

EXPLORING the HE**ART** of **MEDITATION**

A STUDY COURSE

BY CECIL MESSER



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Department of Education
The Theosophical Society in America
P.O. Box 270, Wheaton, Illinois 60189-0270
www.theosophical.org

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THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY IN AMERICA

For additional information, contact:

Department of Information
The Theosophical Society in America
P.O. Box 270
Wheaton, IL 60189-0270

E-mail: info@theosophical.org
Web: www.theosophical.org

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Lesson One

Preliminary Considerations

Meditation is the condition of being fully awake in your original natural state of awareness. It is the recognition of the world as it is and in its primordial purity. Meditation cuts through all veils and obstacles and sensitively touches the deepest essence underlying all phenomena with clarity and compassion. Perhaps you have come close to the experience of meditation in one of those rare moments when your mind was in a state of quietness, when your attention was totally in the present, i.e., when your self was “not.” It may have taken the form of an insight beyond thinking or an ecstatic feeling of joyousness beyond mere pleasure. This experience is not meditation *per se*, for like a rainbow, it graces us with its appearance, momentarily, and then fades away. However, the perception of its beauty remains as a memory that has its own value.

Occasionally, just as one wakes up in the morning after a restful night’s sleep and before the ordinary activities of the mind set in, there is a feeling of joy and wonderment accompanied by the remembrance of a vivid dream. The realization dawns that the people and objects of the dream were never substantially present; they were only an illusion. The actual state of meditation is to our normal waking state as this bright awakening is to our sleep state.

The *Oxford American Dictionary* defines meditation as “the action or practice of meditating.” Its definition of the verb *meditate* is: “think deeply or focus one’s mind for a period of time, in silence or with the aid of chanting, for religious or spiritual purposes or as a method of relaxation.” These definitions are not sufficient to convey a meaning that goes beyond thinking and focusing one’s thoughts. Corresponding to the dictionary definition of *meditation*, we will use the term “meditation practice” and allow a deeper meaning of meditation to unfold throughout this course. Perhaps our meditation practice will at some point flower into meditation just as the practice of musical scales may eventually flower into the experience of a Beethoven sonata.

None of these statements, however, adequately define meditation. They are indicators at best. Just as a distant star on a cloudless night does not shine directly on the path one is trying to follow, it does provide a general sense of direction if one looks.

Regarding meditation, J. Krishnamurti once said:

One asks oneself then whether it is possible to come upon this thing without inviting, without waiting, without seeking or exploring—just

for it to happen like a cool breeze that comes in when you leave the window open? You cannot invite the wind but you must leave the window open.¹

Perhaps the essence of meditation cannot be captured, but nevertheless we long for it. So if we wish to commune with this elusive thing, we must prepare a reception.

Our inquiry into meditation will be a rigorous undertaking analogous to climbing a great and forbidding mountain together. As your guide for most of this trip, my main qualification is being passionate about meditation. I have stumbled along on many treasure hunts, explored steep cliffs, and often fallen into narrow ravines while searching for the Meditation Place. May each who undertakes the journey to the sacred place have confidence that they will come upon the treasure.

It is said that the preeminent qualification for right meditation practice is to be immersed in the fountain of a generous heart. If one is not in sympathy with the idea of a generous heart as a prerequisite for meditative practice, then one begins with a burden that only grows heavier. The climb ahead is very steep and that particular burden could cause you as well as others to flounder and fail.

The nature of this inquiry will be to confront the perennial questions:

- Who am I, the meditator?
- What is the relationship of meditation to the meditator, to practice, to concentration, to thinking, to visualization, to listening, to reflection, to contemplation, or to attention?
- These activities are within the realm of time; yet is not meditation beyond time?
- Is a "system of meditation" an oxymoron?
- Is there a way of preparing the field of the mind and heart, which allows meditation to enter?

Those who have realized the condition of mind and heart that knows no bounds, affirm that there is such a way. This course, however, will approach the learning process by a rather unorthodox path. Rather than emphasize the accumulation of knowledge, it will engage us in the destruction of the accretions and sediments of our own extraneous knowledge. We will examine the old and the new, employ that which is useful, and discard those concepts found to be superficial or irrelevant. Our aim is not to become professional inquirers who make the process of inquiry an end in itself. Instead, we shall be inquirers who start from a position of not knowing, somewhat like the condition of an empty vase,

receptive and without expectations. At this point, a word of caution may be prudent: If we happen to come upon a truth—even though we marvel at its beauty and depth—unless we engage with it and make it part of ourselves, it will have little transformative power in our life.

We will review maps and descriptions accumulated by the sages since time began. We will listen to these sages and begin our journey with their advice but will not indulge in the satisfying continuity of building ever more subtle concepts upon concepts. If we find the treasure at the end or even at the beginning of the journey, then we may discard the maps or offer them to another seeker. We will look at a spectrum of views on meditation: from Patanjali through Buddhism and Christianity, through prominent Theosophists to Krishnamurti. Again, our approach to meditation will be both passionate and tentative. We will commune with all of our sources respectfully; however, there will be no “sacred cows” or traditions immune to the light of our joint inquiry.

Let us begin by preparing ourselves to step into and test the cold waters of the meditation practice river. Meditation itself dwells on the other shore.

Sitting Preliminaries

To establish a foundation for beginning any sitting meditation practice, find a quiet and amicable place to sit where you will have some measure of privacy. Given your particular circumstances, choose a time to begin your session when you can be free of disturbances and interruptions for a few minutes. Sunrise, noon, and sunset are said to be auspicious times of the day for meditation. But you may find other times that work equally well for you. You may wonder how long your session should be. Since we are exploring in a rough and remote mountain area and are not even carrying a timepiece, we will not use the distraction of time to dictate the duration of our practice session.

Feeling comfortable and relaxed with no unnecessary tensions in the body is very important for a sound beginning. The spinal column should be fairly straight and upright. Assuming the correct physical posture helps to relax the tensions of the mind. Some meditators begin their session by taking a few deep breaths and silently sounding the sacred word “OM.” A religious person might recite an opening prayer expressive of thanks or faith. A secular person may reflect on their good fortune in having the opportunity to practice meditation. These thoughts generate a feeling of gratitude and invite the benevolent forces of nature to participate. We will call these types of action “setting the stage.”

Closing each session with an expression of generosity and gratitude amplifies the effect of the practice. Again, some practitioners may silently sound the sacred word "OM" at the end of each session. A religious person might feel that a healing prayer will be more readily heard at this point and wish to share the benediction. A secular person may share any harmonious feelings or insights that arise by projecting the wish that others may also benefit from this practice. We will call these types of actions "sealing the practice."

At this point, a short anecdote might be instructive. There once was a man who took a fairly rigorous and disciplined approach to practice. He thought the only right way to sit was on a leopard skin in the full lotus position. He himself had sat several hours a day for three years before he was able to endure the pain and misery of aching knees and joints. After twenty-five years of sitting practice, he now exhibits a peculiar type of "virtuousness" born out of that discipline, along with a highly controlled mind. Unfortunately, he also appears rather uptight and humorless beneath a repressed narcissism.

Some traditions hold that an essential part—or at least a side benefit—of meditation practice is to learn to deal with suffering. Thus, to be born into a relatively inflexible Western body must have seemed to this man a very opportune set of circumstances for this kind of practice. However, we will not be following that path since we already have sufficient suffering and don't need the distraction of aching joints.

If you wish to sit on the floor, you may sit in one of the lotus positions described in any good hatha yoga book or in the following simple, yet highly recommended, cross-legged position. You will probably need to sit on a firm thick cushion unless you are extremely flexible. Experiment by stacking cushions until you have the correct height established. The pelvis should be tilted slightly forward with the knees touching the floor. Cross your legs, placing the right foot over the left with the heels near the perineum.

Alternatively, you may sit (so-called Egyptian-style) on an ordinary chair or stool, but don't lean back in the chair. Your legs should be uncrossed with the feet flat on the floor. Again, the height and slant of the chair need to be correct. Most people need to raise the back of the chair to obtain a slight downward tilt of the pelvis (an inch-thick book under each back chair leg may work).

Regardless of whether you sit in a chair or on the floor, it is suggested that you place your hands, palms down, directly on your knees or thighs. This helps support the weight of the arms, reducing the tension on the neck and shoulders. Some people like to rest their cupped hands in their

lap. Depending on your anatomy, you may even wish to add a cushion in your lap to get the support right.

For the best posture, pretend that a cord attached to the crown of your head gently suspends your whole spinal column relaxed into its own natural "s" shaped curvature. Gently pull in your tummy, squeeze your buttocks together, tilt your chin down a little, slightly open the mouth and let the tongue float freely near the top of the palate. Then gently wiggle everything into a settled vertical alignment. It is important that the eyes be open and in soft focus. Allow, but don't force, the eyes to remain still. If you are too easily distracted in the early stages, you may close your eyes (and any other disturbing sense organ). But know that this is considered a regressive training technique if one hopes eventually to bring one's meditation practice into daily life. In addition, closing the eyes lends itself to drowsiness. So why handicap yourself? This foundational sequence will be referred to throughout this course as the "Basic Sitting Procedure."

As a general guideline, consistent daily practice is found to be eminently helpful. Short sessions repeated several times seem to be more beneficial than single long sessions. When a session is too prolonged, one tends to become increasingly distracted, fatigued, or discouraged. Sitting with one minute of quality attention is cherished far more than an hour spent battling disturbing thoughts or feelings. In any case, timing your session is equivalent to carrying an extra burden of subtle distraction. Your mind will bounce back and forth trying to simultaneously dwell on two objects: one, the chosen object of concentration such as the breath and two, the status of the clock running in the background of your mind. This is like driving a car while rapidly alternating between accelerating and braking—not a smooth ride. Now let us now begin our first exercise.

Meditation Exercise – 1

Starting with the "Basic Sitting Procedure" described above (review as needed), attend to any remaining bothersome or distracting discomforts. Once you are relaxed and the breath is regular and easy, begin to observe the breathing process. This is referred to as *practice with an object*—in this case, the breath. There are several ways to watch this movement. You may feel the abdomen rise and fall, or you may notice the feeling or sound of the breath moving through the nose or mouth. Choose the best way for you to tune in to the process and begin to count the number of in-and-out-breathing cycles. A complete inhalation followed by a complete exhalation constitutes one such cycle.

Initially, what often happens is that we count a few cycles and find our attention has strayed to thinking about something completely different

than breathing. When this happens, just come back to focusing on the breath. Depending on the persistence of your thoughts, it may take several sessions of practice to keep on track. You may have to repeat this simple exercise daily for up to a week or more before you can achieve the desired focus of concentration. After you are able to count twelve complete cycles without wandering off into “la-la land,” you have accomplished a great deal and are ready to move on.

This next phase again gives attention to your breathing process but drops the counting. Simply notice your total breathing: in — *pause* — out — *pause*, in — *pause* — out — *pause*, etc. Be sure you don't try to control the breath. Watch as thoughts or emotions arise. Marvel at their quantity but don't cling to them. As soon as you notice the intruders, politely excuse yourself and gently return to watching your breathing. Do this for a several minutes. Seal the practice.



The procedures outlined above are deceptively simple. They sound easy but many beginning students of meditation have been surprised by the incessant habit of the mind to wander. We hardly notice this tendency until we attempt to sit down and focus the mind on a single object, in this case, the object being the breath. So be prepared to spend up to a week or more with the first exercise, as you want to lay a solid foundation for the more advanced exercises that will follow in later lessons.

Please be diligent about it so that you will be prepared for the next section of our climb!