



## Daily Practices to support Transformation Mukeshanand Brahmchari

*“There is a state beyond effort and effortlessness. Until it is realized, effort is necessary. After tasting such Bliss even once, one will repeatedly try to regain it” – Sri Ramana Maharshi*

Reaching an effortless state of Being requires effort. This is the case with learning any new skill – such as how to walk, swim or drive. Initially, learning to co-ordinate our muscles is physically and mentally stressful. Once learnt, we can perform these without a thought. Effortlessness cannot be reached without effort.

This practice, this effort involves doing our practices for a long time, without a break – going deeper and deeper. Through continued, persistent practice, our experience of being connected with our spiritual heart during meditation practice will slowly start seeping into our engagements with the external world. As we cultivate love, trust and surrender towards our spiritual heart, we will also become embodiments of love.

*“The end of all wisdom is Love, love, love. When you truly feel this equal love for all, when your heart has expanded so much that it embraces the whole of creation, you will certainly not feel like giving up this or that. You will simply drop off from secular life as a ripe fruit drops from the branch of a tree. You will feel that the whole world is your home.” – Sri Ramana Maharshi*

The more we progress, the more testing situations we will be confronted with, in our external journey in the world. We can see these situations as challenges and hurdles in our journey, or as an opportunity to practice what we’ve learnt from our spiritual heart. By surrendering to the universal consciousness, we can rest assured that our wellbeing will be taken care of, and we are being presented with situations because we have the inner resources to face it and overcome it, breaking patterns of *vasanas* gathered over lifetimes.

At each of these points, we can always access the Guru’s grace or divine energy. By igniting the spark of divine love in our hearts and feeding that fire through daily service, meditation and communion with Spirit, we invite grace. These are essential because without consistent sadhana, there can be no *darshan* (blessing) or grace. Grace unfolds silently with each dedicated effort we make. It is inherent within the *sadhana* itself.

Finally, it is our practice that determines the progress we make. Daily meditation practice teaches us how to anchor ourselves in our spiritual heart.

*“With repeated practice, the mind will develop the skill to stay in it’s source. Thus, when the mind stays in the Heart, the ‘I’ which is the source of all thoughts will go, and the Self which ever exists will shine.” – Sri Ramana Maharshi*

Practice involves cultivating a strong conviction, a persistent effort to consistently choose the lifestyle, actions, speech, thoughts, as well as the spiritual practices that lead in the direction of our spiritual heart Guru. By increasingly taking charge of our choices in life and how we use our personal energy, and focusing on doing what supports us, we gradually find ourselves being established firmly in our new state of being.

In addition to meditation, the following practices can support us in our journey:

### **Contemplation**

The finished 'end-product' of our journey is a new us. Hence, *swadhyaya* (self-analysis) is an important tool to knowing how far we've come and where to go next. Our soul, our spiritual heart communicates with us through silence. Contemplation and reflection offer us an opportunity to integrate our learnings through the medium of language. Reflecting, journaling and *satsang* with peers on a similar journey

### **Chanting**

Sound is vibration. Vibration is energy. Therefore, sound has energy. The energy of sound has been used across cultures through objects such as Tibetan Buddhist bowls, bells in Hindi temples, hymns/prayers and words/*mantras*. It is not a coincidence that key words across religions are based on similar sounds - *Amen* in Christianity, *Ameen* in Islam, *Om* in Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. This commonality in sounds (A, M) reflects the deep understanding that ancient cultures had about this science. By leveraging the energy of vibrations, one can harmonize the energy system within. Chanting can be done verbally, producing audible sound (called *Aahata*), or even internally, without a sound (called *Anaahata*). The resonance produced by this external or internal chanting is a powerful tool to bring our body back into equilibrium, and take our mind back to the spiritual heart.

### **Pranayam**

The Sanskrit word *Pranayama* literally means regulation of our *Prana*, i.e. vital energy. Our vital energies flow through *nadis* (subtle channels in the body). We are alive only as long as the life force of *Prana* resides in the body. The presence of *Prana* in a body is indicated by many functions such as breathing, digestion, excretion, reproduction, circulation, heartbeat, brain processing related to sense organs, etc.

Breathing is one of the main functions of the force of *Prana*, and by regulating it, we can regulate *Prana*. Breath provides us a gateway to access and harmonize our vital energies, as it has a special position amongst all the *Pranic* functions. In scientific language, it can be said that breathing is a bridge between the involuntary and voluntary functions – as it is both involuntary and voluntary. Our breathing pattern impacts our well-being. When we are angry, in fear or anxiety, we tend to take short, shallow, fast breaths. Incorrect breathing disrupts the flow of vital energies through our body and become a cause of dis-ease. Conversely, when we are relaxed or meditation, if we observe carefully, our breath becomes deeper. By taking our breathing back to its natural manner and pattern, we can positively impact our emotional and physical well-being. Yogic practices to regulate our *Prana* through breath regulation are called *Pranayama*.

## **Asanas**

The Sanskrit word *Asana* literally means a sitting position, or, in a broader sense, posture. Our body can take innumerable postures. Among these, certain postures have been identified as “*yoga asanas*” or *yogasanas*. These are postures that can take us on to a higher dimension or higher perception of life, and to a state of internal harmony, i.e. Yog in our body, mind and breath. As per *Yoga Sutras*, the classical text on Yoga, an Asana is characterized by two features – ‘*An Aasan is steady and comfortable*’, and to achieve this position, one needs to ‘*let go of the effort and merge with the infinite*’. This applies to the state of our body, breathing and mind during these physical postures. When we perform *asanas* this way, we will notice that we reach a very different state. Our breath is steady, at ease and effortless. Our mind is steady, at ease, relaxed, focused on the posture in a state of ease, and connected with the universal consciousness. This also applies to our state of being while living life - whether we are engaged in action or rest, flowing or still, speaking or silent. We live our life with stillness (steadiness), joy (comfort), ease (effortless) and connection (merger) – whether dealing with the world outside or inside.

Even if we apply the interpretation in the narrowest sense, the physical act of performing an *Asana* is much more than an exercise. It is a slow motion, like dance, leading from one posture to another posture. It is meditation in motion.

## **Food**

According to Ayurveda, food is that which fuels and nourishes us physically, energetically as well as emotionally. It’s wholesome and therefore moves beyond the concept of only calories and nutrients. It is stated that a living being is made up of the food he or she consumes and food is therefore an important pillar of physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing. In recognition of this belief, the Yogic philosophy has named the body ‘*Anna’maya*’ (*Anna*’ means food). Simply put, we are what we consume.

Many philosophies state that Food is Medicine. We consume food in some form, at least 3 to 4 times a day. Whatever we eat, whether an apple or chicken, is assimilated into our body, and “becomes us” within 3 days. Thus, food can have an immense impact on our wellbeing – it can nourish us, or it can cause diseases. Several scientific studies have corroborated the impact of food on our mental wellbeing (e.g decline in aggression in children and violence in prison inmates through wholesome food).

We are not going into details of what to eat, as this topic is well documented in Ayurveda. In addition to accessing this information, we can start being aware of the impact of various foods on our level of alertness and nature of thoughts during the day and while meditating.

## **Relaxation**

Particularly when we are in a stressful situation, we need relaxation techniques to calm down our hyperactive mind and body. There is another approach to relaxation too. Just like we send a vehicle for preventive maintenance, if we pro-actively practice relaxation, we can maintain our well-being at perform at our potential.

Each of us has an activity brings us alive, makes us forget everything else and brings us joy - music, art, reading, writing, dance. Nurturing these strengthens our connection to our Self. Learning relaxation techniques helps us learn how to be intense and relaxed at the same time. E.g. Yogic practices involve tremendous focus and effort, yet the muscles and the breath are completely relaxed. This is an example of relaxation training. A powerful tool for relaxation training is Mindfulness, i.e. observing and focusing on whatever is happening in the present moment, in a non-judgmental way. Mindfulness is a way to come back to the present. Some illustrations of mindfulness in our daily life: (a) We can focus on what's inside us – become aware of our breath, our heartbeat and pulse, various sensations in our body (b) We can focus on what's outside us. Like looking one by one at every object on my desk, including each one's colours and details. Or holding something in our hand, and focusing on its texture and weight as we move it. (c) While we're eating, we can focus on the smell, sight, texture of our food and observe ourselves eating it (d) When walking, we can focus on how we're taking every step, feeling how our foot hits the ground and comes back up.

Sleep is an often under-estimated, but very important tool for relaxation. All creatures in nature sleep. We should get the necessary amount of sleep at night, which our body needs for repair and rejuvenation. The earlier we sleep at night, the better it is. Our current lifestyle and working hours don't allow us to sleep as early as our ancestors did, but we can make adjustments from our side to sleep on time. We will find ourselves more present during our meditation and during the day.

Namasté

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