

# The Nature of Theosophical Meditation

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THE Theosophical Society (TS) played a pioneering role in introducing meditation to the Western world. During the early 1880s, the TS started presenting the idea of meditation through publications in theosophical journals. Meanwhile, H. P. Blavatsky (HPB) privately trained a small group of individuals in meditation, particularly her pupils in the Inner Group. This was decades before Hindu swamis and Buddhist monks began to talk about meditation in the West. In the second generation of Theosophists, individuals such as Annie Besant, C. W. Leadbeater, and others began to present this subject more systematically and extensively in their talks and books.

Today, meditation has gained widespread recognition. However, as something becomes popular, it often tends to become more superficial. Simplicity has its merits, as it can appeal to a broader audience, but it also poses a challenge — deeper approaches may get overshadowed by the popular understanding.

One consequence of this popularity is that when we use the term “meditation” today, it is not always clear what we are

referring to. Meditation is often marketed as a method to relax the body, alleviate stress, or boost productivity. Some companies have now embraced this practice for purely materialistic ends. Moreover, meditation can also refer to techniques intended to generate positive emotions, enhance concentration, or improve memory. Additionally, there are more specific applications of meditation centred around developing psychic abilities, manipulating subtle energies, or exploring past lives.

While these various approaches may have their merits, the purpose of theosophical meditation is different. It seeks to lead the aspirant to a direct experience of the Real within ourselves and the cosmos. In this approach, more immediate goals like improving concentration or generating a state of inner peace serve as either means to the ultimate transcendental aim of realizing Truth, or as natural byproducts of this practice.

It is important to keep in mind these differences because the results produced by the practice of meditation depend on the methods used and the underlying approach. Consequently, a lack of aware-

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ness of this will likely lead to disappointment because the methods used may not yield the expected results. Moreover, certain meditation techniques can be positively dangerous if practiced without proper guidance or in an unsuitable environment. For instance, some methods traditionally used in India or Tibet were originally reserved for individuals who had withdrawn from the hectic world and were practicing in a protected setting, away from the stresses of modern life. But when these methods are practiced amidst the turmoil of modern life, they can produce undesirable psychological and psychic outcomes.

There is another important reason for the need of a more sophisticated understanding of meditation. If the goal is to achieve simpler outcomes such as increased concentration or relaxation, basic methods can be followed in a rather mechanical way. However, this is not the case when seeking lofty goals such as realizing our true nature. Merely following a method is insufficient, since a mechanical practice cannot produce deep insights. For a practice that seeks higher goals to be successful, we must actively involve both intelligence and creativity.

To achieve these deeper outcomes, our motivation plays a vital role. If our intention is to discover a dimension of our being that is beyond our personal ego, any selfish motivation will obviously be a hindrance. This is why the theosophical tradition presents the whole spiritual journey in the context of service to humanity. When aspirants develop a

genuine desire to help reduce suffering, they engage in these practices not primarily motivated by personal gain, but because of a recognition that the power to help depends on their degree of wisdom and compassion. Until this motivation is dominant, preliminary results of the practice of meditation can be achieved, but not the more transcendental ones.

Right understanding is also necessary. For example, if we are seeking to realize our true self, it is important to have a good grasp of the features of the higher nature. Holding a mistaken idea of the kind of state that we are aiming for may lead us to focus on or reinforce certain aspects that are really features of our lower nature. This typically happens when people focus on desires they want to fulfil or personal goals that lead to self-aggrandizement and strengthening the identification with the personality.

For instance, one may use a meditation technique to cultivate positive emotions. While this can be advantageous from a psychological standpoint, it can also prove counterproductive if our intention is to realize our true selves. If our motivation for practicing this technique stems from an attachment to feeling good, the meditation itself will reinforce our identification with our emotional nature and our dependence on pleasure.

However, the cultivation of positive emotions can be part of our quest for the Real when we have the correct understanding and right attitude. In order to access higher states of consciousness, we must first attune our personality with

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those states. For example, if we find ourselves in a state of anger, it will be challenging to experience feelings of love. Love cannot be experienced until the anger subsides, as this emotional state is not aligned with the nature of love. Similarly, if our goal is to discover our true nature, we must gradually attune our body, emotions, and thoughts with it. This may entail generating feelings of peace, harmony, and the like. However, the mature aspirant will engage in this practice not to wallow in the pleasant feelings, but rather to be able to move beyond the personal self toward the higher nature.

### Theosophical techniques

One of the most well-known meditation techniques today is the practice of watching our breath. This method can be beneficial in several ways and, yet, HPB refers to it as “the tedious and useless practice of the counting of inhalations and exhalations as a means to produce absolute tranquillity of mind or meditation”.<sup>1</sup> It seems evident that this method can be helpful in training our minds to focus, inducing a sense of inner peace and balance, and so on. However, HPB thought that it could not lead to a state of “absolute tranquillity”, where all the layers of our psyche are profoundly quiet. J. Krishnamurti also shared this perspective, frequently emphasizing that no mechanical technique can produce more than a superficial calmness. Both Krishnamurti’s viewpoint and the theosophical approach share the understanding that achieving a state of profound

stillness requires the active engagement of our intelligence.

In fact, attempting to quiet the mind through methods that do not involve the participation of higher emotions or thoughts can yield undesirable effects. Examples of these methods would be fixating our gaze on a single point, constantly repeating a mantra without contemplating its meaning or cultivating a feeling of devotion, and similar methods. This approach, Krishnamurti would argue, can only result in a state of self-hypnosis. Early theosophical literature referred to this as a “mediumistic” state of consciousness in which we may become susceptible to the influences emanating from the lower planes. These influences may entail non-physical entities, or astral and mental forms reflecting the sorrow and unrest prevalent in the world.

So let us explore the theosophical approach to meditation. In 1882, one of the earliest published articles on meditation in a theosophical journal defined it as “the inexpressible yearning of the inner Man to go out towards the infinite”.<sup>2</sup> The term “inexpressible” indicates a kind of yearning that is not driven by mental or emotional impulses, but rather stems from our spiritual nature, which lies beyond concepts and words. And this intuitive attraction is directed towards “the infinite”, that is, that which transcends our limited world and being. As such, the goal of theosophical meditation is transcendental.

This same article suggests that meditation is practiced by means of reasoning

from the known to the unknown. Thus, the exploration into the Real begins in the realm of the known, that is, our current understanding of the world, our concepts of who we are, our present mental and emotional state, and so forth. From there, we endeavour to transcend these boundaries and venture into the unknown. By “unknown”, we do not simply refer to something that we do not know in concept, but rather, in experience. For instance, we may hold a theoretical notion, such as “I am a spiritual being”, but until we directly experience this aspect of our nature, it remains within the realm of the “unknown”.

As previously emphasized, theosophical meditation is not merely following a technique; it requires a creative search for new insights and realizations. While suitable techniques aligned with this lofty goal can be helpful, the true value lies in the transformative journey of uncovering deeper aspects of whatever the subject of our meditation is. Although the article mentioned above highlights an approach where reasoning serves as the tool to move from the known to the unknown, there exist other methods that engage various faculties. These methods may involve cultivating uplifting feelings of aspiration, devotion, and love; a progressive deepening of our attention and awareness, or the direction of willpower towards the higher realities.

### Stages of meditation

Traditionally, theosophical literature has described this journey into the unknown as consisting of three stages:

### 1. *Concentration*

Our minds are often restless, constantly shifting from one thought to another. However, in order to explore the realm of the Real, we must be able to direct our attention unwaveringly towards the inner realities. Thus, the initial phase of this process is referred to as *concentration*. As the term suggests, it requires us to make an effort to quiet our mind and emotions and focus on the object of concentration.

Perhaps because this is the first stage of the process of meditation, practitioners often regard it as a mere preliminary exercise to be quickly surpassed. The truth, however, is that unless we master the art of concentration, we will be unable to reach higher states of consciousness.

Numerous concentration techniques exist, and each individual must find the approach that suits their personality. The supports for concentration may range from concrete objects, to bodily functions such as our breath, a divine incarnation, or an interesting concept. Ernest Wood’s book, *Concentration*, offers a wealth of interesting exercises that aspirants may find valuable.

### 2. *Meditation*

Once we have acquired the ability to sustain a focused attention effortlessly, we pass on to the stage of meditation. This is the stage in which we endeavour to move from the known to the unknown, that is, from the personal to the spiritual levels of experience and insight. Theosophical literature provides a range of methods to help us in this exploration. They involve evoking higher emotions,

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such as devotion; utilizing the mind to grasp spiritual realities; making an effort to perceive subtler aspects of our being; or employing our will to elevate our consciousness.

Aspirants are encouraged to explore the different methods in order to find one that aligns with their temperament. Once a technique is chosen, it is advisable to dedicate several months or even years to its practice, allowing the necessary time for it to affect our nature.

### 3. *Contemplation*

After the work that we've been doing in our meditation has led us as far as possible while using our emotional and mental faculties, we arrive at the final stage, commonly referred to as "contemplation" in the theosophical tradition. During this stage, all mental and emotional activities associated with the specific method of meditation are abandoned, and we remain in a state of quiet receptivity in the atmosphere generated by the practice. The attitude is one of silent attention and awareness, as if trying to perceive something very subtle, coming from beyond the personal realm. At the beginning, it may be difficult to maintain this attitude for more than a few seconds but with persistent practice one becomes able to rest in this silent awareness for a while.

As our meditation practice becomes firmly established, it is vital to cultivate this contemplative attitude, which gradually opens the door to higher realms of perception and insight.

We can now grasp the entire process

of this meditative journey towards the Real more comprehensively. In the concentration phase, we strive to harness the activities of the lower mind and emotions, directing them towards a spiritual object or meditative process. Once we achieve a state of steady attention, the meditation method helps us raise our consciousness from the lower to the higher nature. However, thoughts and emotions can only carry us to the threshold of the higher nature. Once there, a leap is necessary. In the stage of contemplation, we remain in the highest state that we are able to reach, supported only by a silent awareness that is attuned to the higher nature. The "leap", then, occurs through the agency of the higher nature itself. This is why this event has been described in mystical traditions as the grace of God.

### **Stillness**

In the popular understanding, meditation is often associated with emptying our minds. However, this notion is not entirely accurate and can actually be dangerous. When we assume a passive attitude, we become open to the influences surrounding us. But if we do not make an effort to raise our consciousness, we remain anchored at the level of mundane thoughts and emotions. Therefore, emptying our minds in this condition will make us susceptible to negative influences such as fear, anxiety, intolerance, and similar energies that abound on the lower planes.

As mentioned before, Blavatsky and other early theosophists warned that this practice, over time, can result in a

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“mediumistic condition”, in which aspirants become vulnerable to lower influences within their vicinity. This eventually undermines their willpower and ability to maintain control over their own personality.

For this reason, the theosophical approach aims to reach complete stillness only when we are in the appropriate state of consciousness. Through the threefold

meditative process previously described, we gradually elevate our consciousness to more spiritual states and attune our bodies with the higher nature, akin to a radio tuning into a particular broadcast. This process ensures that we enter a state of profound stillness in a condition in which we are receptive only to the influences coming from the higher planes. ✧

## Endnotes

1. H. P. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, Vol. 14, p. 434.
2. Godolphin Mitford, “The Elixir of Life”, *The Theosophist*, March and April 1882.

To comprehend what is contemplation the student must identify himself with Nature. Instead of looking upon himself as an isolated being, he must learn to look upon himself as a part of the INTEGRAL WHOLE. For, in the unmanifested world, it can be clearly perceived that all is controlled by the "Law of Affinity", the attraction of one to the other. There, all is Infinite Love, understood in its true sense. . . . The first thing to be done is to study the axioms of Occultism and work upon them by the deductive and inductive methods, which is real contemplation. To turn this to a useful purpose, what is theoretically comprehended must be practically realized.

Damodar Mavalankar,  
“*Contemplation*”, Feb. 1884,  
from *Damodar and the Pioneers  
of the Theosophical Movement*,  
Quest Books, 1978