrets, or because it imagines future possibilities that provoke fear. If you keep your mind in the present moment, you eliminate potential regrets and fears and

experience peace, though this peace may disappear when you come out of the meditation session. However, we can practice long enough and learn to keep our mind in the present moment, even in the normal course of daily activities, not only during meditation. When our mind is at peace, stress disappears, and numerous other health benefits occur. If we train our minds to remain in the present even when we are not meditating, we not only control stress and attain greater peace but also make fewer mistakes and have fewer accidents.



Why meditate?

- + Get relief from daily chaos and restlessness
- + Manage stress and find solutions for everyday issues
- + Improve health
- + Improve performance (understand yourself better: Values, beliefs, personality)
- + Manage your mental fights (obstructive beliefs, conditioning, regrets and fears)
- + Greater insights on what matters (Know what needs to be accepted or fought)
- + Cultivating loving kindness, compassion, positive thinking, giving, gratitude, forgiveness, healing mind
- + Realizing your true nature (Who am I?)
- + Achieve lasting peace (not just temporary happiness)
- + Achieving Astha (अस्था) Siddhis Liberation or Mokshya

What is attention/consciousness?

While consciousness has several layers of meaning, in day-to-day, most practical level you can understand it as follows: If you have to walk over a piece of wood that is laying over ground you probably give little attention. But if that wood is put over a deep gorge as a bridge and you have to cross it, you will pay a lot of attention. In meditation your attention should be as sharp and focused as it will be while crossing that gorge.

Contemplation: In this phase of meditation, the meditator aims to fix their attention on one thought, although the mind may wander to other thoughts, returning to the intended thought or the subject of meditation (*alambana*). Usually, when we sit for meditation, we focus our attention on our breath, an image, or a mantra. Our mind will wander in and out of our intended subject before firmly remaining focused on the subject. After a while, though, some seemingly important thought dominates all other thoughts. At

this point, our mind starts to think deeply about this subject, analyze it, and draw conclusions and lessons, which is contemplation. Contemplation can be used for various purposes, such as reflecting on the self, enhancing loving-kindness, compassion, and forgiveness,

fostering positive thinking, and developing other virtues.

Contemplation can be used to gain deeper insights and manage thoughts so that the same emotionally powerful thoughts (our mental tigers) do not surface every time you sit for meditation. Meditators also use it to deeply understand the various logical explanations of how to attain *mokshya* put forward by the *shastras* (Gyana yoga), such as the various states of our consciousness (*jagriti*, *swopna*, *nidra*, and *turiya*), various layers of who am I (*annamaya kosha*, *pranamaya kosha*, *manamaya*, *gyanamaya*, *anandamaya kosha*, and the observer). In spiritual practice, three steps are suggested: *shravana*, *manana*, and *nidhidhyasana*. The second stage, *manana*, is basically contemplation, and *nidhidhyasana* is meditation.

Observation: Paying attention to what is happening moment by moment, or paying attention to our flow of ongoing experience, is observation. Some purposes of observation meditation include gaining insights, building awareness (our ability to remain aware), controlling thoughts at their sources, and cultivating equanimity. Meditation is the cessation of fluctuations (*vrittis*) of the mind, but without actively doing things during meditation sessions. Cessation of thoughts is achieved by gaining deeper insights during or outside meditation sessions, thereby eliminating thoughts at their source. Observation is one of the



meditative techniques for achieving deeper insights by observing what is happening now, inside and outside of us. This is similar to mindfulness, except that in observation, the main purpose is gaining insights (e.g., impermanence), whereas in mindfulness, the main purpose is remaining in the present, not dwelling on past regrets and future fears. One good example of observation meditation is Vipassana. In Vipassana, the meditator systematically and equanimously observes the sensations arising and disappearing in the body, which is supposed to reduce and ultimately eliminate our conditionings.

Meditation can offer general health and mental/emotional benefits, including: lower blood pressure, reduced stress, better sleep, improved emotional regulation, increased focus, enhanced mood, reduced aggression, greater adaptability, healthier aging process, a greater sense of empathy and connection with others

meditation or *alambana*) remains along with your consciousness/ awareness. However, at this stage, the meditator completely loses awareness of the self or the meditator/subject. For beginners, it may take 30 to 60 minutes to attain this level of meditation, but as we practice, we achieve the *Dhyana* stage more quickly.

In short, meditation, as suggested by Patanjali, is the management of thoughts so they cease to crowd and control you. This is done to achieve sukh, santosh, and shanti (jivan mukta), as well as self-realization and understanding of the cosmos. All practices or sadhanas, such as fostering virtues and eliminating vices, help manage the mind and begin the journey from impermanent samsara to permanent brahma, the truth.

4. Concentration/Dhyana: In concentration or *dhyana*, we achieve nearly complete cessation of thoughts, or the *vrittis* of the mind. Not fully, but nearly complete cessation of thoughts, because at this stage, also one thought (the subject of

The previous three steps are called *Dharana* because in those stages, the mind is engaged in thinking or watching, and they can be viewed as preparations for concentration (*dhyana*) and absorption (*samadhi*).

Absorption/Samadhi: This is the ultimate stage of meditation. Only spiritual meditators aspire to reach this stage, because the ultimate purpose of spiritual meditation is *Samadhi*, whereas that of various *dharana* techniques is rest, relaxation, self-improvement, and performance enhancement. At this stage, awareness of the self and the object of meditation (*alambana*), such as the breath, a mantra, an image, or a thought, also disappears; only pure awareness remains. All the fluctuations of the mind cease; only awareness remains.

5. TECHNIQUES: CUSTOMIZED BY GURUS AND BRANDED BY SELLERS:

There is a lot of noise in the world of meditation, which, instead of guiding, may confuse us. Since meditation has become a multi-billion-dollar global business, its essence often gets lost in the competition for market share. These sellers have attempted to gain market share in the name of innovation and product differentiation, resulting, in many cases, in the distortion of true meditation. If we web-search meditation, we will find things like the six, ten, and sixteen types of meditation. Most of these are their attempts at product differentiation. Some of these brand names are discussed below, so a serious aspirant can think twice before falling into the traps of these *gurus* and sellers.



5.1. Body scan meditation: Sometimes our body may be aching or itching, while the mind is focused on another thought. This technique suggests syncing the body by performing a mental scan. It asks you to mentally move slowly over the body from head to toe, bringing attention to any discomfort, sensations, tensions, or aches.

5.2. Chakra meditation: Ayurveda suggests that there are seven chakras (centers of energy) in our bodies, and when blocked or imbalanced, we experience uncomfortable mental and physical symptoms or fall ill. This technique aims to keep the body's chakras open, aligned, and balanced.

5.3. Calming and insight meditations: Meditation techniques that aim to cultivate a quieter, more peaceful state of mind and improved concentration are called calming meditations. These techniques involve focusing on or visualizing a particular object, such as breath, a mantra, a physical object, or sensations within your body, and returning to that object whenever you get distracted. Alternatively, insight meditation techniques aim to develop qualities such as loving-kindness, wisdom, and compassion. These techniques involve focusing on what is happening now and learning from it or contemplating the subject we want to develop.

5.4. Focused attention: The first challenge a meditator faces is focusing the mind on one thing. Since there are thousands of stimuli around us, the mind wanders from one subject to another. The purpose of this meditation is to bring the wandering mind to one subject. As such, this is initial training to help the mind maintain focus and attention for extended periods. In this technique, we are supposed to keep the mind on one subject, such as our breath, a mantra, an image, listening to a gong, or gazing at a flame, and if the mind wanders, gently bring it back to the subject of focus.

5.5. Kriya yoga - This technique combines mild exercises, pranayama, and mudras with meditation. These activities (*kriya*) precede meditation and are designed to energize the body and bring the mind to full alertness. However, exercise should not be excessive, as this may tire the body and lead to sleep during meditation. The technique claims to move prana (life force) up and down the spine to balance it and purify the energy channels (*nadis*) through pranayama. The purpose of the technique is to accelerate inner peace, spiritual growth, and self-realization. Yogananda and Lahiri Mahasaya are mostly associated with this technique. Some *gurus* have cleverly rebranded this technique as *Urja Dhayana*.

5.6. Loving kindness: This practice strengthens feelings of love, compassion, kindness, and acceptance toward oneself and others. It argues that if you are unable to love others, you have not loved yourself enough. You will not love yourself enough if you blame yourself for "past failures" and "mistakes", or if you don't forgive yourself and set unrealistic standards for yourself. Performance enhancement begins with self-love and compassion for others. We know that our best friends are our virtues and our worst enemies are our vices. This technique aims to develop, alongside loving-kindness, all other virtues and to convert



vices into virtues. It is a contemplative meditation in that we direct positive energy and goodwill first to ourselves, and then, as a ripple effect, to others. It typically involves opening the mind to receive love from others and sending love and wishes to all living beings. This technique is particularly useful for those experiencing anger or resentment.

5.7. Mantra meditation: As the name suggests, in this technique, a mantra, a sound, a word, or a phrase is spoken repeatedly. The most common mantra used in this technique is “*Oum or OM*”. But we can chant any other mantra, quietly or loudly, such as *Tat Twam Asi (you are that)*, *Aham Brahmasmi (I am divine consciousness)*, etc. This meditation is expected to train the mind to remain focused and allow us to experience deeper levels of awareness. Some people enjoy mantra meditation because it helps them feel the vibration of the sound in their bodies.

5.8. Mindfulness: Very popular among Buddhists, in mindfulness meditation, we are asked to keep our attention (or our mind) on what we are doing right now. If we are chanting a mantra, we must keep our mind on ‘mantra chanting’ alone; if we are eating, keep our mind on eating alone. No multitasking! Similarly, if you are observing your thoughts, pay attention to them alone without judgment. This meditation calms the mind and keeps us in the present, away from past regrets and future fears, resulting in reduced anxiety, stress, and pain, and an enhanced immune system.

5.9. Movement meditation: Generally, we are required to sit with our spines straight while meditating, but some practices involve gentle movement, such as walking meditation, tai chi, and gardening. This is one form of mindful meditation in that you keep your attention on what you are doing. This is an active form of meditation where the movement guides you into a deeper connection with your body and the present moment. Movement meditation is good for people who find peace in action and want to develop body awareness.

5.10. Noting Distractions: This is a contemplative technique; instead of watching every thought, attention is paid to the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that distract your mind during a meditation session. The purpose is to restore awareness to the object of your meditation (breathing, mantra, etc.), but once the distractions are noted, you analyze them, learn about these thought patterns, tendencies, and your conditionings, so you can let them go forever.

5.11. Prayer: All religions suggest prayer to connect with a higher power. Prayer is a form of communion, or the sharing of intimate thoughts and feelings with a higher power. Many people think that prayer, particularly the petitionary kind, in which one asks God for something, is not meditation because it neither calms the mind nor brings wisdom. However, contemplative prayer, or orison, whose sole purpose is to pray for union with the divine, does achieve many of the objectives of meditation.



5.12. Progressive Relaxation Meditation: Also known as a body scan, this practice helps you release physical tension and achieve mind-body relaxation. To practice progressive relaxation meditation, gradually work through your body, tensing and releasing each muscle group in turn. You can also link your breathing to your practice by inhaling as you tense your muscles and exhaling as you relax them. In some cases, it suggests imagining a gentle wave flowing through our body to help release tension. This form of meditation is often used to relieve stress and unwind before bedtime.

5.13. Resting awareness: The purpose of this technique is to provide the body with full rest. As such, rather than focusing on the breath, a mantra, or visualization, this technique involves letting the mind truly rest. Thoughts may come and try to distract you, but you do not pay attention to them. You just let them drift away.

5.14. So-Ham meditation: This simple yet powerful mindfulness technique aligns the breath with the mental chanting of the mantra *So* (Inhale) *Ham* (exhale). *Swo-ham* means, 'that (pure consciousness) I am'. This technique calms the mind, reduces stress, and fosters deep relaxation by focusing on the natural rhythm of breathing. You may also consider this meditation to gain deeper insight.

5.15. Spiritual meditation: Some prefer to classify meditation techniques into three categories: spiritual, performance enhancement, and rest/relaxation. Spiritual meditation techniques focus on developing a deeper understanding of things, a connection with a higher power, out-of-body experiences, and ultimately *moksha*. In spiritual meditation, the practitioner begins by training the mind to focus through dharana and dhyana, and ultimately attains samadhi, the complete cessation of the mind's fluctuations. Samadhis are of two types: *Sabija Samadhi* and *Nirbija Samadhi*.

5.16. Skillful compassion: This is a kind of loving-kindness meditation. In this technique, you are asked to focus on a person you know or love and pay attention to the sensations arising from your heart. This technique is based on the idea that if we open our hearts and minds to benefit others, our own happiness multiplies.

5.17. Transcendental Meditation (TM): This technique, developed by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, claims to achieve a state of full rest and erase all previous accumulated stress in just 20 minutes. It suggests that if you transcend your thoughts for 20 minutes, you will eliminate accumulated mental fatigue. As such, this appears to be a stress-management technique rather than true meditation, although it argues that if you achieve full mental relaxation, the mind is better prepared for the experience of pure consciousness. While mindfulness meditation asks you to be actively aware of your thoughts, TM asks you to transcend them. This is done by repeating a mantra.

5.18. Vipassana Meditation: Popularized by the Buddha, *vipassanā* or *vipaśyanā* literally means "insight" or "seeing things as they really are." In this technique, we are asked to watch the sensations in our



bodies, which is supposed to improve our concentration and our understanding of nature and *samsara*. For example, by observing the rising and fading sensations, you realize the impermanent nature of the world. But the real potential of this technique lies in its ability to lead us to self-realization and salvation. The technique suggests that our conditioning (*samkhara*) appears as sensations in our bodies, and when we react to them, they multiply. Thus keeping us in the cage of conditioning, or Karma, or the cycle of life and death, forever. However, if we let the sensations appear in our body, observe them as they are, equanimously, they do not multiply; they disappear from their roots. If we practice Vipassana meditation long enough, we will empty the storehouse of our karma or conditioning. Once we become karma-less, or fully unconditioned, we will not have to see or visualize things through the glasses of our conditioning. We become capable of seeing the truth the way it is. This leads to self-realization.

5.19. Visualization meditation: Like mindfulness meditation, this technique involves focusing your thoughts on a specific image, event, scene, or person in as much detail as possible. The technique is expected to enhance relaxation, calm the mind, reduce stress, and achieve inner peace. You can also visualize your personal goals and successes, which may increase focus and motivation. Visualizing negative images and events can be counterproductive.

5.20. Walking meditation: This is a form of movement meditation. Most of the time, we meditate in a sitting position, but we can also meditate while walking slowly. In walking meditation, you are required to focus on your body's movements. During a walking or movement meditation, you might pay attention to or notice things like: your muscles contracting and relaxing in certain postures; tight areas throughout your body that you may not have noticed before; your breath and heartbeat, and how they respond to different postures.

6. ADDITIONAL PREPARATIONS:

If you are serious about meditation and want to practice it, you not only achieve its worldly benefits but also gain spiritual benefits such as out-of-body experiences and the realization of the truth; you need to make extra preparations. This includes moral growth, dispassion, and bodily preparations.

6.1. Moral growth: For spiritual benefits, you need to attain total absorption for an extended period. This is like holding a big pot of water, full to the brim, for a long time, with not a drop spilled. Just as any small movement will spill the water, any small distraction will break your absorption. Then, what are the common distractions? Fear, anger, jealousy, greed, ego, and similar vices of ours are the main distractions. No matter how cleverly you subdue them, they will slip into your meditation and break your absorption. These vices need to be overcome, and this is probably the hardest part of meditation. One way to overcome these vices is to cultivate virtues such as loving-kindness, giving back, forgiveness, compassion, respect, and truthfulness. This is why moral growth is a prerequisite for success in meditation. Without a clean heart, prolonged absorption is not possible. In fact, Rishi Patanjali suggests starting the journey of meditation with moral growth, which he calls Yama and Niyama - the first two of the eight limbs of yoga. Yama can be



defined as ethical restraint, and it includes the practice of non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, sensual restraint, and non-possessiveness. Niyama, on the other hand, means personal discipline and includes cleanliness and purity, contentment, total dedication to the goal, self-study, and surrender to a higher power or acceptance of what is beyond our control. Most of the time, we know when we are right and when we are wrong. A thief also knows that stealing is wrong. We still do wrong things because we cannot resist the strong desires arising from our senses. The best starting point for moral growth and the practice of Yama and Niyama is to restrain from doing what our conscience says is wrong.

6.2. Dispassion: In the Geeta, when Krishna was explaining about meditation, Arjun said his thoughts were as uncontrollable as the wind, and asked Krishna how he could restrain them. Krishna suggests two things: regular practice and dispassion. Regular meditation practice is self-explanatory, but dispassion warrants elaboration. Dispassion is gradually withdrawing from the external world and starting the journey to our own internal world - exploring who I am, watching my own thoughts, self-reflection, and so on. This should begin with withdrawing from desires driven by our five senses and thoughts. Rishi Patanjali also includes this in his eight limbs of Yoga as *Pratyahara*. For many, this could be a major departure in life, but it is a small price to pay if you are interested in experiencing the ultimate truth of life and the cosmos.

6.3. Bodily preparations: I used to find it difficult to meditate for more than 5 minutes. When I meditated on this problem itself, I found two key reasons: One, my mind did not have the patience to remain idle. Impatience, propelled by my urgency to achieve something, or fear of something, or my ego and judgment, would sneak in quietly and force me to terminate my meditation. Another, less subtle reason was the pain and aches I experienced while sitting in one position. While even five-minute meditation provides several health and other benefits, the longer the meditation, the greater the benefits. As such, one essential part of meditation is preparing the body to sit in a position for an extended period - 20 minutes, one hour, and even 2-3 hours. A meditation session lasting up to one hour is sufficient for most worldly benefits, but for spiritual benefits (out-of-body experience and self-realization), longer sitting is necessary, at least initially. Flexibility and breathing exercises, such as tai chi, Pilates, Hatha yoga, and pranayama, help us prepare the body to sit in one position for an extended period. Rishi Patanjali includes *hatha yoga* and *pranayama* as the third and fourth steps in the *Astanga Yoga* (eight limbs of yoga).

7. FINAL REMARKS:

Most meditation brands promoted by internet *gurus* are largely marketing gimmicks. But not all are useless or deceiving. Several of them can be used successfully for various purposes. For example, if your interest is in temporary peace of mind, you may practice mindfulness. If your interest is in performance enhancement, you may contemplate a chosen subject. There are examples of people winning competitions by practicing in their minds alone or by contemplating. However, if spiritual growth is the purpose, one needs to move beyond marketing gimmicks.



If we consider *Dharana* and *Dhyana* as preparatory steps alongside *Yama*, *Niyama*, *Hatha yoga*, *Pranayama*, and *Pratyahara*, then true meditation is *Samadhi* (absorption), which is divided into two types: *Sabija Samadhi* and *Nirbija Samadhi*. *Sabija Samadhi* is absorption with a chosen subject or thought, and *Nirbija Samadhi* is total absorption, or thoughtlessness.

Sabija Samadhi can be practiced achieving world improvements, such as health, performance, and desired personality traits, and is accompanied by an *Alambana*, or a chosen subject. Patanjali says that even the *Asta Siddhis* are achieved through *Sabija Samadhi*. These *siddhis*, as explained by Patanjali, are: 1. *Anima* (shrinking one's own body), 2. *Mahima* (expanding the body), 3. *Laghima* (becoming weightless and levitating), 4. *Garima* (become heavy), 5. *Prapti* (obtain desired things), 6. *Prakamya* (realization of any desire of sense objects), 8. *Isitva* (control over natural laws), and 8. *Vasitva* (access to others' minds and external forces). In his book *Yoga Sutra*, Patanjali describes how one can practice meditation to achieve any of these *Asta Siddhis*. However, he also explicitly cautions us against pursuing these powers that defy natural laws. Instead, he suggests continuing to *Nirbija Samadhi*. According to his texts (e.g., *Yoga Sutra* 3.37), developing or displaying these powers creates an inflated ego that is a major hindrance to the goal of Yoga.

The goal of Yoga is the experience of the ultimate truth, including our soul, and this is achieved only through *Nirbija samadhi*, which has no *Alambana*. This *Samadhi* is a state of total absorption, a prolonged, complete thoughtlessness. In this state, it is claimed that the ultimate truth is revealed because practitioners' consciousnesses connect to the universal consciousness. Access to the ultimate truth will answer questions such as who are we; what is the ultimate building block of this universe; what is *Brahma*; what is *Jiva* and *Prakriti*; and what is *Maya*. In quantum mechanics, these questions are synonymous with quantum field theory, consciousness, wave-particle duality, the observer effect, quantum entanglement, the block universe, and so on. Through *Upanishads* and *Gyana Yoga*, you can intellectually understand the ultimate nature of truth but cannot personally experience it; only through *Nirbija Samadhi* can it be experienced. A combined practice of all yogas (*gyana*, *karma*, *bhakti*, and *samadhi*), however, accelerates spiritual growth and realization of the truth.

In addition to the direct benefits discussed above, meditation also contributes indirectly if practiced regularly. For example, in meditation, you will start to realize that the bodily sensations aches, and pains come and go. This will make you realize that everything in the world is changing. This wisdom will improve your tolerance for extreme events in your life, potentially leading to health benefits. Many such learnings will occur during sustained meditation sessions, which will indirectly contribute to your goals.

Now, let me conclude by offering a few practical tips and cautions. If you have been meditating only for stress management and some health benefits, you can follow any of the recent meditation adaptations discussed above (Meditative techniques: Customized by gurus and branded by sellers). But if you are interested in deeper meditation, you need to pay attention to the differences between what is being sold



these days as meditation and what the source, Rishi Patanjali, says about it. You also need to think about the following:

Know why you want to meditate: For a long period, I just followed what my *gurus* said and expected extraordinary results. But after decades of meditation, I found myself getting nowhere. I never felt the need to know what the *Rishis* who used meditation to understand the ultimate, primordial truth say about it, and what the recent adaptations preach. And that was my mistake. In meditation these days, emphasis is placed on the process - sit with your spine straight, close your eyes, etc. While the process is important, the purpose of practicing meditation is equally important. The same process, but with a different purpose, may or may not make a practice a real meditation. That's why you need to know why you want to meditate - you want rest or everlasting peace and containment - *Jivan mukti*. If you want more than rest, you need to have a clear objective, benchmarks, a process to evaluate your progress, and a feedback system. Above all, you need to know what real meditation is and what the recent adaptations that pretend to be meditation are, and which ones serve your objectives.

Become your own guru: I read about various *gurus* and followed several of them. I went to week-long meditation camps too. I certainly learned a lot, and I am deeply grateful to them. But I never got a breakthrough until I tried to become my own guru - questioning everything and believing only after my own practice or experience proves it. The greatest mistake we make is blindly following our *gurus*, without questioning or testing their guidance in our own practices. Most of the ones that we consider *gurus* are not *gurus* at all - they are businessmen trying to sell for profit, prestige, or followership. Most of the *gurus* I encountered were either deceivers or disillusioned themselves. I found a few who behaved like real *gurus* - practiced what they preached, had no profit motives, and taught out of compassion. Until you start questioning, you will not find a real guru. As such, a serious practitioner of meditation must become his or her own *guru*, which leads to the ultimate *guru*.

Feel-good, positive thinking - when it becomes an illusion: Positive thinking is a virtue. However, I found several *gurus* misusing it to make their followers feel good. In guided meditation sessions, they ask the students to say things like, "I am feeling good," "my body is full of energy," "my mind is empty," etc. I also found some *gurus* preaching autosuggestion based on falsehoods, such as 'I am seeing cosmic light,' which may reinforce a false belief rather than prompting questioning and examination. This is why, in Vipassana meditation, practitioners are asked to become a neutral observer, without any preconceived or biased ideas. Autosuggestions may offer hope, but they will not change you fundamentally, which should be the goal of meditation. Superficial positive thinking is an illusion. It does not scratch beyond the surface, and the impact is short-term. Real positive thinking must be anchored in your deep beliefs, even if those beliefs need to change.



Are you meditating or daydreaming?

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