

a look at the **BASICS**

There are many misleading notions about the practice of meditation. Some people have the **impression** that they should sit down with eyes closed and try to make the mind blank. Others mistake **practices** (*trataka*, for example) for meditation. Many pick up an **idea** from books and start practicing without any actual **instruction**—and it leads nowhere. Others do not begin meditation practice at all because they **think** they will have to leave their families, homes, comforts, professions, and duties—and withdraw to a **faraway** cave in the Himalaya Mountains in order to succeed.

by swami veda bharati

Here I would like to pass along first-level instruction in a method of meditation that anyone can start on and practice any time, anywhere. This method is seldom found in books, and when it is, it is seldom properly understood. Yet it is so simple I have found that a three-year-old child takes to it like a fish returned to water.

The core of this method of meditation is breath awareness. This practice is central to all major schools of meditation. *Smṛty-upa-sthāna-sūtra* of the Buddha describes it in great detail. It is an essential part of *Vipassana* as taught in the southern Buddhist schools from Burma to Cambodia. Breath awareness is also the very first practice taught in the Tibetan system, in Chinese *Ch'an*, in Korean *Son*, in Vietnamese *Thien*, and the Japanese *Zen* (all these words have been derived from the Sanskrit *dhyana*, or Pali *jhana*). This practice is also the core of Sufi *Zikr*, around which all other Sufi practices are built. In the Christian tradition, *Hesychasm* (the practice of

the practice, their stated psychological, theological, and spiritual goals, and additions to the practice of breath awareness, such as mentally repeating a mantra, as well as other techniques for achieving stillness. For example, a Sufi may use *allah-o*; a Tibetan may count the breaths from one to ten again and again or may repeat *Om mani-padme hum*; a Jaina is taught *hreem arham*; a Christian in the Arabic-influenced countries will use the name *Isa*, *Yeshu* where the Hebrew name is preferred, the latinized *Jesus* in English-speaking countries, or *Abba* (Father) anywhere within Christendom.

Theravada Buddhism prohibits the use of mantra, and its philosophy has influenced some of the most popular forms of Zen. However, in some schools of China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, one of the names of the Buddha (such as *Amitabha*) may be taught, or the Japanese mantra "*Nomo amida-butsu*" (*Namo Amitabhaya*). An aspirant may gradually move on to more complex mantras or longer prayers, but awareness

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hesekia: stillness) forms the core of the Prayer of the Heart tradition practiced in the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches. It is taught by the reclusive monks of the 800-year-old monasteries on Mount Athos in Greece as well as by the hidden *startsi* (meditation masters) in Russia up to this day. In modern Europe and America many followers of the Christian tradition have assimilated it for the purpose of intensifying their experience of prayer, as have a number of spiritual teachers in the Jewish tradition.

These schools may differ from each other in their physical and mental preparations for

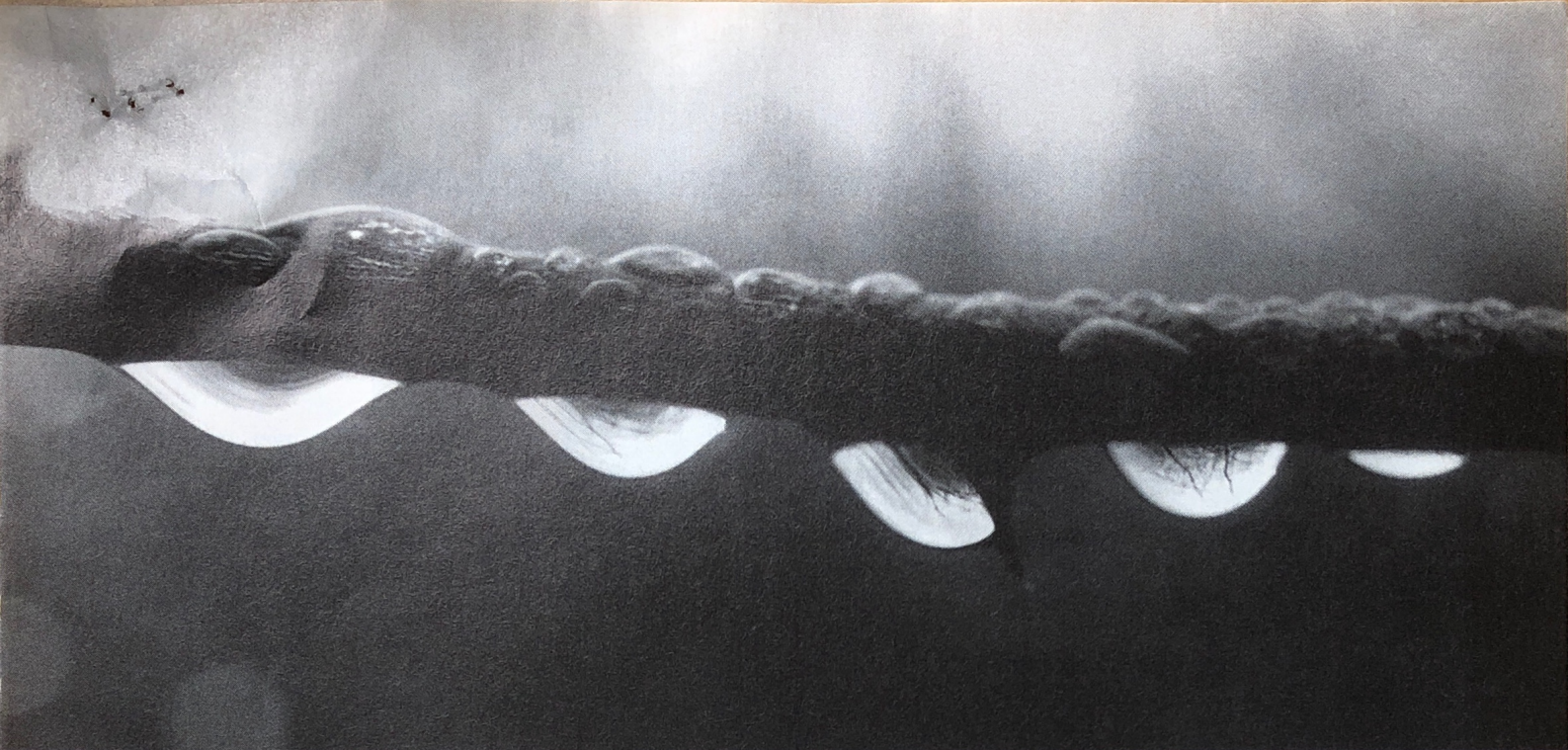


LYNE OLSON

of breathing remains an essential part of meditation in all of these systems.

The following technique is a simple and effective method from the raja yoga meditation system as taught by the Himalayan yogis. It does not involve breath retention (although, unfortunately, those who teach the popular forms of hatha yoga often lead their students into such practices prematurely). The raja yogis teach that techniques such as breath retention should be introduced only after a long period of purification.

What follows is a systematic point-by-point method for starting the practice of meditation.



Anyone at any age may begin—the younger the better—but, on the other hand, it is never too late in life. In fact, starting during a terminal illness will be helpful and may even prolong life. At least it will impart peace.

This practice should be done at least once a day for whatever length of time is available. Success does not lie in the length of time you sit, but in gradually intensifying the awareness that comes. You may also practice it at other times of the day—when you are tired and need a quick recovery of energy; when you are becoming angry or frustrated and want to be gentler; when you are very busy and consequently tense and need to relax so that you can be more effective. You may do it while you are waiting at a bus station or in a car when someone else is driving. There is no restriction and no limit. No harm can ever come from this practice.

What follows are the first steps. They are the foundation of meditation. The reader's ego may want to say, "I have been practicing meditation for a decade or two; I want something more advanced; I do not need elementary lessons." This attitude is incorrect. Many aspirants have been making the mind blank or holding the breath like an athlete for years, but have not learned the correct method of breathing. When I am teaching meditation, I check everyone on this point, and only when this foundation has been properly laid do we go further. Now to the specific steps.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

The chief organ that controls the breathing process is the diaphragm, a muscle just underneath the ribs separating the chest cavity from the abdomen. Ideally, the diaphragm contracts so that we may inhale fully, even into the lower lungs. Then the diaphragm relaxes to push against the lower lungs so that the exhalation from

this part of the lungs may be complete. We breathe diaphragmatically at birth, but later forget this natural process and have to retrain ourselves to breathe correctly. In deep and correct breathing, no pressure should be felt in the lungs, and no tension should develop. Breathing should be a relaxed and relaxing process of rejuvenation.

Diaphragmatic breathing is taught in *makarasana*, the crocodile position, and is practiced further in *shavasana*, the corpse pose, as well as in sitting and standing positions. To learn the practice, lie on the stomach in the crocodile—heels touching, toes apart, or in whatever way the legs feel relaxed. Place the right palm over the back of the left hand, and rest the forehead on the

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hands. The neck is not to be bent sideways. Let the shoulders relax—do make sure of that.

Bring your awareness to the breathing process. In this position chest breathing is not possible. Observe the flow of the breath. Observe the gentle rise and fall of the stomach and the navel area with the gentle and smooth flow of the breath.

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Let there be no jerks, no breaks, in your breathing. Let it flow like a smooth stream. Let it slow down. Observe the gentle flow, along with the rise and fall of the stomach and the navel area. Take note of the breathing process and how it feels. Resolve to breathe in this way at all times.

After doing this from five to fifteen minutes, turn over on your back in the shavasana position; continue to breathe and to observe the process of the diaphragm relaxing and contracting (the rise and fall of the

stomach and the navel area). Place your left palm on the chest, right palm on the stomach. No movement should be felt under the left palm; the right palm should feel the rise and fall smoothly, without a jerk, without a break.

You have mastered diaphragmatic breathing when you breathe only diaphragmatically at all times. While you are practicing this, let even breathing develop; the length of the inhalation and the exhalation should be equal. When this has been mastered, you graduate to 2:1 breathing (where exhalation is twice as long as inhalation), but not here; not right now.

Correct Posture

One often sees people sitting in prayer with their spines looking sadly like a bent bow. It is most important that your spine be straight for sitting in meditation—and at all other times. Unfortunately, there seems to be a conspiracy among the designers of chairs and sofas as well as car and airplane seats to make us sit in positions that convolute our spines.

This prevents correct and full breathing, causing short breaths which reduce the life span and generate or worsen many diseases such as asthma and heart problems. It

also adversely affects the entire neural system, whose central flow is in the spine. Let us not even begin to talk of twisting the kundalini flow. We have not learned the letter A; why jump to Z?

A straight spine is not a straight line. It is a slightly S-shaped curve that is convex in the lower third of the back (lumbar region), concave in the middle (thoracic region), and convex again in the neck (cervical region).

The correct posture should be learned under expert guidance, but a few hints here will be helpful. You need

THE SITTING POSTURES

A good meditation posture is still, steady, and comfortable. It is more important to keep the head, neck, and trunk aligned so that you can breathe freely and diaphragmatically than it is to put your legs in a particular position. Regardless of what position the legs are in, the head should be supported by the neck and held directly over the shoulders without creating any tension in the neck or shoulders. All facial muscles should be relaxed and the eyes gently closed. The arms should be relaxed so completely that anyone who picks up your hand will find it limp.

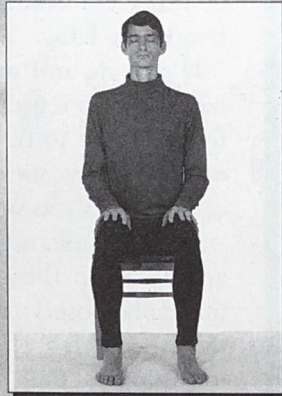
Experiment with the following asanas until you find the one that is best for you. The last two poses—*siddhasana* and *padmasana*—are for advanced practitioners. Because attempting to sit in a position that is uncomfortable can strain muscles and ligaments, leading to injury, these two positions are not recommended as meditative postures until you have developed flexible hips, legs, and ankles. Both can be practiced to increase flexibility, but neither should be used for meditation unless a qualified teacher has examined you in the pose and given consent.

not try to sit in advanced postures like *siddhasana* and *padmasana*, especially if age or physical problems prevent you from doing so, or if you are out of the habit. *Sukhasana* or *svastikasana* will do quite nicely. Unfortunately, when people sit in the cross-legged positions, the low center of gravity makes them bend their backs.

The solution to that is simple. Fold a blanket, and make it into a neat, firm cushion. This is not to serve as your seat; it is not like a rug to sit on. Place it under the hips, keeping the legs or knees on the floor. This will lift the hips from the floor. Straighten yourself. If there is discomfort anywhere in the back or the neck, you need to experiment with the height of the cushion under the hips and either reduce or increase the number of folds in the blanket. Experiment for a few days till you obtain the optimum comfort. Resolve always to sit in this position.

If sitting on the floor is difficult for you, you may sit in *maitri asana* on the edge of a hard chair, with your feet on the ground. But sit with the spine straight.

Form this habit. Let it become your natural position at all times, the position of the physical body affects the breath and the free flow of the kundalini force. You will soon notice a psychological change—heightened awareness, intentness, self-confidence without unnecessary pride—and you will be more effective in your life.

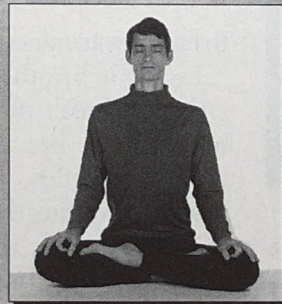


Maitri Asana (Friendship Pose)

This posture is ideal for those who tend toward stiffness and who are uncomfortable sitting on the floor. Select a chair or bench with a firm seat. Sit with both feet flat on the floor and your hands resting on your thighs. Your head, neck, and trunk should be aligned and you should be sitting comfortably erect with relaxed shoulders.

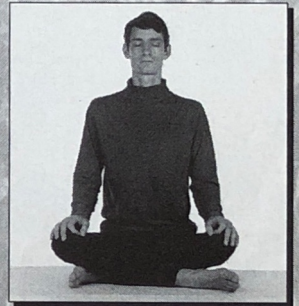
Sukhasana (Easy Pose)

Sit with the head, neck, and trunk comfortably aligned. Place the right foot beneath the left knee and the left foot beneath the right knee, so that each knee is resting on the opposite foot.



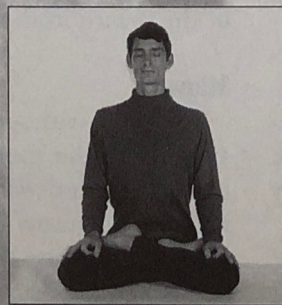
Svastikasana (Auspicious Pose)

Bend the right leg at the knee and place the sole of the right foot against the left thigh. Place the outer edge of the left foot between the thigh and calf muscles of the right leg. Only the big toe of the left foot should be visible. Then pull the toes of the right foot up between the left thigh and calf so that the big toe of the right foot is visible.



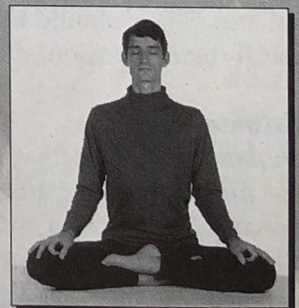
Siddhasana (Accomplished Pose)

Apply the root lock and place the right heel at the perineum. Then place the left heel at the pubic bone. Arrange the feet and legs so that the ankle joints are aligned and touching. Place the toes of the left foot between the right thigh and calf so that only the big toe is visible. Pull the toes of the right foot up between the left thigh and calf so that the big toe is visible. Place the hands on the knees.



Padmasana (Lotus Pose)

Extend the legs straight out in front of you. Bend the right leg and take hold of the foot, turning the sole upward. Place the foot firmly at the left groin. Then fold the left leg, turning the left foot up and placing it firmly at the right groin. Both heels should press firmly against the abdominal wall.





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Having assumed the correct posture, breathe diaphragmatically and mentally observe the flow of the breath and the gentle rise and fall of the stomach and navel area. There should be no feeling of pressure in the chest. If there is tension, the breathing is incorrect.

Relaxation

Shithilikarana (systematic relaxation) is the next step after diaphragmatic breathing. It is practiced in shavasana. There are a number of progressively complex mental exercises done in this posture that finally lead to *yoga nidra* (yogic sleep), and entry into the subtle body. Here, let us learn a basic, methodical relaxation.

Lie in shavasana with the feet apart. The arms are separate from the body, alongside the body, palms up. Breathe diaphragmatically. Now take a mental inventory of your body in this sequence:

Forehead, eyebrow, eyes, nostrils, cheeks, jaw and the corners of your mouth, chin, neck, neck joint, shoul-

ders, shoulder joints, upper arms, elbows, lower arms, wrists, hands, fingers, fingertips; fingertips, fingers, hands, wrists, lower arms, elbows, upper arms, shoulder joints, shoulders, chest, heart area, stomach, navel, abdomen, pelvis, thigh joints, thighs, knees, calf muscles, ankles, feet, and toes.

Now do the same thing in reverse order, beginning with your toes and ending with your forehead. Remember this sequence. Go over the body in this order; relax each of these parts in succession. Let them go limp. For example, the hands should become like the hands of a baby.

If you do not at first succeed in relaxing, or if you have been so tense that you have forgotten what it is like for a muscle to be relaxed, do it differently. Tense each of these parts, one at a time, and then relax each, one by one, as deeply as you can.

After completing the entire sequence down the body, and then up the body, continue to breathe diaphragmatically, observing the flow of the breath and the gentle rise and fall of the navel area. Lie in this way for a few minutes, then sit up for meditation.

Remember to sit with hips elevated on a folded blanket and with the spine straight. Quickly scan the body for any sign of tension that might have developed in the process of changing position. Relax. Reestablish diaphragmatic breathing.

Breath Awareness

Let your breath flow, smoothly and evenly, with no jerks, no break in the middle of the breath, no break between the breaths, no sound, no gasping. Become aware of the flow. Let there be no break in your awareness. Twelve breaths, with unbroken awareness, without any interrupting thoughts, will lead you into *samadhi*. But twelve such breaths are difficult to come by!

Feel the flow and touch of the breath in the nostrils. Continue to breathe without a jerk, without interruption. The awareness of inhalation should immediately merge into the awareness of exhalation, and vice versa. Awareness of exhalation is especially important.

If the mind wanders off because of habits that have been given to it over many lifetimes, straighten your spine again; relax again; reestablish diaphragmatic breathing. Continue being aware of the flow and touch of the breath in the nostrils.

Mantra

To begin with, use *soham*. Some prefer to say *hamso* and call it the *hamsa-mantra*. Exhaling, think in your mind the word *ham*. Inhaling, think in your mind the word *so*. It means "I am That." Those from a different tradition may use the word prescribed by their tradition, but it should be properly learned from someone who

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knows meditation according to that tradition. Just any reverend, priest, pandit, maulvi, or rabbi will not do.

Let there be no interruption in breath awareness, nor in the awareness of the flow of the word as a thought. Observe how the breath, the word, and the mind are flowing together as a single stream. Slowly lengthen the time—not how long you sit, but how many seconds you manage to maintain awareness of the flow of that stream without interruption. Too much effort is self-defeating; you cannot fall asleep by making a determined effort, nor can you enter a meditative state by fighting yourself. Let it flow. Let it happen. Don't *do* meditation. Observe and experience.

We have given these basic instructions for a complete beginner in meditation. We have not even prescribed the *nadi-shodhana* pranayama, which is essential at some point. But start with this practice. Be diligent, and it will lead you a long way. The next step is to seek out a teacher who is qualified to give you the first initiation, *mantra-diksha*—your own personal mantra. If you already have a mantra, ask a qualified teacher how to merge it with the practice of this awareness, so that it may go deep into you.

After mantra initiation, you may be led to concentration or methods of meditation that are appropriate for you personally, for both mantra and meditation mode

are assigned according to the aspirant's *samskaras* and spiritual needs. Then there are many different ways of refining the mantra experience—all the way to the final silence. (This state can also come about through the guru's grace.) Or you may be taught to proceed on the path of internal sound (*nada*) or light (*jjyoti*) and go on the path of the kundalini. Or you may be assigned a particular chakra to meditate on (the actual entry into such a meditation occurs only when the initiator mentally touches the disciple's particular chakra). You may be assigned a visualization within this chakra. At this time you will also be taught how to merge your mantra with the energy of the given chakra and how to penetrate through its central point (*bindu-vedhana*). The secrets of these practices are taught in specific tantras but understood only in the live guru-disciple relationship.

Meanwhile, all of these techniques arise from the beginning meditation we have just discussed. It is central to them. So practice it faithfully. Enjoy it. Flow with it. When you are ready for the next step, the teacher will come.

Formerly known as Pandit Usharbudh Arya, D. Litt., Swami Veda Bharati began teaching the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Yoga Sutras to crowds of thousands at the age of eleven. He was initiated into the Himalayan tradition by Swami Rama in 1970. He currently resides in Rishikesh.

