

Meditation as a Personal, Social and Evolutionary Step

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Love and Knowledge

There seems to be a widespread craving for spirituality. It has grown over recent decades and is in stark contrast to a very non-spiritual human world that we have created. Whether it is curiosity or a deep spiritual yearning doesn't matter. The craving for spirituality reflects a longing to find meaning in life, meaning that has disappeared for many people from their ordinary lives. What I mean here is some deeper or higher meaning, something to strive for beyond our daily concerns about work, family and material things - some spiritual or religious striving. The good news is that psychological research is now finding that people who have spiritual goals in their lives are happier, healthier and achieve worldly goals better than people who have no spiritual goals. So, to be spiritual is good for you. It's also good for us all, because the growing craving for spirituality represents an absolutely necessary evolutionary shift for humanity, a global move in reaction to our spiralling into materialism, consumerism and psychological fragmentation.

The bad news is that becoming spiritual is not necessarily easy. Yes, there are some people who are born enlightened and others who suddenly become spiritual overnight. But for most of us it happens either when we have reached rock bottom, or through hard work and discipline, including the questioning of many of our deeply engrained views and habits. This questioning also requires knowledge and understanding with mind and heart, because we need to comprehend the world we live in if we want to go on the journey to the higher spiritual levels of being.

For me the framework for such understanding is the ancient Indian science of Yoga. Yoga does not just comprise the physical exercises that we in the West are becoming increasingly familiar with. It is a whole system of knowledge and practices from the Vedas, the Indian scriptures that many experts now believe may be the oldest scriptures on our planet, dating back possibly more than 10,000 years. But it is not its age that gives Yoga the credibility to serve now as a tool for us in the West to overcome our inner and outer fragmentation. The credibility for me lies in how much sense Yogic wisdom and practice make. As a psychologist and psychotherapist, I can see how Yoga presents a beautiful and comprehensive model of how the mind works, and deepens many of the issues that Western psychology struggles with. Yoga takes it further because it presents a very clear and practical view of our inner and outer worlds that includes soul, spirit, God and devotion as practical healing tools, something that most of Western psychology ignores. And as a practitioner I know that Yogic practices work.

The central part of Yoga practice is meditation. There is plenty of research evidence now that shows that meditation is beneficial for physical ailments, ranging from asthma to heart problems, and for psychological problems like anxiety, depression and stress.

In order to gain most from the practices of meditation, we need to understand why we are doing it. Meditation is serious business. It is a powerful procedure for healing the mind. People in the East are usually introduced to meditation by a teacher, who takes a lot of care to gently expand his students' minds, their ways of seeing, thinking and experiencing. That takes time and also includes the transmission of knowledge. In the West we have grown used to the 'quick fixes' – brief instructions of how to do it and

then off we go. We don't have time for all this mental work! Well, Yoga meditation doesn't work like that. Its model of the mind would even explicitly warn against such 'quick fix' approaches.

First of all we need to quieten the mind. There is no point in just saying 'OK, I'll meditate then'. The mind will soon find many reasons why this is utterly impractical and a waste of time. Or else it will bombard us with shopping lists, memories, images, fantasies and worries. It seems that as soon as we try to shut out the external world by closing our eyes, an inner restlessness takes over, since that is what we are used to. In order to build a solid foundation for our meditation practice, we first of all need to convince our intellect, that this 'going inside' might be a good idea. That does not mean that the mind won't rebel against the whole project later on. But by gently convincing the mind, we will get some breathing space (space for the breath) in which we can build soul-strength. Nor must we neglect or ignore our intellect, which is our rational understanding.

In the yogic model of the mind, the intellect is an important part of the story. Yoga meditation is not about ignoring or splitting off any part of the mind. It is about integrating the different parts, so that they can be in harmony and balance. Yoga says that we need to transcend the part of the mind and the feelings that are dominated by external sensations and their resulting thoughts and memories in order to reach the deeper levels of intelligence and consciousness that are connected with the soul. It is like going through the intellect, our outer mind, which governs our normal daily functioning. But we just can't do this transcending it without having the co-operation of the intellect. Therefore we need to know that what we are doing is right. It is our capacity to know and to use our knowledge that on the one hand has expanded our boundaries enormously and created the explosion of science and technology of which we are part. On the other hand, this explosion has also fragmented, separated and isolated us. It is like this: how can our wonderfully knowledgeable intellect be held by something bigger and deeper? How can our intellect be held, contained, guided by something beyond it? And what would it look like if that happened?

That's the challenge of our times - using our capacity for knowledge, but directing it from a much deeper place of 'inner knowing'. Swami Vivekananda expresses it beautifully: *'What is now wanted is a combination of the greatest heart with the highest intellectuality, of infinite love with infinite knowledge. ... Existence without Knowledge and Love cannot be; Knowledge without Love, and Love without Knowledge cannot be.'*¹

So, it's Love and Knowledge, or head and heart that we need to connect and combine. This, in a way, is intrinsic to the human condition, part of our lesson in this life. In Yoga the heart is the seat of consciousness. What Yoga and meditation ask of us is to become more conscious and to let our knowledge be informed by this consciousness. We need to go inside, to our heart, in order to then be able to apply our capacity to 'know' in a heart or soul directed way. But for that process, for that journey to the heart to succeed, we also need to identify, question and modify our old, habitual ways of 'knowing'.

Splitting and One-ness

Genetically we are not too different from trees and almost the same as our nearest primate fellow creatures. 96% of our bodies are formed from the chemical elements Oxygen, Carbon, Hydrogen and Sodium. These are also the elements that are found in the rest of nature, the stars and galaxies. We are made from the same stuff that the solar system and the galaxies are made of and all that stuff has been here since the Big Bang. What makes us different at this point of the evolution of life in the universe is our

level of consciousness. Cosmologists are now beginning to postulate that we are living in a conscious universe; the consciousness that we as human beings express is nothing more and nothing less than the consciousness of the universe. What does that mean, especially in relation to our human world, which seems to be the world of wanting and consumerism?

Our actual one-ness with everything else is not something we can experience and feel easily today, because consumerism and wanting are based on splitting, separation and fragmentation, while unity-consciousness is based on feeling connected with everything, feeling one with everything. Wanting means that we feel the need to have something external, something that is different and separate from us and we want to assimilate this 'other' into ourselves in order to become more, to become 'perfect'. Wanting also means competing against others who may want the same thing. Wanting can so easily escalate into greed, envy and anger, while providing brief moments of excitement and satisfaction.

In our world of wanting, these two processes have formed an unholy alliance, creating inner and outer worlds of extreme splitting and fragmentation. At the same time the splitting and fragmentation that we experience within and without have also created a situation of extreme inter-dependence between people, nations, our environment and ourselves. Unfortunately, this inter-dependence has not yet found its way into our consciousness, which is still mainly dominated by the individualistic thinking of 'me' and 'other', even though our lives are extremely inter-woven.

We need to understand these processes of splitting, because only by understanding them can we convince our intellect that the move towards unity (or God, or enlightenment) is not only a good idea but also where evolution seems to want to go, through and with us. Evolutionary theorists like Robert Wright claim that we have now reached a point where we need to be moral out of self-interest. We have to care about others and the planet for our own survival and development. Moral behaviour is becoming an evolutionary necessity.

"I think it was in the cards that that we would reach this kind of watershed in human history. It's just a very morally and interesting watershed. What happens next – whether we make big mistakes that lead to global chaos and destruction, or we usher in an era of some harmony – depends largely on whether we accurately perceive the commonality of interest among human beings around the world and show some interest in their welfare".ⁱⁱ

Understanding the process of splitting and fragmentation will also allow us to develop within us a spirituality that is psychological, social and political as well, because it touches all these areas. For me personally it has meant that I can include my knowledge and experience as a political being, one that used to be a Marxist, in my spiritual path. Many people, who are spiritual, unfortunately allow themselves to be ignorant about the social and political reality of the world we live in. This is yet another level of splitting. So, for example, we have psychological models that focus entirely on the psyche, social models that ignore the psyche, and spiritual approaches that leave out the psyche, and the fact that we are social and inter-dependent beings. We need models and ways of thinking and being that holistically cover all these areas. The force that permeates all these areas is spirit, which means that spirituality will enable us to connect with all those areas of our being.

We are trying to develop a way of thinking here that says 'meditation and spirituality are our evolutionary duty', rather than just seeing it as yet another interesting pastime. Meditation and spirituality are the activities that move us along to the next step

of our evolution as a species. They are needed for our healing, as individuals, couples, groups, and for the species.

The World of Wanting

One of the first things you will need to begin to see differently is that it can be very productive to stay still and just 'be'. This might seem unusual, because doing nothing externally, being still, has become associated with boredom, laziness, or stagnation. Of course, it can be that, but there is also another way of 'just being', which is highly skilful, powerful and rewarding. This is the way of meditation that many of the religious and philosophical traditions of the East teach us. It is a highly active practice, even though from the outside it looks as though nothing is happening. Ultimately, however, it can enable us to become more active, more energetic and more focused on doing 'the right things'. 'Doing' can then happen from a deep sense of 'being', rather than as a reaction to external events.

In our world, even relaxation has become associated with activities like watching television, going to the gym etc. Just sitting with your eyes closed, apparently doing nothing, might seem the complete opposite of the Western way of 'achieving' things. But if we stop for a moment and consider how damaging many of the practices and activities are that our world of consuming and wanting requires of us, then it makes total sense that an activity like meditation could be a good starting point for balancing some of the destructive hyperactivity that we have come to regard as normal.

But surely all this wanting and consuming is good for the economy? When high street sales go up, the economy is regarded as 'healthy' by economists and politicians; when sales and consumption go down, we worry about recession. The 'health' of our nation seems to depend on our state of 'wanting'. Happiness doesn't even depend on having things any more, but much more on wanting ever more things. Wanting is excitement and this excitement is stimulated in us all the time. Wanting ever more things stimulates us and it stimulates the economy. We have come to believe that this is what keeps us going, keeps us alive. Marketing and advertising use subtle and skilful techniques to keep us wanting, thus maintaining us in a constant state of excitement. Sometimes we hear that the economy is 'overheating'. I think we need to ask ourselves, how, in this process, we are overheating as well. Our planet certainly is!

Isn't it strange, weird, and almost obscene that our sophisticated 'modern' cultures are determined by how much we spend in the supermarkets and shopping malls? Yet, many people are now questioning this - consciously and through subconscious psychological reactions. These subconscious reactions express themselves in the fact that even though we in the Western world now have more stuff than ever before, we are also unhappier than we used to be. Surveys show that life satisfaction in people is going down, while prescriptions for anti-depressants are booming. It is estimated that by 2020, depression will have become the new plague of humanity. All this 'wanting' that is stimulated in us and that is supposed to be good for us does not seem to be making us very happy.

The MindBalancing Meditation Programme

Yoga meditation, even though based in ancient traditions, seems to address our current issues of wanting, splitting and fragmentation very directly. Yoga sees the excessive wanting and splitting in our culture as the result of an inappropriate focus on sense-stimulation and gratification. One of the core practices of Yoga is 'pratyahara', which involves the withdrawal of life energy from the senses through breathing and meditation exercises.

Much of Yoga is based in the Samkhya philosophy of India. In both Yoga and Ayurveda, Samkhya is presented as a very practical philosophy. David Frawley, for example, calls Samkhya a science and a cosmology: 'Samkhya is the original spiritual science behind Yoga and Ayurveda'.ⁱⁱⁱ Paramhansa Yoganada refers to it as 'the sublime wisdom of self-realisation', and Yuktswar elaborates it as 'the holy science'. Samkhya is both spiritual and psychological, and it forms the theoretical basis for Yoga meditation.

In this model the mind is an important focus, and healing through meditation at the level of the mind is seen as deep healing that affects the grosser forms of manifestation like the body. Two opposing forces meet at the level of the mind – repulsion and attraction. Manas, our sense-minds, repel us away from our source (God) into the realms of gross manifestation or matter, whereas Buddhi attracts us to Sat (the real substance or God). The essence of healing is contained in this polarity: *We need to shift our being towards Buddhi to balance Manas and to open to the fullness of Chitta (consciousness) or the heart.* In our fragmented world of wanting, our sense-mind is constantly over-stimulated and thus the force of repulsion is strengthened. Meditation, through withdrawing energy from the sense-mind, helps us to connect with the 'inner mind of the soul' (Buddhi), which is the force of attraction to one-ness and wholeness within us. We have an evolutionary choice to make, either to go with the forces of splitting and fragmentation, or to align ourselves with the forces of wholeness and integration. In order to follow our evolutionary destiny we need to shift our energy at the level of mind.

The 'MindBalancing Meditation Programme' was developed in my book *The Only Way Out is In*^{iv} and is further expanded in my recent book *Practical Psychology of Yoga Wisdom*^v. The programme (available on CD^{vi}) combines relaxation and meditation exercises based in different Eastern and Western traditions to provide an easy-to-follow practice aiming at the energetic mental shift described above. We have also created a MindBalancing course, which consists of four 1½-hour group sessions. So far, over 100 people have attended the courses and the feedback has been very encouraging. Content-analysis of participants' feedback highlights improvements in the following areas:

- *Physical improvements*: reduction in headaches and shoulder pain; better sleep; reduction in PMT symptoms.
- *Detachment*: improved ability to switch off; not taking things personally; detached attitude to unsolvable problems; taking 'time out' and re-grouping; not being overwhelmed by problems any more, being more objective about problems.
- *Concentration/ focus & problem solving*: remaining calm when others are stressed; meditation before work has reduced anxiety and improved focus; standing back and thinking before reacting; being more positive and optimistic at work; letting go of negative thoughts; friction is being put into perspective.
- *Valuing self and others*: calming others down; not take on others' problems; being quietly assertive; valuing self more; valuing work more; being more tolerant, less judgmental; being more accepting; being more patient with others.

Based on these subjective reports, it would seem that the 'MindBalancing Meditation Programme' stimulates in people something like 'spiritual intelligence' (see Emmons, 1999^{vii}). This includes a more detached attitude to conflict, and a more compassionate approach to self and others. Emmons concludes that this leads to improved problem-solving abilities.

The question that we need to consider is why a relatively simple meditation practice like the MindBalancing Programme can have such a profound effect on people. One reason may be that in our culture we have lost the ability for 'inner living' or interiorisation. We have an 'outer locus of control'. We are subjected to a culture where the outer mind is constantly stimulated and because of this over-stimulation we are operating in a reactive mode most of the time. Our natural state, however, is to be proactive *and* re-active, or at least sometimes to act from a deep inner sense of self. We need an 'inner locus of control'. Many people intuitively know this, and are actually longing for a more balanced approach towards themselves and their lives. This would certainly indicate that the time for more meditation research and development in the West has come, as advocated by Emmons, who states: 'It is my belief that the psychological sciences are on the verge of a spiritual revolution' (p.8), and 'There is a robust connection between personal well-being and a concern with the spiritual' (p.5).



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- ⁱ Vivekananda, *The Yogas and Other Works*, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York, 1984, pp. 251-2
- ⁱⁱ Robert Wright in *What Is Enlightenment?* Spring/ Summer 2002, Moksha Press, Lenox, p.105
- ⁱⁱⁱ David Frawley, *Yoga & Ayurveda*, Lotus Press, Twin Lakes, 1999, p.15
- ^{iv} Reinhard Kowalski, *The Only Way Out is In*, Jon Carpenter, Oxford, 2001
- ^v Reinhard Kowalski, *Practical Psychology of Yoga Wisdom*, New Age Books, New Delhi, 2008
- ^{vi} Reinhard Kowalski, *MindBalancing Relaxation and Meditation Programme*, The Sattva Center, 2006
- ^{vii} Emmons, R. A. *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns*, The Guildford Press, New York, 1999.