

Back to Zero

by

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Chapter One

THE CONCEPT

For millennia meditation has been practiced by monks and nuns, rabbis and priests, yogis, shaman and spiritualist. It is one of the ways that these people have chosen to achieve mental clarity, various transcendental states of consciousness, even 'enlightenment' or 'salvation'. Today, many people from around the world practice meditation regularly as a way of dealing with the mass of information that constantly bombards the thinking process.

The concept that underlies the practice of meditation is really quite simple. Think of the mind as being a large pond of water, with an inlet waterway and an outlet waterway. As long as these waterways are open, the water in the pond is constantly churning and swirling about as it flows from the inlet waterway on its way to the outlet waterway, currents changing as ripples and waves splash against the pond's shore.

If somehow we should stop this flow, the pond would be stilled. The churning and swirling, and the splashing of waves and ripples against the shore would all stop as the stirred up mud, silt and impurities would settle to the bottom, leaving the pond clear and still.

With the mind it is our senses that are the inlet waterways, and our own speech and actions that are the outlet waterways. Our own thoughts and the impressions left upon our minds by our endless experiences are the mud, silt and impurities that cloud our minds and confuse our thoughts, often causing us to make radical decisions and behave in a way that is not in our own best interest, or in the best interest of others.

By applying the mental process known as meditation, we can cease, or at least slow, the constant flow of information to our senses and bring the currents of mental activity to a momentary pause, to a momentary emptiness of mind, an intentional thoughtlessness of sort, allowing a clearer view of our own situation in relation to the world around us.

This stillness is achieved, first of all, by taking control of the physical body, placing it in a position that is conducive to the meditative process. Several of these positions are discussed in the next chapter. The more traditional and often more difficult to endure yogic postures were developed long ago, apparently long before recorded history, and have definitely stood the test of time in regards to their effectiveness.

Next, you stay in that position for some amount of time, hopefully with as little distractions as possible, while your breath, heartbeat, thoughts, emotions and impulses all settle down, leaving the mind clear and undisturbed. Once these mental actions have settled, you are

allowed a clearer view of your own mind, as thoughts and mental impressions continue to arise, regardless of the calm that you are experiencing.

For most of us, just achieving this preliminary level of calmness is rewarding enough. For others, there are much deeper levels of meditation that must be attained, a much more thorough stillness to be achieved. For these folks there are exercises (some could be called non-exercises) that will allow the mind to settle into a deeper state of tranquility, a state of transcendence above normal consciousness where the purest form of logic becomes evident as the meditator becomes aware of their own relationship with the universe.

Those who follow this path have a serious curiosity about such terms as 'God' or 'Buddha' or 'salvation' or 'enlightenment' or other such terms that are generally associated with religious thought and experience, but often misunderstood, due to the lack of the latter: experience. We could sit and discuss and debate the meanings of these things forever, but until we each can search deep within ourselves and find the experience that the authors of these terms have themselves experienced, we would only be creating confusion for ourselves and for others. The answers to these questions lie deeply within each persons own consciousness. They must simply be accessed to bring about a truly spiritual experience. This is the deeper purpose of meditation.

Ultimately and finally, there is meditation as a way of preparing ourselves for our only obligation, the obligation of dying. If ever we would need a stilled and a calmed mind, it would be at that final moment. And as we have seen emphasized in the recent past, death can appear at any time or any place for anyone. However, with a little preparation, in the form a meditational practice that deals with this important event, we can more easily understand and accept the reality that is dying and death, even as it may appear in an instant's notice. Truly, to understand death is to understand how to live.

We should be careful not to confuse meditation with what is commonly referred to as prayer. The practice and purpose of prayer is far different from that of meditation, though the two are often, in many faiths and practices, performed in concert. A prayer can be a request made to a deity, for one's own or for other's forgiveness or favor or just acceptance, or for some material thing, such as a good crop, or for that matter, anything. A prayer can be a thanksgiving for those things that are received, or an offering. A prayer can be a verbal event, or it can be the ritual itself. To the Native American traditionals of the Southwestern United States, the act of smoking tobacco is a prayer. Prayer has many forms.

But prayer is at best still just a communication with the deity (however named), and most often with the perception that the deity is something outside of ourselves. Meditation, on the other hand, allows the practitioner to experience, first hand, the deity that lives within our own hearts, minds, and actions. That being so, the arrangement of a ritual that combines prayer and meditation has long been proven to provide a powerful platform for a true spiritual

experience.

However, even for those who do not practice any form of prayer, meditation can prove to be an effective way of calming and clearing the mind, almost a requirement these days for those working in scientific, medical, technical, or other fields that may require concentrated mental activity. Just as one who works at a very physical job must stay in good physical condition, so must one whose job requires mental sharpness maintain a mental clarity and awareness. For this there is no need to address a deity, only the need of the individual to take control of that part of his or her own being, the most illusive part, the mind.

In the following chapters, I will take the reader through a series of steps or processes that should be mastered if one is to achieve any of the rewards of the practice of meditation. Each step will be presented in such a way as to allow the reader to adapt it into their own practice, as they feel comfortable. The comfort of the practitioner is very important here, since this directly affects the calmness of mind that is required.

*

"What is the meaning of 'the sound of one hand clapping'?"
a young monk asked.

"If I told you in words what 'the sound of one hand clapping' meant,"
replied the Zen Master,
"it would no longer be 'the sound of one hand clapping'.
It would become 'a lecture on the sound of one hand clapping',
and that would certainly miss the point entirely."

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Chapter Two

THE POSITIONS

When approaching the practice of meditation, many people are quickly driven away by the idea that they may have to sit in a cross-legged position, or even worse, in some yogic knot-like posture. To most of us, having spent our lives in the three most common positions of modern man: standing, sitting in a chair, or reclining, the idea of sitting cross-legged for long periods of time is not very appetizing. And as far as the 'yogi-in-a-knot' thing goes, well, not a chance.

If this is you, then don't worry about it. We've got the problem solved. There are many physical positions from which one can meditate, from just sitting in a chair, to the standing and walking meditations, to the reclining meditations. Each is valid and each allows the practitioner to ascend to a certain level of consciousness, that depending upon the position chosen as well as upon the practitioner's prior experience and skills. Meditation doesn't necessarily have to equate with physical pain.

Perhaps the least difficult position for the beginner is simply seated in a chair. Let's just call it the "simply sitting in a chair" position. This is, as is said, sitting in a chair, back straight, feet flat on the floor, knees separated to about the width of the shoulders, palms up with index finger and thumb touching while resting on the lap of each respective leg. The exact position of the head depends upon the actual practice being performed, but generally the head should be looking straight ahead, then tilted forward slightly. This allows for unrestricted breathing, an absolute necessity for any serious meditational practice. The back should be straight, but not tense.

When sitting in this position for a long period of time, the back or neck may tire. Don't overdo it. Meditation can be like any other exercise in that it must be taken step at a time, carefully, so as not to incur injury, but to fully develop a foundation from which one can build useful meditational skills. And it is important, at this stage, that pain or discomfort not become a distraction.

Another good position is a standing position that is sometimes referred to as "The Universal Position of Meditation". This is an excellent position that has been used by martial artist for centuries. It allows the practitioner a better awareness of Chi flow, a natural process of the body of energy, as well as allowing the practitioner to enter into a depth of consciousness that is dependant upon the development of one's ability to stand for long periods of time, without movement. Those martial artists who have developed an 'iron' stance may go into deep trance as easily as if they were seated and in the Padmasana. To the beginner it is a good

introductory position, allowing an experience of both the body of energy and the body of consciousness, without a lot of initial physical pain.

To meditate in this position, first stand up straight, with feet shoulders width apart, pointed straight ahead. For now, just let your arms hang freely and look straight ahead with head slightly tilted forward. There should be a very slight bend at the knees. Next, rotate the right foot, pivoting on the toe so that the heel of that foot is pointing about 45 degrees outward from it's original position. This, in turn, should cause your hips to rotate about 23 degrees to the left.

Holding this stance, raise your arms to a position much as if you were holding a large beach ball, resting the imaginary ball at just about your navel. Arms and hands embracing this imaginary ball, fingers extended, palms inward. The tips of the middle fingers on each hand should be about an inch to an inch and a half from touching each other. Once this position has been mastered, it is not uncommon for the practitioner to actually observe his or her own chi flowing through the fingertips.

Then there is the easiest of the cross-legged positions, this being commonly known in the west as the half-lotus posture, lotus being the flower of Hinduism and Buddhism that represents wisdom. I guess, if you really think about it, 'half-lotus' isn't a very complementary name. Its much more appropriate Sanskrit name is Siddhasana, siddha being one who has attained yogic and psychic skills, asana being the position. It is best to be seated on a mat, rug, or flat pillow, both feet pulled in, resting just in front of the crotch, right foot over left with knees pointed outward. The back should be straight but not strained, the head, again, looking forward with a slightly forward tilt. The hands, like in the "simply sitting in a chair" position, should rest palms up, index finger touching thumbs, this time on their respective knees.

This position is used by beginners and master yogis alike, and is probably the most widely used meditation position. It is very close to the Padmasana, and allows for the deepest of meditations for the experienced meditator.

The Padmasana is the position most historically depicted in Hindu and Buddhist art, and can even be found in art from the pre-Colombian western hemisphere, this position having been practiced by the yogis of the Maya. The padma, being the lotus flower, is a symbol for wisdom as well as being representative of the chakras, or energy centers, of the body of energy, the natural and necessary consort to our physical bodies. Without one there could not be the other, nor would the body of consciousness have a home. And again, asana means position or posture. It is more commonly known in the west as the 'full-lotus'.

Here the practitioner sits like in the Siddhasana except that the legs are now drawn up, the right foot placed on top of the left thigh, sole pointed slightly upward and pulled towards the

pelvis. The left leg is then pulled up over the right leg in such a way as to place the left foot, again, sole pointed slightly upward, in a similar but opposite position as the right foot. The hands should be placed together, right over left, palms up and thumbs touching, between your feet and lower abdomen, wrists resting on your thighs. I have also found that placing the hands as mentioned for the Siddhasana affords another excellent meditative point of view that is useful for certain meditation practices.

This position helps in mastering mental focus and other such things, as it locks many of the energy paths of the body of energy into a certain kind of flow that encourages a higher level of mental activity. Those performing such exotic yogic practices as the Kundalini yoga of the Vedas, or certain practices of Tibetan yoga, or the yogic practices of the Maya will find this asana to be without equal.

Needless to say, anyone who has not practiced yoga for some time will, most likely, find the Padmasana to be impossible, or at the very least extremely painful to achieve. That's okay. Leave this one to those who can do it. It's not absolutely necessary, especially in the beginning, and especially if the goal of your meditation is simply to clear your mind and give it a brief rest.

There is one more seated position that I will mention. This is the kneeling position that is used by the people of Japan when practicing Za Zen or performing a tea ceremony or just visiting a temple, etc. It is also used by traditional Native Americans for personal spiritual practices and for certain ceremonies. I once observed a century old shaman sit, presiding over a religious ceremony, for over eight hours on his knees, from sunset to about 2:30 A.M. At that point he said, "I'm going outside to pray." He got up and walked outside like he had only just sat down.

This position may be more suited for some than for others, and I recommend that you try it for yourself if you are physically able. For those who are comfortable with this position, it can support the deepest of meditations. This can be a position for beginning meditators and experienced shaman alike.

To sit in this position, place a mat, rug, or flat pillow on the spot where you chose to sit. Then stand with your feet together, facing the direction chosen for the meditation. Next, go to your knees, proceeding to sit down, knees together or apart depending on your own comfort, placing your buttocks on your ankles. You will, most likely, experience some numbness after sitting in this position for a few minutes. But this can happen even if you've been sitting in a chair for too long. I'll discuss how to deal with that after I talk about one more position.

This position is rarely written about, as there is a tendency, especially among the inexperienced, to simply fall asleep rather than experience a meaningful meditative or spiritual experience. I'll call this the "dying man" position. It is laying on your back, back

straight with heels together, arms alongside, palms up and index finger touching the thumb. The head should be only slightly elevated so as to allow for unobstructed breathing.

This position can be used by anyone except the most severely physically handicapped individuals, and can be used for many basic meditations and, as is suggested by the name, it also can be used by those who are preparing for the moment of death as it is excellent for what is known as 'consciousness transference' or passing into the afterlife.

Regarding the leg numbness that will most likely occur in any of the seated positions, often long after the position has been mastered. First of all, don't let it scare you. If you are in good physical condition, then this is not a problem. At the end of your meditation session, simply do the following.

Remove any shoe or sock that you may be wearing, then sit on the floor, on a couch, or where ever is comfortable, with the numbed leg extended in such a way as to better allow circulation, bent at the knee. Then moisten the tips of the first two fingers on the opposite hand with your own saliva and rub the sensitive area just behind the inside ankle, doing so in a circular counter-clockwise motion. The numbness should disappear quickly.

In all of these positions, it is important for the back to be straight, without tension, and for the meditator to be as relaxed as possible without falling asleep. The ideal is to be fully alert and fully relaxed, both at the same time. This may take some practice to attain.

The physical meditation position becomes the foundation upon which the practice of meditation is built. Choose a good, comfortable position for yourself, one that you can sit in for about twenty to thirty minutes, and make it a part of your life. Once you've done that, the foundation is established.

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Chapter Three

BREATHING

Next, you must breath life into your meditation practice. This requires learning how to breath all over again. It requires that the practitioner becomes fully aware of his or her breathing process, eventually re-training this involuntary action. All mental and physical functions are interconnected with the breath cycles, so it is extremely important to maximize and condition this particular bodily function if one is to expect any of the positive benefits gained through yogic meditation.

The following is a basic breathing exercise that is very beneficial when applied to general meditational practice. For the purpose of learning this exercise, it may be preferable to read over this short chapter first and then go back and follow the steps described within.

The best way to begin re-training your breathing process is to first blow out all of the air in your lungs, residual air included, through your mouth while sitting or standing in your preferred meditation position. The residual air is the used air that settles in the bottom of your lungs and may normally only leave your lungs when you sneeze or cough. By blowing all of the air out of your lungs at the start, you remove this residual air and allow for the beginning of a corrected breathing process, utilizing the full capacity of the lungs.

Next, you must inhale as slowly as possible through your nose until your lungs are filled with fresh air, not straining but comfortably full. Once you have begun to fill your lungs, carefully and slowly bring the in-breath to a stop and then begin very slowly, the out-breath, again, through your nose.

When performing this transition, it is very important to make the change from in-breath to out-breath as smoothly and evenly as possible. There should be no sudden exhalation of the air, only a smooth even change from in-breath to out-breath. In other words, you must slowly decrease the flow of the in-breath until it is non-existent. Then reversing to the out-breath, slowly increase the flow of air until it is about the same comfortable level that you achieved on your in-breath.

Continue the out-breath, as slowly as possible without straining, until you have exhaled most of your lungs capacity. At this point the lungs should be not quite as empty as when you first expelled the residual air. Bring the out-breath to a halt, slowly decreasing the flow of the out-breath until it is, again, non-existent. This is a reversal of the transitional process from the in-breath to out-breath. Now it is transiting from out-breath to in-breath. You have now just completed the first cycle of correct breathing.

Continue breathing in this way throughout your meditation practice, for twenty to thirty minutes or so. Once this process has been repeated often enough, you will discover that, even when not in meditation, your breathing process has become greatly improved. Remember that it is very important to be smooth, with virtually no perceptible transition (to an observer) from in-breath to out-breath, or from out-breath to in-breath. It is also extremely important that there be no straining to achieve this level of smoothness. The practitioner must be relaxed, breathing within the limits of what is comfortable.

For some, breathing this way may seem near impossible at first. Careful persistence is the key if that is the case. For others it may seem easier. Just remember that, like any other skill, extraordinary breathing skills come with time and practice. It has been said that a master of yoga can breath imperceptibly, not even disturbing the quills of a feather if held beneath the masters nose. Perhaps that sounds a bit extreme for most of us, but it at least gives us some idea of the depth of mastery of breathing that is possible.

There are many other forms of yogic breathing practice, many prescribed for various other yogic exercises, from the vigorous breathing practices of Tibetan tumo to the subtly controlled breath of the Hindu kundalini practices. But for now, while you are focusing on meditation practice, this way of breathing is quite sufficient and will help not only your mental alertness and focus, but also your general health.

In the meditational exercises that follow, the breath should be maintained in this manner. This will become an automatic process in time, but the focus required in the beginning will also become a helpful mental exercise.

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Chapter Four

FOCUS

The next step is to focus the mind. We cannot achieve a stilled mind if we allow the constant bombardment of mental images and impulses to distract our mental focus. By focusing the mind and its various activities we will eventually find the stillness we seek, lying hidden within those mental activities. The mental murkiness settles and the waters of the mind become clear.

Seated in your preferred meditation position, hopefully you are already mentally overseeing your breath control. But once that process is underway, the mind will tend to wander away from the purpose at hand, thinking about your daily events, family problems, business and such, eventually leading to drowsiness and then, quite often, dozing off to sleep. Not at all what this is about.

Now some meditation techniques rely on the eyes being closed during meditation. I have found that this allows the practitioner to fall asleep quite easily. Therefore I will follow the recommendation of those sages who have taught that the eyes should be open in order to not miss the glory of enlightenment.

To do this, and to develop a state of alertness and focus, you will want to learn to visually focus on the smallest possible object. May I suggest a small pebble. Find such a small pebble and wash it, even polish it if you wish. This is not some superstition. You just want to make sure that the pebble is all that you are focusing on.

Place this pebble about three or four feet in front of your seated position in such a way that it is in your direct line of gaze as you sit correctly in the chosen posture. If you are seated in a chair, you may want to place the pebble on a stand or a small table, again, three to four feet away. If you are seated on the floor, you may also wish to use a small stand to elevate the pebble to the proper level, or you may just want to place it on the floor in front of yourself, at about that same distance. Then fix your gaze undistractedly and unblinking upon the pebble while you maintain control of your breathing process.

After a short time you will find that eye movement and watering may become an annoyance. Sometimes the eyes will wander from their focus, or tears will fill the eyes as they strain to not blink. Be strong. Continue to make your effort. Eventually you will be rewarded as is an athlete after a hard session's training, being able to focus for long periods of time with little effort.

Practice this visual focusing technique for up to twenty minutes at a time, once a day to start. Once you've become comfortable at it you may wish to continue the exercise for an even longer period of time. It will be especially effective if your breathing technique is also being performed correctly.

The next stage of learning to focus the mind is to focus the hearing. With everything from the sounds of birds and children, to the noise of distant traffic, to what is just the general noise of civilization, all constantly playing in your ear, you will now want to focus your hearing on the sounds within your own inner-ear.

This internal sound is a collection of extremely subtle sounds that emanate from the various bodily functions. Everything from the blood rushing in pulses through your brain to the anvil and stirrup clanging away within the structure of your ear. At first this sound seems to be much like a distant sound of bacon frying. Once brought into focus, there seems to be more to the sound than just breakfast cooking. For those who enter a deep meditational state the sound may become not unlike that of a Tibetan sacred music orchestra. No coincidence there.

Focus on those sounds. Let the definition of each of the sounds that make up that one sizzling sound become clear. Continue to listen until you can hear the bell clanging and the drum thundering and the cymbals crashing, each distinct from the other. Now listen between those sounds. Listen to the sound of emptiness, hiding in the spaces between the other sounds. That is the zero that you are seeking. That is the stillness that will allow the currents of the mind to be calmed and brought to a pause.

Once attained, this becomes a very important stage in your meditational development. Having achieved this level of meditation, you will want to remember that experience so that you can replicate it easily.

But sometimes there is a seeming avalanche of thought stuff. Mental images that seem to come from out of nowhere, beckoning our attention and stimulating our imagination. These thoughts are not generated by our sight or hearing, but are purely mental images, generated by our memories of our various life's experiences, much the same as are our dreams during sleep.

The best way to deal with these images is through what is known as visualization. This is using your own imagination to create an image in your mind. In this case you will imagine a solution to the invasion of thought stuff.

One of the classical visualizations is to visualize that you are wielding a sword and every time a mental image appears you cut it from it's source and send it back into the void. That one is my favorite. But if, for example, baseball is your game, try imagining yourself as the batter and every mental image is a ball, and so on. Or tennis? And so on. The image that your

mental actions are essentially removing those mental distractions is what the object is here. Meditation doesn't have to be so dry. And this exercise gives the active imagination something to do that works toward the goal of calming mind.

Another visualization, and perhaps the most simple and direct, is to simply visualize that you are looking between the images, into the voidness of pure mind. This is much the same technique as is used when focusing your hearing, only now you are using what some call your "sixth sense."

Once you have mentally come in contact with that voidness there is generally a feeling of release, much like the weight of the world has been lifted from your shoulders. That is because that voidness is your mind in it's natural condition, much like the pool of water once the murkiness and impurities have settled. This is that return to Zero that we are seeking. Once achieved you will be ready to return to the daily grind with a clear minded approach. This is the ultimate goal of meditation.

Again, make it a point to remember these experiences as you have them. This is very helpful when it comes to returning to these mental states that you have achieved. In doing so, the depth of experience should increase noticeably with every practice.

Perhaps you noticed that two of the positions mentioned in Chapter Two won't exactly work with the visual focusing techniques mentioned here. These are the Universal Position of Meditation and the Dying Man position.

Regarding the latter, you may want to just focus on a spot on the ceiling rather than the pebble suggested. Another very powerful technique that may take some practice is to visualize a spot in the air and focus on that. This can also be done with your eyes closed as you visualize a small clear bright light and maintain your focus on that. This can be an excellent meditation in one's final moments.

If you are going to use this position , you will want to make every effort not to slip off to sleep. Otherwise you will certainly miss the point of the effort you're making.

Regarding the Universal Position of Meditation, it is most often practiced by Tai Chi, Gung Fu or other martial arts practitioners, and is a very good way to harmonize your chi flow after a rigorous work out. I highly recommend it to those so inclined.

While the breathing cycles suggested here will work with this position, the visual focus should be fixed at the space between the finger tips. The cultivation of spinal energy is greatly helped with this practice.

There is one more thing I should mention here. Because of the depth of concentration

achieved by your practice at this point, it may be helpful, at the end of your practice, to make a loud noise such as a hand clap, or the ringing of a real bell, or the beating of a real drum, just to help return your consciousness, from the super-conscious state you have attained, to a more normal level of awareness. No point in walking around in a daze.

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Chapter Five

PERSEVERANCE

Sometimes gathering up all of your energies and sitting them all down together so that they can be calmed from the daily roar is much like herding animals. But like herding animals, all that is required is a consistent effort and a little perseverance. With such an effort, the animals eventually become familiar with the herder's intentions and eventually settle into a pattern that is comfortable for both the herd and the herder. It is perseverance that can be the binder, the glue, if you will, that can hold any such difficult effort together.

Sometimes when one first attempts the practice of meditation, one finds that it is impossible to sit motionless for more than five to ten minutes or so without having to stand up or at least move around a bit. This is not unusual. Everyone has their limits for most everything. The thing here is to remember that this is not unlike most any physical exercise. Only here we are exercising the mental part of our existence, for which the physical energies must be brought under control.

If someone decides to become a marathon runner, but had never run further than 50 yards, that person would have to train with the goal of expanding their personal envelope of endurance in running. So it is with meditation. What you must do is to sit for five or ten minutes or so in the beginning. Do that once or twice a day for a few days until you are comfortable with that length of time. Then sit for a few minutes longer, say, fifteen minutes, again, once or twice a day for a few more days until you are comfortable with that length of time. Then again and again, until you have become comfortable with sitting for the amount of time that you have decided is right for you.

You may be overtaken by thoughts of "all of the things that you should be doing other than just sitting there." That can quite often make you jump up with no further thought of meditation, running off to take care of those nagging duties. Try to remember that everything you do will go much smoother, be completed much more successfully, if you approach it from a meditative point of view, with a calmed mind. Everything you do will benefit from your taking twenty to thirty minutes a day to meditate. Done twice a day, you may even find that you sleep better at night. But you must persevere. You must get control of your desires and impulses long enough to allow them to subside so that you can have a clearer view of your own life.

By the way, while we're discussing it, how long one should sit depends on the goal of the meditation. Most folks will want to sit for twenty minutes or so, or until the energies of the tensions of the day have subsided. But a few will want to sit longer, usually in search of

deeper insight to their own personal life, and occasionally in search of universal truths.

One way to deal with the restlessness that arises during the meditative process is to simply take a few minutes break from sitting and go for a short walk, or perhaps do a Tai Chi set or even a few Hatha Yoga positions. Then resume your meditation as it was before your break. But you must not allow the thoughts of those daily duties to call you back to your daily grind before you've had a chance to return to your meditation and complete your goal of seeking out that pond of mental calm which is your mind in it's natural state.

Once in a while, for the beginner or experienced practitioner alike, no matter how long you sit, the distractions and the noise inside your head just won't subside. At times it may even seem as though the longer you sit, the louder the internal mental impressions and noises become. And there may even appear to be light shining from objects, radiating as if some kind of aura. Or the shape of objects may seem to be undulating.

Don't let it scare you. This is just your mind attempting to relax, subtly protesting all of it's daily demands. Just remain calm and keep focused on the goal. For those having such experiences, achieving that goal will be that much more rewarding. When your allotted time for meditational practice is up, just finish as you usually would, with a bell or drum or a loud clap of the hands. When you return to sitting later that evening, or the next day, you will find it easy to resume your practice, almost exactly where you left off. Your ascension through the levels of consciousness will continue as long as you do not lose your intent. Perseverance is especially important at this stage.

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Chapter Six

THE GOAL

There are those who believe, due to the lack of knowledge and/or experience with the subject, that the practice of meditation is an escapist pursuit. Not so. If one is using meditational exercises to escape, one is probably escaping to one or more of the dreamworlds described in many ancient writings. Allowing your mind to dwell in those dreamstates will not help you achieve the true goal of meditation, and can, in fact, be detrimental to your mental and physical health.

The goal of meditation is to allow your mind to adjust to the inputs it has received, allowing you to return to the worldly duties and obligations with a mind that is clear and refreshed. We are mental beings, and just as we bathe and clean our bodies periodically, so should we rest and clear our minds.

The mind could be compared to a mathematical calculator. Each time a math problem is entered into the calculator, it must first be cleared, returning the memory and the display to zero before one can proceed. Meditation is that "clear" key. A properly cleared mind is more perceptive, alert, and aware, ready to deal with most any problem that one might encounter in life.

How do we know when we've reached that goal of clearing the mind? Well, since zero equals nothing, one could say that there isn't any experience. Perhaps we could call it a non-experience. I don't mean to sound so much like a Zen koan, but there really isn't too much of a better way to say it.

The human ability to perceive has its limits. We know when we approach the goal, and after attaining the goal we will feel a certain calmness, a certain overview of life, a certain kind of objectivity, but there is nothing that is perceivable within that experience at the instant we attain that mental zero. Not that there is nothing there. It is just that, at that point, we have reached the limits of our perceptive capabilities and are, at that instant, experiencing those limits. Or rather non-experiencing those limits. Therefore, it may take some time for the practitioner to begin to become fully aware of the rewards they are receiving for all of those hours of meditation.

It is not like just stepping out of a bath and now you are clean. Certainly you will feel refreshed after sitting, but the depth of that refreshment will take some time to be discovered. For me personally, it took years to realize the impact it would have on my life, even though I had felt some of the benefits, and even a need to pursue the practice, within the first ten or

fifteen minutes of my first meditation session. Your own experience will, most likely, be not too dissimilar, though we are all different to some degree. Just remember the topic of discussion of Chapter Five: perseverance. Only then will the rewards eventually reveal themselves.

It should be mentioned at this point that the non-experience of the goal will most likely occur during an out-breath of the breathing cycle as suggested in Chapter Three. This is because the breath and the heartbeat and the rhythms of brain activity are all interconnected. When you visit your physician for a blood pressure test, you are most likely asked to take a slow deep breath or two before your blood pressure is checked. Usually the result is a lower blood pressure than if you had not taken a couple of slow deep breaths. This is because of that connection between the lungs, the heart, and the brain. Imagine the affect on your blood pressure after twenty minutes of deep breathing. Or better yet, get a blood pressure monitor and do a 'before and after' test on yourself, testing before you meditate and after you meditate (using the techniques I've described), and see for yourself, first hand, the result. I'm sure you will be pleased.

So with this non-experience that we seek presenting itself when the lungs are empty, the meditator must maintain the physical position, the breath cycle, and the mental focus as this goal is approached. You may notice that the mental activity is increased as you slowly breath in, and decrease as you slowly breath out. This is much like the heart rate, which will increase slightly with the in-breath, but decrease, or even seem to pause for an instant, on the out-breath. If your position is correct and your focus is uninterrupted, it is during that apparent pause that you may experience that absolute mental clarity. The goal will probably not be experienced within the first few sessions, but, with perseverance and a consistent effort, can eventually be attained.

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Chapter Seven

WHERE & WHEN

Once you have made these practices a part of your life and are comfortably exercising that part of your mind, you may want to try variations on the theme. You are probably now used to meditating in a room in your home or perhaps in your garden or yard, but have you thought of the options that are now open to you? If you are a suburban or urban dweller, you may want to try taking a trip to the country and find a nice tree to meditate. Very interesting experiences have been said to happen to people who meditate under trees. Do make sure that you're not trespassing in el toro's or anyone else's pasture. Or you may just want to go to the beach and meditate during the sunrise or sunset, or to a mountain top.

A waterfall is traditionally a great place to practice deep breathing due to the high negative ion content. The same can be said of an early morning at the beach. Or practicing yogic deep breathing in a high mountain location can increase your lung capacity, greatly improving your meditative skills and your health. Yogic masters have practiced these skills in the Himalayas for thousands of years. It is, in fact, there where many of these practices were originally developed. One of my favorite places to meditate is sitting on a rock in the middle of a mountain stream. Very transcendental.

On the other hand, many indigenous shaman have meditated long hours in the Southwest U.S. desert, where life is hidden to those who are not patient enough of wait for it to show itself. And the deserts of the Mideast have historically been a place of both prayer and meditation. There is much insight to be had meditating in such lands.

There are, in fact, many places around the world that are considered ancient holy sites where temples, pyramids or other such structures have been constructed. Many of these places are excellent meditational spots and should be experienced if such an opportunity arises. Some of these, such as many of the locations in Mexico, Central and South America and elsewhere around the world, were built to harmonize with certain celestial events, such as the winter and summer solstice, the autumn and spring equinox, and so forth. Often the effect of just being at those places during those times is memorable, not to mention the effect of deep meditation in such an environment.

In regards as to when to meditate, I can say that most anytime of the day or night is a good time to meditate. Just make sure that you won't be interrupted, which may help you determine what is best for you. However, as far as what is generally the best time to meditate, the air is best in the early morning between 4 A.M. and 6 A.M.. Since the deep breathing of air is what brings the whole process to life, we can probably rest assured that this would be the preferred

time to practice yogic meditation. This is also a time when your body is rested and the digestive system is settled, having not eaten for over eight hours. An early morning meditation can send you off into the day with a cleared mind and a refreshed outlook and give you a better perspective with which to face the world and its complexities.

On the other hand, a nocturnal meditation can be equally rewarding, allowing you to enter the night's sleep with a cleared mind. Since the mind tends to make a lot of self- adjustments while we are sleeping, meditation then becomes a sort of pre-adjustment orientation. We slow down the mental processes and re-orient our energies. Excellent for anyone who may ever have trouble getting to sleep at night.

But if, somehow in this era when many people are required to spend most of their time working towards their survival, you are lucky enough to be able to spend twenty minutes or more meditating in the morning, and twenty minutes or more meditating at night, you will receive the rewards of both. If this sounds extreme, compare this with the rigors of a monk or nun who may spend eight to ten hours a day in prayer and meditation. In that light, it is not extreme at all. Meditation twice a day, morning and evening, can be an excellent, most rewarding routine to get into.

*

"Teacher," asked the young monk,
"How do I listen for the sound of one hand clapping?"

"By not-listening," replied the old man.



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