

## ***Dhâranâ, Dhyâna, and Samâdhi – Three Stages of Concentration***

*Based on Foundations of Yoga by Basile Catoméris and Advanced Hatha Yoga by Sri S.S. Goswami  
(Inner Traditions)*

Thoughts can be groups of images that appear in the objective field (citta) of consciousness. Generally the images forming a group are closely linked. A group can be simple and limited, or complex and extended. Thoughts, such as they appear to the ego (*aham*), are either simple images of the memory of our daily experiences or they form a constructive idea, even a brilliant one.

The level of our mental life is determined by any kind of prevailing thought. At a lower stage, thought can express a blindness in which darkness, indolence, and lack of attention, intelligence, or comprehension are its main features. In an agitated state, thoughts are dominated by wishes, desires, greed or excesses. On the other hand, in a mind intensely “monofocal,” that is to say concentrating on only one object, thoughts are sharp, constructive, noble, and elevated. In reality, thoughts are an image of a person’s self.

A thought is not just something that comes and goes. Our thoughts not only influence the mind. They deeply mark the brain, the nervous system, the internal organs, and the whole body. Destructive thought makes us less controlled, more petty, egoistic, weak, and physically imperfect. On the other hand, constructive thought develops creative energies, strength, health, and a broader perspective. Weak thoughts really do not encourage action; they are maintained only momentarily in the mind and then quickly disappear from it. Strong thoughts, on the contrary, promote action. Feeling can reinforce thought. The constructive or destructive character of a thought thus depends on the type of feeling that is associated with it.

Thought also has another aspect, which remains hidden from a normally functioning mind. On a level where everything is transmitted by the senses, there is no awareness unless it is in combination with certain vibrations. Moreover, we are only conscious of the grosser forms of vibrations. These forms are associated with the fast and uninterrupted formation of our consciousness based on the objects that give rise to the mental images of our awareness of the external world. We constantly spend our mental energy on rapid sequences in the field of our consciousness, instead of transforming it into a truly alive form or a stimulant for action, which is then recorded as a subliminal impression that, in the future, can be recalled at will. The only way of developing and controlling this hidden force is to try to move from a state of dispersion to a form of monofocal thought. This form is called

*ekāgratā*. It is the mental exercise that consists of seizing and retaining a single image.

Experience shows that it is almost impossible to maintain a given mental image for a prolonged time. A new image pushes back the first one, and then another appears when the second disappears, and so on. Mental energy is dissipated without our realizing what is in fact happening. Yoga is the means of preventing this needless dissipation of energy in the form of *vr. ittis* (the continual formation of consciousness derived from sensory objects) and to develop the faculty of maintaining a single image in the mind. It is here that true concentration begins. Yoga teaches us how to control the insane rush of our mind and to develop our faculty of concentration.

### ***Dhāranā, Dhyāna, and Samādhi***

It is customary to distinguish three stages of concentration, referred to by the terms *dhāranā*, *dhyāna*, and *samādhi*.

*Dhāranā* is the first stage, when an appropriate object is selected or the mind to concentrate upon. It is characteristic of the mind to manifest various sequential images, each of which is retained for only a brief moment. *Dhāranā* is the method in which the mind retains the selected image and recaptures it as soon as it escapes in order to continue to maintain it without allowing another image to take its place. *Dhāranā* is the process of intermittently establishing the same single image in the mind. This sequential image process can be compared with the falling of water, drop by drop, from a perforated vessel full of water.

### ***Mantra***

An easy method of developing *dhāraṇā* is mantra *japa*. *Mantra* is “the sound pattern of power,” which manifests as mind and matter. With the help of mantra we can reach the power level that is beyond the manifested mind-matter level, and at that stage power is revealed as radiant energy gradually transforming into an inner consciousness. *Japa* is the technical term used to mean “the production of a particular manifested sound form represented by a mantra in a specific way and at specified intervals, one after another,” which is continued until a certain number is finished. With the help of *mantra*, *dhāraṇā* can be comparatively easily mastered. When the mantra is said mentally, the mind is molded into a new image composed of two parts, form and sound. The first image stays in the mind during the period of saying the mantra. Then there is a brief interval—a void—before it is said the second time. In this way the saying of

mantra goes on with brief intervals between. The working on *mantra* is so arranged that this void period is rightly adjusted to the intervening period, that is, the period between the throwing out of an image and the taking of a new one by the mind. In this way *dhāraṇā* is acquired with the help of mantra. This process has been fully dealt with in Mantra Yoga.

When concentration deepens, it is possible to maintain only one focused image without it escaping from the mind. At this point, the drop-by-drop stream changes into a continuous flow. It can be compared to oil or honey running slowly out of the spout of a carafe. This focusing of the consciousness is called *dhyāna*.

With practice, focusing becomes increasingly complete until finally the selected object alone illuminates one's whole consciousness. Everything else disappears from the mind. The yogi is then only aware of the subjective aspect of consciousness. The state of the mind in which concentration is at its apogee is nonstatic, and called *samādhi*. In *samādhi*, any conscious form of bodily activity disappears to the point of forgetting the body, which then becomes completely motionless. At this stage, the adept becomes aware of a separate existence of the body and acquires extrasensory perception.

This experience has two categories, supramaterial and immaterial. In the first category, there is the faculty of perceiving objects or events from the past, present, or future relating to the sensory world, without the intervention of the senses. In the second category, there is the perception of phenomena that cannot be reached normally by the senses. There then emerges a new world of colors and forms that, via various intermediate stages, leads to ultimate, completely sublimated suprasensory knowledge. On this level, various types of latent powers appear, whereas normally they could never be expressed.

### ***Samprajñāta Samādhi*** (Super Concentration with Super Knowledge)

*Dhyāna* ripens into *samādhi*, the final stage of the process of concentration. *Samādhi* again is subdivided into *samprajñāta* and *asamprajñāta*. *Samprajñāta* is that form of *samādhi* in which the realization of four forms of object occurs stage by stage: *vitarka* (deliberation), *vicāra* (reflection), *ānanda* (bliss), and *asmitā* (pure I-feeling).

### ***Vitarka Samādhi***

In *dhāranā*, as in *dhyāna*, the object of mental concentration is sensory and material. In *vitarka samādhi*, the object changes character: an individual *bhūta* can be isolated from a group and used as an object of concentration. Thus each *bhūta* can be individualized and “seen” in *samādhi*. By this method, an aspect of the object is revealed that is not part of its sensory form; it is a suprasensory realization of our material world. The objective aspect of our consciousness acquires a new perspective, the image of a *bhūta* that, by nature, is suprasensory.

### ***Vicāra Samādhi***

The image of a material object is the result of the combined actions of the senses operating through the sense organs. All of our senses act together, though each of them plays its specific role. The outcome of their combined actions is the knowledge of a particular object, which is a compound of five fundamental forms of nonmaterial energy. Of course, all objects do not contain these energies in the same proportions. This is the cause of differences in objects.

The essential constituting the sense object can be reduced to a still finer “form” in the shape of the most concentrated force being expressed as the “thatness” or *tanmātra* of that essential. The *tanmātras*, like *mahābhūtas*, are five in number. The realization of the *tanmātras* occurs in the *vicāra samādhi*. The distinctive characteristic of an essential is lost at this state.

When the image of a particular essential is concentrated upon in *vitarka samādhi*, it will appear in place of the image of a sense-object and it will appear as vast. Now if concentration is applied on a minute portion of the vast essential, it will appear also as vast. Again, concentration should be practiced on the minute part of that appearing as vast and this minute part will reappear as vast. In this way, by repeated applications of concentration a stage will be reached when the power of receiving the finest state of the essential—the “thatness”—will be fully developed. This is the stage of the *vicāra samādhi*.

The realization that is attained in *vitarka* and *vicāra samādhi* consists of two stages. In the first stage the realized phenomenon can be brought into the intellectual level and expressed through words. In the last stage the realized phenomenon cannot be given an intellectual form and consequently remains beyond language. The first stage of *vitarka* and *vicāra* is called *savitarka* and *savicāra* respectively, and the last stage *nirvitarka* and *nirvicāra* respectively.

### ***Ānanda Samādhi***

The third stage is called *ānanda samādhi*. What characterizes this stage is that mind is able to transcend the pain-pleasure phenomenon along with the revelation of the root of our conception of the material world, a phenomenon called *abhimāna*. At the human stage, consciousness consists of the ego, the subject, an object, and their mutual relationship. The feeling of ego is the Self plus some other thing. This other thing appears when the Self functions under the influence of rajas, the principle of change, which presents itself as that which knows and acts. The Self becomes identified with this non-self when the mind reaches the ultra-*tanmātra* stage. It is at this stage that a realization of a divine being occurs through a most intensified and concentrated of sublime love with no trace of pain or sorrow.

### ***Asmitā Samādhi***

At this stage the realization of “I-less” consciousness occurs. “I”-ness that is associated with objects disappears and along with it images of all things completely vanish. What remains now is deindividualized consciousness. This is the last stage of *samprajñata samādhi*.

### ***Asamprajñāta Samādhi***

The apogee of mental concentration is called *asamprajñāta samādhi*. At this stage, the image of the object, like that of the ego (*aham*), is completely erased from consciousness, which is then formed neither by the object nor even by the purified ego. “Knowledge” comes from the Self without any intermediary. This is what it means to know oneself, in oneself and by oneself, without external assistance. The dualistic form of our existence reaches a stage in which an eternal and immutable principle reigns, beyond birth and death. Consciousness becomes pure consciousness. Released from the least spot of impurity, it becomes supraconsciousness, beyond our existence. This is known as the appearance of *puruna*. In yogic terms, this state is called *yogacittavitti nirodha*.

Such a state of consciousness should not be regarded as a form of mental degeneration, nor be compared with an extinguished mental life, synonymous with “living death.” It is not a dark state of the human organism, nor a disastrous metamorphosis of the

mind. On the contrary, it is a hidden face of human existence appearing at this stage of *samādhi*, which is in fact a total broadening of our limited existence, the elevation of awareness to the highest form that human consciousness can reach 1). The body and mind function normally when the state of *samādhi* ceases, which proves that this state is not an abnormal one. The fact is that in this state, thinking gains in acuity and the body enjoys optimal health.

In *asamprajñāta samādhi*, the three *gunas*—the original principles *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, which is to say the principles of cognition, energy, and inertia respectively—have attained perfect balance. This state implies an obliteration of the mind, which cannot continue to exist without the participation of the *gunas*. Three factors cause this balance: *vivekakhyāti* (clear understanding), *parāvairāgya* (the supreme state of detachment), and *nirodha samādhi* (where the sublimated impression of birth is no longer perceived, while the sublimated impression of loneliness prevails). This is *asamprajñāta samādhi*.

*Vivekakhyāti* is the knowledge that reveals the difference between, on the one hand, an immutable reality that is incomprehensible and radiant (*puruna*), and, on the other hand, phenomena in constant change. Ultimate knowledge, produced by *sattva* at its highest point of saturation, combined with total control, leads to the obliteration of the non-self. This is called *parāvairāgya*, fruit of the realization of *puruna* and of *rajas* at their highest point of expression. It is then that the mind is subjected to *nirodha* (cessation) by the complete absorption of *vrittis*, which includes the feeling of self, a stage of *mahat*. It is designated by the term *nirodha samādhi*, which comes from *tamas* in its highest form.

*Vivekakhyāti*, *parāvairāgya*, and *nirodha samādhi* are actually three facets of a single state in which the three *gunas* exert their maximum force before, so to speak, losing their individuality and becoming united in an unmanifested state. This state indicates that the mind has now ceased representing the world to itself and experiencing it as we customarily do, in order to return to its origin, *prakṛiti* 2) which is a state of balance of the three *gunas* in which the metempiric being, the supraconsciousness (*puruna*) is revealed. At the term of a long spiritual journey, the *jīvātman* experiences, in a realization beyond realization, the merging into the ultimate reality in *nirvikalpa samādhi*. That is the yogic final realization of the Unknown, Brahman (Parama Śiva) and its three inherent attributes: the power of Being, supreme Consciousness and supreme Bliss, or *sat chit ānanda*.

1) Cf. Heraclitus's wisdom, which is pregnant to seekers of Truth: "The hidden harmony is better than the visible" (Fragment 54).

2) Cf. the Greek term φύσις