

# Meditative Practice

## *An Experiential Analysis*

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*This study tried to understand the experiences of people practicing meditation. The volunteers (n = 37) completed a semi structured measure after 20 sessions of practice. The responses to the open ended questions were qualitatively analyzed. The themes which emerged highlight important prerequisites for practice, and also uniqueness of subjective experiences. This analysis revealed that meditation is a process involving many preliminary practices as well as gradual withdrawal. With practice the understanding and regulation of the mind enhances. This requires a nonjudgmental continuous relation with the practice itself.*

**KEY WORDS:** Asana, Experiential account, Meditation, Pranayam.

**K**rishnamacharya, T. (1888-1998), one of the greatest Yogacharyas of 20th century stated that "*Dhyanam*" or Meditation is a Manasika Vyayama (Mental Discipline), which contributes to health and peace of mind. *Dhyana* or Meditation is an integral aspect of Yoga. Even though it is one of the components of many techniques proposed by *Patanjali* people have accepted *Dhyanam* as the most important aspect of yoga practice sometimes ignoring others. *Yoga Sutra of Patanjali* defines *Dhyana* as "*Tatra Pratyaya Ekatanata*"—when the mind is fixed on an object and all the activities are directed only towards the object of focus then we have *Dhyanam*. The important prerequisite for "*Dhyanam*" is that the mind must have the ability to focus on an object. Shri Krishnamacharya, giving an interpretation to the *sutra*, "*Desabandha Cittasya Dharana*"—when mind is linked to an object, it is focus and he calls it as "*Manobandh*", which is the essential preliminary for progress in meditation.

There are many alternatives available for mind, but a person must choose a single object not necessarily an external one. Once this direction is fixed, then the link between activities of mind and the chosen object takes place. When this happens, there is an uninterrupted flow of activities towards the single object and the person is said to be in a state of meditation. Unlike the other components of

Yoga, i.e., *Asana* or *Pranayama* which are external or *Bahiranga Sadhana*, meditation is highly an internally oriented practice. It is called *Antaranga Sadhana*. Modern scientists define it as systematic focusing of attention on a particular aspect of inner or outer experiences purposefully at a given moment. Thus, in the process of meditation, there is an intentional self-regulation of attention. The awareness is systematically directed, with a purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally.

While identifying the five states of mind, *sage Vyasa*, who has given commentaries on *Patanjali's Yoga Sutra* presents the one-pointedness or *Ekagrata* as a state, where the activities of mind are in single direction. When this is continuous and the mind is completely absorbed then one is said to be in a state of meditation. "*Yoga*" and "*Dhyana*" are used synonymously. The flow of activities of mind in a single direction is demonstrated by the analogy of the flow of oil (like the oil flows continuously in a single direction without break).

The object is a must for *Dhyanam*. What must be the object? Whether it is divine, natural, simple, complex, internal or external, etc. varies according to different traditions and techniques of meditation. The major source of knowledge, for these techniques comes from *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras*, Vedic traditions, Buddhist philosophy and various religious traditions. Meditation is different from other self-regulatory or relaxation strategies. The former includes a non-striving and non-doing orientation and non-attachment to goals. It is practiced for its own sake.

The *Vipasana Meditation*, *Transcendental Meditation*, *Concentrative Meditation* (on Mantra), *Mindfulness*—an attempt to open up awareness of the external environment—and many other spiritual forms of meditation are practiced by Yogis of different orders.

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Recently meditation has been researched as a medical intervention in the Western world and its impact on mind and body is being documented. The Transcendental Meditation, Herbert Benson's Respiratory One method, clinically standardized meditation (Carrington) and Mindfulness Meditation are the ones, which are being widely studied for their potential to enhance the quality of life. Meditation is used for three different purposes:

1. Self-regulation for stress and pain management and thus focus is therapeutic.
2. Self-exploration—a way of introspection to understand self and also to develop oneself in the process.
3. As a form of spiritual exercise in the context of religious disciplines and also for the spiritual liberation or enhancement. This has higher spiritual goals.
4. To understand the implications and mechanisms of such practices on various physiological and psychological states.

The first step in determining whether meditation is to be taught, is to understand the individual's life style, thought processes and most importantly the belief system. Also, the mental state of person, the anxiety, and depression and fears must be explored. People who fear loss of control may not feel comfortable with certain types of meditation. When there is a constant "chatter" or "noise" in the background such as traumatic experiences, they will be obstacles. On the other hand, some may become depersonalized, distressed after meditation. Individual differences in responding. In view of one must ensure that method must suit the needs of the individual. The personality, background and the purpose of practice must be clearly evaluated before initiating someone into practice of meditation.

The teacher who initiates and guides the practitioners is most important. Krishnamacharya states—"without the initiation of the Guru, *Dhyanam* will be a failure, for the Guru knows the aspirant's background and needs." The faith in the teacher is must. This statement is very true because learning to meditate is not merely acquiring information, it is a skill to be practiced, under supervision. The Guru understands the frame of mind in which the students or learners are and then trains them.

There are many disciplines, which are interlinked to the process of *Dhyanam*; the environment, type of life style, activities of daily life, food habits, thoughts, etc. Meditation cannot be simply a technique of 10-15 minutes of practice; it must form a part of life. At the same time, there is no need to completely merge oneself in meditation for hours together and ignore the duties and

responsibilities. The intensity of practice varies according to the stage of life and the state of mind.

There are three important aspects in the process of meditation: the *Dhyata* or meditator (one who observes), *Dhyanam* (the process of focusing and sustaining attention) and *Dhyeya* (the object of Meditation).

The one who observes, experiences is unchanging, whereas, the mind as a tool to be used for the purpose of understanding can be colored and it must be free from impurities. An agitated mind cannot focus and neither sustain the focus. So the mind must be relatively free and able to be guided, which can reflect the object to the experience as it is. The way to refine the mind and make it eligible for *Dharana* and *Dhyana* is the goal of preliminary practices such as *Asana*, and *Pranayama*. Unless the mind can focus (*Dharana*), it cannot hold the object for reflection. The focus itself must be practiced through other means; *Dharana* is not possible without adequate preparation. This idea is well delineated by yoga teacher Desikachar (2001) in his book *In Search of Mind*.

Not everyone can meditate on the same object equally efficiently. Though *Patanjali* states-(1.39) "*Yathabhimata dhyana*"—"one can do *dhyanam* on whatever one likes," the need to find out what appeals to the mind of the person is essential. Some find peace in *Pranava japa* or chanting. Others find thoughts or concepts as most important aspects of reflection and contemplation. Sometimes it needs sustained practice even to learn how to focus and choose a focus. Some people find it even difficult to meditate on forms or attributes and they find it easy when there is no focus at all.

Past research on meditation has equivocally proved its effect in restoring health, reducing symptoms, managing stress, altering cognitive styles and enhancing personal control. Few studies have focused on the effectiveness of meditation as a tool, in advanced practitioners who can demonstrate the possibility of transcendental states. The findings have resulted in harnessing meditation as a complementary and alternative technique in disease management and health care. There are studies which have also demonstrated that meditation has no greater effect on specific parameters when compared to non meditation (Murphy & Donovan, 2004). The length of practice, quality of practice and individual characteristics have profound effect on outcome variables. Non-normality in the responses highlights the role played by unique personal characteristics in determining the results. The variety of approaches, modification of procedures and high level of structuring of meditation, taking it out of the context of socio-cultural and religious milieu has provided a new and yet different meaning to the practice of meditation.

The scientific research has also raised the expectations of public and earnest seekers to turn to meditation as a panacea. Further, availability and accessibility to multiple traditions and techniques has resulted in continuous shopping for "experiences." It is in this context, it was envisaged to train a group of volunteers in Yoga programme, in the skills of meditation. The focus was to provide opportunity to develop the ability to get into a state of *Dhyanam* and also come out of it in a methodical way. The experiences of practitioners were recorded and analyzed to understand the effects of training.

## Method

### Participants

An study was conducted with the focus of evaluating the meditative experiences of 37 persons, who attended a Yoga workshop at Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, Chennai. There were 35 females and 2 males in the age range of 25-65 years. They came from different countries and some of them were Yoga practitioners and others were practicing alternative forms of therapies. Their experiences in Yoga ranged from 2 to 25 years. Majority of them (70%) had previous exposure to meditation and were practicing it.

### Procedure

The group underwent sessions of meditative practices, where the first researcher provided supervised instructions. Each session had a *Purvanga*, i.e., the preliminary practice of *Asana*, *Pranayama* and a concept or object for focus was given and they were asked to sustain the focus non-judgmentally and be aware and alert to their experiences. The *Uttaranga* or the descending process involved coming out of the practice in a stepwise manner with some breathing, postures and sometimes listening to certain, chants and also the attitude of surrendering whatever has been gained and not gained.

These sessions were presented as aids to meditation and thus called meditative practices or techniques to facilitate the mind for *Dharana* and *Dhyanam*. The session lasted for one-hour duration in which the volunteers practiced the techniques.

At the end of 20 sessions, the participants provided feedback about their experiences in these sessions on a schedule, which had both structured evaluative dimensions and open-ended questions. They rated affective experiences on 7 point scales consisting of bipolar adjectives (see Table 1) which indicated positive and negative affect associated with the practice.

## Results

The affect rating showed a high level of comfort, alertness, relaxation, calmness and enthusiasm were associated with meditative practice sessions. The feeling of lightness and clarity were relatively stronger and the experiences of the group were almost identical. The overall quality rating is 37 (Maximum = 49), which shows that positive subjective experiences were associated with the sessions.

Only six participants in the group had minimal impact of meditation on their mind and body.

## Qualitative Analysis

The responses of the participants were content analyzed and following major themes emerged i.e. experiences, preparatory practices and facilitators, blockages and obstacles, and accentuating the practice. The details of these themes are described below.

## Experiences

Majority of the participants reported experiences of inner calmness, quietness, relaxation being alert, and refreshed were reported. Some had an ability to be centered, distanced from everyday thoughts and also thought it to

**Table 1**

*Affective Experiences During Meditation*

Affect scales	Mean	SD	Verbal Rating
Comfort Vs. Discomfort	5.22	1.51	High
Clarity Vs. Confusion	4.97	1.23	Moderate
Lightness Vs. Aches and Pains	4.33	1.74	Moderate
Alertness Vs. Lethargy	5.25	1.13	High
Relax Vs. Irritative	5.58	0.97	High
Interest Vs. Boredom	6.14	1.02	High
Calm Vs. Restlessness	5.56	0.97	High
Total Positive Rating	37.06	5.26	

be moment for self-reflection, evaluation and profound experiences and enhanced awareness. These experiences were not same throughout the four weeks period they fluctuated. One respondent stated—"In the first week, I had best experience of a meditative state, at least that's what I think... this third week it has been again better for me."

Another practitioner said—"Depending on the day, 20 percent excellent, 80 percent physical discomfort, distraction and impatience." Some meditators who had high expectations when could not experience any thing, they feel the disappointment. "I feel not as "in touch" with higher power as usually do-imbalance."

Thus the activities of the day and state of mind had an impact of what happened during practice as another respondent stated—"I feel the difference when I prepared my mind before meditation." One participant reported "finding the gap between thoughts and also connecting with one thought and going off on the target" reflecting thought awareness pattern.

The majority of the reports reflected a state of positive and desirable experiences which helped them to understand different techniques and approaches that help in going deeper into self.—"Very positive, I am impressed with the variety of approaches that are used."

"A well-thought out course each time to move deeper into a quite place step-by-step."

The gradual step-by-step progression into meditation in a smooth manner was found to be more beneficial by the participants. The time given for preparation and progress was not equally effective to all. For somebody, "Asana part was too long" and another reported that "so for me, its fine that not every thing works out perfectly." Thus, an acceptance and resigned attitude was also evident which is much better than expecting a result These observations indicate, that meditative practices have relaxation effect, helps in quietening the thoughts and at the same time the quality of experiences are not always same as it varies with the content of the mind, the type of daily activities and to some extent expectations and experiences of the practitioners.

## Facilitators

Preparation for meditative experience emerged as an important qualitative experience. *Asana* practice of mild form and *Pranayama* was considered as important preparation. Many of these students who had come from different schools and traditions of Yoga practice were able to experience the facilitating role of preliminary practice or *Purvanga*. Many of them would just sit for meditation without preparation. One respondent—"I never been doing *Asanas* before meditation, but it really helps me to relax more in the body. Also the *Pranayama* was positive experience."

"Preliminary steps of gentle *Asanas*, breath work, and chanting helped to focus, taking initiative and time to get into the process of Meditating." The aids which prepared for the meditative practice were varied, but majority of participants felt *Pranayama*, *Niyasam*, breath preparation as essential reported the role of body movements. Some of them and chanting to prepare for *Dhyana*. The openness to experience, sometimes guided instructions from teacher and the context in which they were taught also found to be facilitating the practice.

## Obstacles

Breath has a close link to the mind and one cannot focus and meditate, if the body and mind are troubled or distracted. Pain and ache in the body can become blocks, obstacles and interferences. The participants could experience the role of preliminary steps in building the internal resources. This was clearly evident in the themes which revealed those factors which hindered the positive experiences.

The practice of meditation needs good ambience. The external noise must be minimum. If the instructions are complicated, the trainee may feel confused. Thus, too many instructions and does and don'ts can hamper the focus.

The "internal chatter of the mind" is most difficult to control and students need more time and space to regulate this aspect. The following excerpts of the selected participants feedback highlights the above facts.

- R — "Numbness in my legs." "My legs went to sleep."
- R — "When I couldn't follow my own ratio of breath"
- R — "I have sometimes felt one part of my back being painful. So the disturbance has been physical within myself, not outside."
- R — "Leading a busy life."

Apart from not having conducive ambience, inability to feel comfort in body and mind, the other life style factors also hinders the positive experience. This is well reflected in the following instance.

- R — "My greatest hindrance is my mind, always wandering. Sometimes I ate too many cookies. Sometimes I was uncomfortable, because, I had not taken time to prepare good seat for myself."
- R — "I am new to meditation. In the past I feel so disturbed in body and mind. Here these did not affect as much-mostly emotions."
- R — "If I was worrying about something prior to meditation."
- R — "My body—not prepared enough to sit long."

In spite of all the above mentioned hindrances the participants were able to experience positive states of body



and mind. This was facilitated by good regulation of breath, ability to focus on present, and specific skills of focusing such as *nyasam*, *chanting postures*, *pranayama* and specific chants, etc, helped in regulating the wandering mind.

Many participants reported that guided meditative practice in a stepwise manner was more enriching. As individuals proceed at different rate, some students experienced insufficiency of time. Many wanted to meditate for longer period, even though the sessions were for one-hour duration per day.

Knowing the meaning and purpose of *mantra* was important for some. Knowledge of different techniques and a need to share the experiences in a smaller group was also felt.

As this was a group class, there were certain limitations in terms of providing individualized instruction and feedback. As meditative practice involves internal experience sharing the experiences could give the learner feedback and status of his/her own practice. But too much of explaining and after reflections may make the experience more of an interpretation and goal seeking behaviour. Thus, it is essential to provide reasonable level of opportunity to share experience in the session.

## Conclusion

It may be concluded that meditative practice can have a positive impact on the state of mind characterized by

lightness, clarity, relaxedness, etc. None of the participants experienced any of the altered states of awareness. Preparatory practices and a gradual withdrawal of practice is very essential and this makes the meditation a more achievable state. Not all individuals experience the same level of comfort or clarity at all times. Apart from inter individual variations intra individual variations are also high. Hindrances and obstacles to reach meditative stage can be external, or internal. Overcoming them by choosing right environment, life style and proper preparation through *asana*, *pranayama* and other specific techniques can facilitate progress. Support from experienced teacher who provides different techniques and approaches to reduce the interferences of body, breath and mind is essential. Guided and supervised practice can help in achieving the goal of reaching meditative state.

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