

## **The Sivananda Book of Meditation**

The Sivananda Yoga Centre

£14.99

Gaia Books

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In this issue of YogaLife we are previewing excerpts from *The Sivananda Book of Meditation* by the Sivananda Yoga Centre, recently published by Gaia Books.

We start with basic guidelines for the beginner in the section '*Starting Out*'.

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE PRACTICE OF MEDITATION

## A TWELVE-STEP GUIDE

S wami Vishnu-devananda would say, as mentioned in our introduction, that it is not possible to teach someone how to meditate, any more than it is possible to teach them how to sleep. Sleep overtakes us only when we detach our mind from its concerns. Meditation also cannot be forced, but unlike sleep, it is a conscious state. We need a degree of willpower to remain in the state of heightened awareness that occurs when we meditate. However, at the same time we need to relax, letting go of all expectations and desires. This subtle balance between the effort needed to sustain concentration on the one side and detachment from all distractions on the other is the art of meditation. We learn to focus the mind without struggle, yet maintain enough control to avoid a drift into reverie.

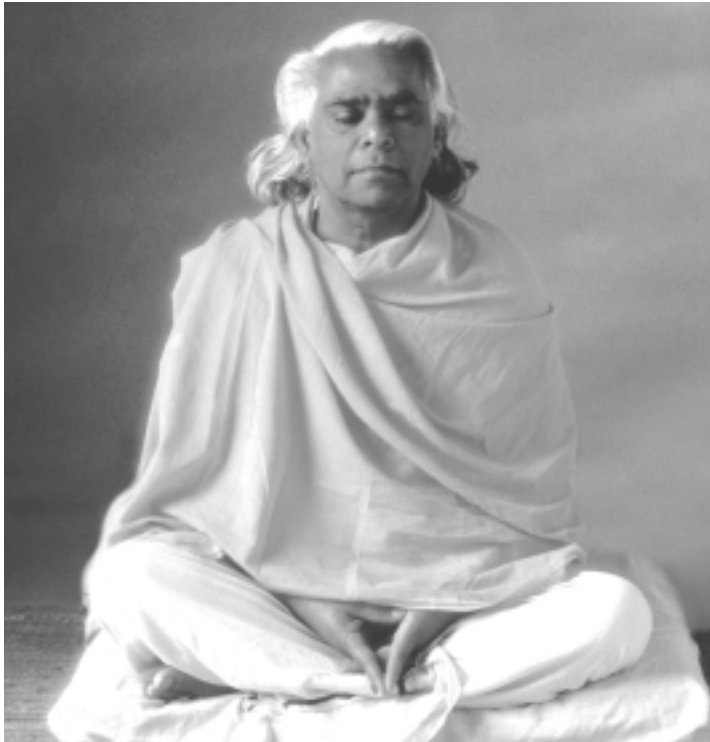
To attain this state of relaxed awareness we need to prepare ourselves, and there are several steps that will help us. It is important to reiterate that meditation is a process, and as such, takes time. Be gentle and patient with your mind; do not expect miracles. The more care and attention you give to the preparation, the more positive the results.

### **1 THE PLACE**

It is best to have a special room for meditation, but if this is impossible, as it is for most of us, try to separate off a portion of a room, reserving it solely for your practice if you can. Maintain it as a space to be used only for meditation, clean and tidy, free from distracting vibrations and associations, and allow only those who respect its sacredness to enter.

#### **The place of focus**

Set up a little table as the focal point of the room, with a candle, or better still, a small oil lamp, light being a potent spiritual symbol. Gazing at the steady flame before you start your meditation practice will bring concentration and introversion of the mind. This gazing is actually a concentration exercise in its own right, as explained later in the book. A flower or vase of flowers will enhance the atmosphere and fill the mind with joy. Burning incense in the morning and evening has a strongly purifying effect on the energy of the space. Use natural (not chemical) incense such as sandalwood, with its calming and cooling effect on the mind, or fragrances such as rose or frankincense. If you are of a religious nature set up an image of an uplifting spiritual symbol, such as the OM symbol, the Cross, or the Star of David; or a picture of Christ, Krishna, the Divine Mother, or Buddha. Choose what



**Above: Swami Vishnu-devananda in meditation**

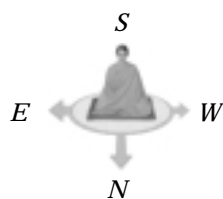
speaks to your heart and soul and helps your mind to turn within, away from worldly concerns. The powerful vibrations from repeated meditation practice will remain in the room, creating a magnetic aura, and within six months the peace and purity of the atmosphere will be quite tangible. In times of stress you can sit in the space, practise for half an hour, and experience great comfort and relief.

### Which direction to face

Sitting on a clean mat (a folded woollen blanket or cotton mat are excellent for this) in front of the table, face north or east to take advantage of favourable magnetic vibrations. These directions are considered to be the most conducive to spiritual concentration.

### Meditating in nature

It scarcely needs mentioning that natural environments are much more favourable to the practice of meditation than cities, where pollution from noise, traffic, electronic machinery, and the high stress levels of many of the people around can make it difficult to concentrate. If you can, try to take advantage



**Face north or east to take advantage of favourable magnetic vibrations**

of any opportunity to meditate in nature – on a beach facing the ocean, on a peaceful river bank, under a tree, on a mountain, with the rising or setting sun. You will find the meditation qualitatively different. If like most of us, you have to meditate in the city, you can still create a protected and sacred environment and it is certainly better to meditate in a city than not to meditate at all!

## 2 THE TIME

The most effective times for the practice of meditation are at dawn and dusk, when the atmosphere is charged with special spiritual force. The most desirable time is brahmamuhurta, the hours between four and six a.m. In these quiet hours after sleep, the mind and atmosphere are clear and unruffled by activities of the day. Refreshed and free of worldly concerns, concentration comes without effort. If this is not feasible, choose a time when you can retreat from daily activities and calm your mind. In the evening around sunset is also a good time or just before going to bed. With the mind freed from the tensions accumulated during the day and tuned to a higher state, you will quickly fall into deep sleep after meditating. At whatever time you choose, make sure you know you will not be disturbed by outside distractions.

## 3 THE HABIT

It is important that you maintain consistency in your practice as well as meditating at the same time each day. The subconscious mind needs regularity to develop the habit of settling down and focusing easily. Start with fifteen to twenty minutes' daily practice and gradually build up to an hour. If you can't manage this, aim for thirty minutes daily. It is better to meditate every day for thirty minutes than once a week for two hours.

Even when you travel, meditate every day. As you establish the practice, you will actually feel the need to meditate every morning; if circumstances prevent you from practising, you will experience an inner discomfort, similar to how you feel if you start your day without washing. You will realize that meditation is a mental cleansing, necessary for mental wellbeing. You will find you do not want to miss even a single day of practice.

**'Be gentle and patient with your mind; do not expect miracles. The more care and attention you give to the preparation, the more positive the results'**

*continued overleaf*

# Book Preview

There are various possible positions for the hands:

- 1 **Placed on your knees in the chin-mudra position**
- 2 **The right hand cupped in the left, with palms turned upwards**
- 3 **Hands clasped loosely by interlocking the fingers.**



## 4 THE SITTING POSITION

Sit in a comfortable steady posture, with spine and neck erect but not tense. The psychic current needs to travel unimpeded from the base of the spine to the top of the head, helping to steady the mind and encourage concentration. A comfortable cross-legged posture provides a firm base for the body, but it is not necessary to place the legs in padmasana, the classic lotus posture. You may wish to sit in siddhasana, the half-lotus position, or in any simple cross-legged position. Sitting on a cushion will help the thighs relax and bring the knees closer to the ground. In these sitting positions, a triangular path is created for the flow of energy, containing it rather than allowing it to disperse in all directions. Metabolism and breathing slow down as concentration deepens. Elderly or less able people may wish to sit on a comfortable chair, with ankles crossed. Lying down is not recommended because you relax completely and may find it almost impossible to ward off sleep. The mild muscular contraction necessary to hold the back upright in a sitting position keeps you alert. Try to relax the rest of the body as much as possible, especially the muscles of the face, neck and shoulders. The chest should be open, with the rib cage lifted to encourage abdominal breathing.

Initially you may find it difficult to keep the back straight for more than a few minutes. The practice of asanas (yoga postures) for as little as thirty minutes a day will strengthen your back, making it easy for you to sit comfortably over a long period of time. The actual purpose of asanas, according to the classical texts, is to be able to sit effortlessly and without fatigue for prolonged stretches. Patanjali, author of the most significant treatise on raja yoga, says that the meditation pose should be "sukham sthiram", pleasant and firm. Swami Sivananda says one should feel as steady as a mountain outwardly and as flowing as honey within. Your body will be at ease and will require no attention; a little like a vehicle that has been parked and can be forgotten about. You will be able to disconnect from the sense of being the body and focus on the deeper aspects of consciousness. It may take a few months to master the meditation posture; however the confidence and satisfaction gained from training the body is well worth striving for. This first achievement in your practice will give you much joy and the confidence to overcome higher obstacles.



## 5 THE BREATH

Consciously try to relax and make the breath rhythmic. Begin with one minute of deep abdominal breathing to bring oxygen to the brain. Then, slowing the breath down to an imperceptible rate, inhale and exhale rhythmically, for approximately three seconds each. The breath becomes light and completely silent. This technique is a pranayama (breath control) exercise that steadies the prana (breath) and thereby quietens the mind.

**Above Swami Sivananda in meditation**



## 6 THE MIND

For your meditation practice to succeed, it is important to transform the suffering and negativity of the mind by welcoming heightened awareness, broad vision, joy, and contentment into your life. The degree to which you are successful in your practice will be in direct proportion to your commitment to this goal. There must be an earnest desire to refrain from "sleeping with open eyes", as Swami Vishnu-devananda would say. Our minds love ease; we love to be on holiday, doing what we want when we want, with no sense of responsibility. We feel free with all

options in our life possible. However, these options remain only potentialities, mere dreams, and without effort nothing in our lives changes. For real change to occur we need to understand that commitment is not a limitation of freedom, but, on the contrary, an assertion of the freedom to choose the direction in which we want our lives to go. Meditation allows us to see things as they are, without the masking veil of our likes and dislikes, without fear or hope. Start every meditation session asserting this willingness to face reality without escaping into imagination. It is not easy to do this, and initially you may try to take refuge in familiar defence strategies. But be patient, and over a period of time, gently coax the mind away from these destructive thought patterns. Gradually you will grow aware that you need to stop escaping into distraction whenever difficulties arise. Detachment from hopes and fears protects against suffering. By making the commitment to your wellbeing at each and every practice session, by gently commanding the mind to be quiet for a specific length of time, by focusing only on the present moment, your life will be immeasurably enhanced.

## 7 CHOOSING A POINT OF CONCENTRATION

Try to select a focal point on which the mind can rest. The mind needs a point of anchorage to ground itself as it usually spends much of the time daydreaming, disconnected from the present moment. This is partly achieved by bringing the awareness to the posture and the breath. But it can be further strengthened by bringing the attention to a specific point in the body. There are energy points in the body that are particularly appropriate and helpful to focus upon. These points are called chakras, or energy centres. This knowledge belongs to a branch of yoga called kundalini yoga, a specialized branch of the path of raja yoga. Kundalini yoga focuses on these energy centres in order to release the energy stored in them and bring about an expansion of consciousness. There are seven major chakras in the body and many more secondary ones. They are located in the astral body (a body of energy that is like a subtle etheric double of the physical body), along the spinal column. They correspond to the different levels of consciousness, or the different levels of expression of our inner energies. The three lower chakras correspond to the more basic desires of the mind, the desire for security, for pleasure and for the expression of our

## COMMITMENT

**The commitment we need to make is to live in the present moment, to give up living in the past, daydreaming or worrying about an imaginary future. In short it means controlling the tendency we all have to live in a fantasy world, a world in which we use the imagination to create a defence against suffering.**

**'Meditation allows us to see things as they are, without the masking veil of our likes and dislikes, without fear or hope'**

*continued overleaf*

# Book Preview

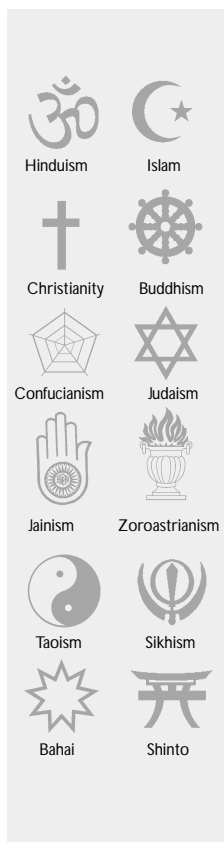
individuality. The fourth, the heart chakra, corresponds to the expression of our energy as love; the fifth, the throat chakra, is the centre where consciousness expands to encompass knowledge of past and future incarnations. The sixth energy centre, located at the point between the eyebrows, is the centre for intuitional knowledge. The last, on the top of the head, corresponds to a state of union with cosmic consciousness.

Swami Sivananda recommends that we focus either on the heart centre (anahata chakra) or the centre between the eyebrows (ajna chakra). According to the science of kundalini yoga, one can meditate on any one of the chakras. However, the masters warn us that we must be ready for the energy release that is produced if we do so. Energy of course is neutral, and will empower whatever it is with which we identify. If the mind still strongly identifies with the instinctive desires, the newly released energy will feed these desires, strengthening them, and preventing us from bringing our awareness to higher states of consciousness. Until the mind is thoroughly purified, it is safer to focus on the higher chakras.

Swami Vishnu-devananda advises people with a more emotional type of personality to focus on the heart centre. This centre is ideal for those who find it easy to relate to others and the world at large through their feelings. They will find it easy to invoke devotion to an ideal, since this part of their personality is already active. Focusing on the heart centre will help to channel emotional energy and allow it to manifest as selfless love. The heart will expand.

If your personality is predominantly intellectual – if you tend to trust your thoughts more often than your feelings – you will find it easier to focus on the point between the eyebrows. This is the centre for self-awareness. Focusing on this centre will uplift the intellect and will gradually free it from its narrow and selfish vision. Eventually the doors of intuition will open and you will perceive reality without the limited screen of the intellect. This state is often referred to as the opening of the third eye.

Obviously everyone has both an emotional and an intellectual side to their personality, but one aspect is usually predominant. Neither point is better than the other. Concentrating on either of these points will lead to the same result: an expansion of consciousness. The main purpose here is to train your energy to stabilize on one point. Once you have chosen a point, keep to it for the rest of your life. If you change, the energy will become unsteady again, which



**The major world religions have their own symbols, any of which can provide a potent focus for meditation.**

**'The mind consists of energy. The energy has to be trained to flow in a harmonious way'**

will make the mind wander. The mind consists of energy. The energy has to be trained to flow in a harmonious way. You cannot stop the energy from flowing, but you want the flow to be steady and quiet, like pouring oil from one vessel to another, so that you feel no movement and the flow is uninterrupted.

Try not to confine your mind when you focus on your chosen energy centre. This may seem paradoxical, but focusing is a springboard for concentration, allowing the mind to expand into infinite space. Meditation is not merely an act of will, but more a commitment of the heart. Where your heart goes, your mind goes, and where your mind goes, your life will follow.

## 8 CHOOSING AN OBJECT OF CONCENTRATION

You will find that you need to stabilize your mental energy even further. The mind now needs to be trained in the art of concentration itself and for this you need to give your mind an object on which to focus. All previous steps are actually a preparation for this purpose – keeping the mind on a single object for more than a few seconds. Concentration is supported by a firm posture, a quietened breath, and focus on an energy centre. This is still not meditation. Meditation is a state beyond concentration, which is reached only once the mind is perfectly concentrated.

Yoga considers the use of mantras (words of power) as an essential tool for concentration. The practice is simple: repeat the mantra mentally and synchronize this repetition with your breath. It will help if you can feel the vibration of the mantra emanating from your concentration centre. The breath, the concentration centre and the sound of the mantra become one point. However, the mantra can also be repeated out loud, especially if you are becoming drowsy. You can also start the practice by repeating the mantra aloud, gradually lowering your voice to a whisper, then reducing it to the most powerful method, mental repetition. Always use the same mantra; the mind will attune itself to the sound and rhythm and will focus more easily. A mantra is a powerful tool, channelling two aspects of the mind – the desires to see and to hear – which can interrupt the flow of concentration when not properly directed. As you repeat the sound, you listen to it and at the same time visualize its form.

You can also repeat a mantra and visualize any symbol of an uplifting nature. The symbol can be abstract or concrete. You can focus on

light, the sun, or the sky, or on a symbol connected to your religious belief if you have one, such as Christ, Krishna, or Buddha; or the Star of David, the Cross, or OM. You can also focus on a positive quality like love or compassion, relating to it, not as an abstract concept, but as a living entity that you want to manifest through your actions and words.

Make sure that the object of your concentration is of an uplifting nature: it should have the inherent power to take your mind to the infinite. In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali expands this idea even further by advising us to focus on anything of an agreeable nature, allowing unlimited scope for choice.

## 9 GIVING SPACE TO THE MIND

Allow the mind to wander at first – it will jump around, but will eventually settle into concentration, along with the concentration of prana. Initially, in your eagerness to control the mind, you may be too forceful with it. If you focus too hard a headache may develop. Relax deeply into the breath and focus more gently. We are often unaware even of our most obvious psychological habits and the power that they have over us. Be patient. There is a natural tendency to want a quick fix, but there is no easy way to bring the mind to a permanent state of silence and contentment. It needs to be freed very gradually from its many layers of emotional agitation. If the release is too sudden, there is a danger of being overwhelmed by the resulting reaction and you may decide to abandon the practice. Change has to happen consciously, progressively, and steadily to have a lasting effect.

So give yourself space. Be both firm and gentle with the mind at the same time. Educating your mind is similar to educating a child. Both love and strength are necessary. Arm yourself with patience. Develop a healthy relationship with yourself, avoiding both over-indulgence and harshness. Realize that what you are attempting to accomplish is not easy and feel a healthy pride when you make a step forward, however small it may seem. As the Bhagavad Gita says, become your own best friend and feel compassion for that part of you which is struggling to regain a sense of wholeness.

As you give space to your mind, keep it under close observation, like walking a dog with an extended leash – the dog retains a sense of independence, but is quickly reminded that its freedom is limited when it wants to wander off. During the first few minutes of your practice, develop a



relationship of trust with your mind by being patient and compassionate. Then you will find that the part of your mind that resists being told what to do will cooperate more readily.

## 10 DISASSOCIATING FROM THE MIND

If the mind persists in wandering, simply disassociate from it, and watch it objectively, as though you were watching a film. Sometimes the mind is resistant and continues living in its world of imagination. To start with, you may find this a little frustrating, even discouraging. If this is the case, try another approach suggested by Swami Sivananda – the attitude of non-cooperation. Watch your mind with the feeling: I am not the mind, I am only the spectator of my mind. If you find you are caught up in your own emotions and cannot let go, this practice of detachment or of witnessing will help. If you can sustain this mode of thought even for a few minutes, your mind gradually slows down. You stop feeding your emotions and thoughts with your consciousness and, since consciousness gives life to everything, the emotions and thoughts will simply have no energy to live, and will lose strength and intensity. Powerful discrimination and a good level of emotional strength are required to maintain a distance from your thoughts even for a relatively short time and may prove demanding for a beginner. However, try to practise a little each day, and a powerful new habit will gradually develop.

**The stillness and calm of nature acts as a perfect setting for the practice of meditation**

## 11 PURE THOUGHT

Sustained concentration leads into meditation. This occurs after many months, and in most instances, after many years of practice.

## 12 SAMADHI

Sustained meditation leads into samadhi, a state we enter when we have trained the mind to find absorption in consciousness itself. Samadhi is the highest state of meditation and the eighth step in the raja yoga system. Here, duality disappears and you enter the superconscious state ■



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Est. 1957 Swami Vishnu-devananda

*'The purpose of Yoga is to give  
your life a boost, to put your  
spiritual progress in first gear'*  
– Swami Vishnu-devananda



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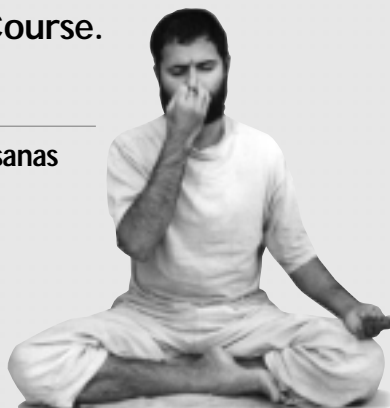
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*Above: In seclusion – Swami Vishnu-devananda stands outside his flimsy kutir in the Himalayan forest, where he practised intensive sadhana for up to fourteen hours daily*

### COURSE DATES

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