

Concentration for Spiritual and Secular Use

Yoga is the science of concentration*. However, when conceived of in a more elaborate manner, there are many other aspects in addition to concentration. The practical value of Yoga is best revealed when one is listening attentively to a competent and experienced spiritual teacher (a guru), and when one has the proper understanding of Yoga's prerequisites and challenging prospectives.

It may not always be possible to remember sophisticated theoretical and philosophical aspects of concentration such as that which is imparted by a guru, but no one is expected to write down all of the advanced teachings imparted directly from teacher to pupil. This sort of knowledge must be well remembered through the active and disciplined practice of keeping it faithfully within.

In fact, the whole of Yoga consists essentially of concentration. Except for yogic concentration, it would seem that no science on concentration was ever disclosed. There are thousands of developmental methods available for the body and mind, most of them being subject to comparison and evaluation, but nothing compares with yogic concentration. Only a few amidst the most advanced Yoga students are truly knowledgeable in that field, often in conjunction with their own religious or spiritual ambitions. However, concentration is not confined to spirituality. It also applies the realm of worldliness.

Along with spiritual ambitions, one's daily life, with all of its practical matters, includes many artificial barriers to spiritual aspirations. Most people cannot (or do not want to) see or think anything beyond mainstream lifestyle. There are people who succeed in leading a mundane lifestyle while trying to compensate by adhering to and cultivating religion. Also, there are people with genuine spiritual aspirations who get confused on how to simultaneously live a secular and a spiritual life.

Life's material realities cannot be entirely avoided as long as the physical body exists and the thoughts and emotions predominate, seeming impossible to give up. This results in profound dissatisfaction and

unhappiness, when one finds no way to reconcile the needs of both body and mind, seeing them as antagonistic partners. It can often seem as if there is an insurmountable wall between material realities and spiritual ambitions. Few are the people who realize that these two can actually blend. In Yoga, mind and body are never considered as antagonists.

While physical needs must be met, there is also one possibility for the body to be trained to serve the spiritual, instead of regarding it as a bar to cognitive acquisitions. Too often, it is thought that the physical is unimportant and that it can therefore be overlooked or neglected. In fact, there is nothing that actually prevents combining mental improvement with the meeting of physical requirements.

How, then?

When the body is not kept in good repair, or when it is unable to withstand serious situations, one often feels handicapped in carrying out daily duties. It is very difficult to live exclusively in the mental world and to concentrate accurately when there is pain, illness, or even discomfort. On the other hand, there are also people, exceptional as they are, who actually manage this kind of situation.

For most people, it is necessary to remold the body into a pattern that efficiently supports the practice of concentration. This is by no means to be understood as an invitation to solely concentrate on the body at the expense of the mind. Instead, we should glorify the body so as to glorify our mind, as in the Latin dictum "*mens sana in corpore sano*" ("a sound mind in a healthy body") and the Sanskrit saying "*For religion, for material achievement, for our personal aspiration to be fulfilled, and for spiritual achievement, the body as our instrument is to be taken care of.*"

In India, at a time when the priests wrongly interpreted Buddhist ideas (but also in Europe during the last period of the Roman Empire), an "all-mind" theory developed as a reaction to the introduction of professionalism in athletics and physical culture. As a result, no effort was undertaken to bridge the gulf between the "all-mind" and the "all-body" ideals, which led to a schism between these two different mentalities.

Correctly understood in the context of Yoga, concentration actually establishes the bridge between these two positions. While concentration is traditionally used in spirituality and religions, it also offers great

advantages in secular life, something that has long been overlooked. The mind's faculty to concentrate is nowadays recognized as a positive element for achieving success in all fields of activities.

Concentration differs according to individuals, of course, but it can be trained and developed. Concentration can increase to a point where it works as a powerful catalyzer, affording one the inner faculty to grasp and compare, penetrate, analyze, combine and reduce, but at a certain level it becomes even more advantageous when it begins to broach the levels of "real" concentration. The first stages of concentration are most often difficult to carry on, but regular practice enables one to perceive many hidden things which can then be applied for spiritual improvement.

Guidance

In the absence of a competent and reliable guru, the following can be used as general guidelines for concentration.

The practice of concentration has 3 main aspects: 1) environment, 2) physical, 3) mental.

Environment: The chosen premises should preferably be located indoors; concentration is rarely done outdoors. Before undertaking to begin, one should first give forethought as to possible disturbances which may arise. The foremost obstacles in exercising mental concentration are noises and other interfering sense-related factors, such as odors and temperature.

It is always preferable to practice by oneself in one's own room. (Still better is to dedicate a room for the sole and exclusive practice of concentration and spiritual exercises. Thoughts always remain in subtle form where they once were expressed; this may sometime be felt at soon as one enters a room. If so, there is a risk of being disturbed by such thoughts, and it may even be difficult to get rid of them when these thoughts are potent. Hence the value of a room solely dedicated to concentration.) Concentration exercise should preferably be done in the dark, or at any rate without too much light around.

The room for concentration exercise should be well ventilated and quite free from any kind of offensive smell. Room temperature must be comfortably adapted to one's personal needs. To create a suitable ambiance, one may put nice, discrete-smelling flowers in the room, as these are often endowed with the faculty of creating a feeling of ease and calmness, especially if one is able to get the right type of flowers

according to one's personal taste. Mild incense is also advised, in which case excess smoke must be removed from the room so as not interfere with the oxygen. (This may not apply in tropical countries with open rooms, but it is advisable in Nordic countries to burn the incense before concentration is started and then open the window to get rid of the smoke. In this way, some light fragrance will stay in the room.) Sandal smell has proven to be the best for the purpose of meditative concentration. In India, sandal-paste mixed with flowers is freshly prepared every day and then dedicated for worship to one's *devata* (deity).

Physical: Sitting motionlessly on the floor, with the body kept perfectly straight, is most suitable for the practice of concentration. One should not sit too close to a wall or any other support. The spine should be kept straight without the aid of any kind of support. With or without underwear, the clothing selected for sitting in concentration ought to be reserved exclusively for concentration. It is advisable to possess two separate clothing sets for frequent change. The most appropriate seat is a comfortable, thick and soft blanket, or a cushion covered with a washable linen over a piece of raw silk placed on a blanket or cushion. One's chosen seat is to be consecrated only for use during concentration. It should not even be touched unnecessarily.

At least one hour should be dedicated for exercising mental concentration, one hour during which one is expected to be quite alone with no other interference whatsoever. This is generally easier to achieve for bachelors than those who are surrounded by a family and children.

Morning concentration is advised with the body facing East, and North during evening concentration. If this for some reason is not possible, one should endeavor to only face either the East or the North, but never the South or West.

Mental: Having a natural bowel discharge prior to morning concentration is always an advantage to cultivating the proper mental state. Before sitting for concentration, yogis in the Hatha Yoga discipline clean their nostril passages and their mouths with clean water and wash the whole body (or at least rub it with a wet towel). They may also choose to first drink one glass of water with lemon juice and spend some time with the abdominal control exercises of *uddiyâna* and *navli* before commencing their practice of concentration.

* *Editor's note:* Rather than adhering to the vague and inadequate English-language term, "meditation" (*to reflect upon, ponder, contemplate*), the Author has adopted this term to cover the yogic, 3-stage, mental control process of *dhârana, dhyâna* and *samâdhi*. The etymology of the word concentration (*to direct the mind toward a one-pointed state; bring or draw to a common center or point of union; to focus*) better relates to the actual mechanism involved in this mental exercise.