



Svaroopaa® Vidya Ashram

August 2018 Teachings Article:

Spiritual Upliftment #8

Use Your Mind Differently!

By Swami Nirmalananda & Rukmini Abbruzzi

"I think I can, I think I can," says the little engine that could. She succeeds at what seems impossible with her mantra of faith in herself. Do you repeat similar thoughts of encouragement, faith and optimism to yourself? Unfortunately, most people are stuck in repeating thoughts of discouragement, uncertainty and pessimism. Consciously or unconsciously, you do focus on repetitive thoughts, over and over again.

You can harness this capacity of your mind to a different purpose, focusing inward for the exploration of your own spiritual essence. Choose to use your mind differently! Contemplate your own Self as Consciousness-Itself. This is the first stage of meditation, dharana.

"I translate dharana as 'contemplation,'" says Swami Nirmalananda. "Others translate it as 'focus' or 'concentration,' but both words imply a type of force or strain that is absent in dharana. Instead, you coax your mind inward to develop a progressively expanding awareness of your own beingness. Dharana changes how your mind works, while it reveals that there is more to you than you thought."

In Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga, dharana is the first of three stages of meditation. The early limbs or practices move you from lifestyle practices, to working with your body and breath, then to looking inward. Dharana is number six, following pratyahara (turning within). This means you're focusing your mind after you've turned your attention inward, so it is an inward focusing.

de"sa-bandha"s-chittasya dhaara.naa — Yoga Sutras 3.1

Keeping your mind on one [internal] object is dharana.

You know how to keep your mind on a single object, usually by focusing on external objects. To do school homework, you learned to return your attention to your essay or math over and over, even when your mind proposed going out to play, having a snack or watching a cartoon. You've gotten so focused on a movie that you lost track of time. You may have gotten so enraptured by another person that you lost track of everything else, including your own welfare.

Dharana is using this capacity to explore inward. A beginning step is Ujjayi Pranayama, which is one of the reasons it's included in every Svaroopaa® yoga class. Listening to the inner sound of your slowed-down breath, you bring your mind again and again to the sound. Your teacher knows you need support in the process, so she or he gives you an instruction about every 10 seconds, to help you focus on the sound.

Support is needed because it's the mind's nature to be busy, scattered and slippery. It hops, skips and slides to other thoughts: plans, ideas, fears, hopes and memories. It's amazing how far afield your mind can stray in only 10 seconds.

Rukmini says, "While doing Ujjayi Pranayama one day, I realized that I was steadily making the sound, but I wasn't listening to it. My mind had gone off in some other direction. Once I noticed what was happening and *actually* listened to my Ujjayi sound, prana began to blissfully flow through my body. Keeping my attention on the sound made a tremendous difference."

Yoga values focus instead of multi-tasking. Even in worldly activities, it is your ability to focus that makes you successful. Dharana cultivates your ability to focus, but uses it to focus inward instead of outward. Activating your mind to look inward, especially by repeating mantra, you are exploring your Self. No matter how many times it's needed, you refocus your attention inward. Gradually, your mind wanders less. It becomes increasingly still, clear and powerful.

Each time you refocus inward, it's a success because dharana has a cumulative effect. Your perseverance pays off, both inside and outside. Inside, you get a deepening awareness of your own Self. At the same time, your mind becomes progressively more powerful and useful in the outer world. Most important, dharana gives you a mind that is oriented towards your Divinity, intent on seeking its own Source. What a lovely mind to have.

The sages gave their students things to practice dharana on, starting with external objects. A well-known dharana is to focus on a candle flame; it stops flickering when your mind achieves steady and easy focus. They progressed focusing on internal “objects,” like friendliness and other qualities (Patanjali 3.24), ultimately leading to subtle dharanas, like on the “inner impulse giving knowing to your mind.” (Patanjali 3.34)

We do dharana with mantra.¹ In the beginning, each internal repetition of the mantra is distinct, like water dripping from a faucet. One. At. A. Time. You have to prompt your mind in order to keep the mantra going. When you notice you are not repeating the mantra, simply start it up again, being firm with your mind, yet kind. You already know how to be mean to your mind, but it does not help you focus.

Swamiji explains, “Mantra repetition is a practice unto itself, called ‘japa.’ Repeating the enlivened mantra of our tradition leads to deep meditation, but to do dharana on the mantra, you actively resist meditation. Keeping your mind on the mantra uplifts and empowers your mind. This is why we use rudraksha beads and japa rings, to keep you actively engaged in japa, so you can transform your mind.”

Dharana is a profound practice. Simply keep repeating mantra, aloud or silently. In the classical yoga tradition, you repeat it 100,000 times or more, even keeping count. This gradually cultivates your ability to focus. But in our tantric tradition, something more is happening. As a *Svaroopā*[®] yogi, you are in a process that Patanjali does not describe.

Whether you take *Svaroopā*[®] yoga classes or attend *Svaroopā*[®] Vidya meditation programs, you are part of a Shaktipat tradition. Through your practices, you already have or you will receive Shaktipat. You can also choose to receive formal initiation from Swami Nirmalananda at a Shaktipat Retreat. Shaktipat is the awakening of your Kundalini energy, the revelatory energy of Grace that is hidden within every human being. Once you've received Shaktipat, you are supported and guided into ever-deepening and longer-lasting experiences of your own Divinity.

Thus, when you do dharana with the mantra, you get propelled into profound and deep meditation both quickly and easily. Swamiji says, “I didn’t know what dharana was for decades! This was because I’d repeat the mantra just a few times and then I’d be deep — beyond thought, beyond breath, in the inner timelessness of Self. Only after Consciousness began to imprint on my mind could I identify the stages of meditation that had been happening all along.”

Each time you're propelled by Grace, into the depths of your inherent Divinity, your mind is imprinted by Consciousness. These imprints gradually transform you. But if you use meditation to blissfully bypass your mind, you are not working on your mind. And you need to, because when you bob out of meditation, something pulls you out of the Consciousness that you are. What pulls you out? Your mind. So you have to work on your mind. To elevate and uplift your mind, to have a Divine mind, do more japa.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES ON “SPIRITUAL UPLIFTMENT,” OUR THEME FOR 2018, CO-AUTHORED BY
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¹ To receive the mantra, request a free Mantra Card from Swami Nirmalananda at <http://svaroopaa.org/mantra-card>