

THE PLACID LAKE OF THE MIND

By Helen V. Zahara

According to ancient tradition, the personality in which each one of us lives is only a small part of our true nature. Beneath the facade which we display there are depths of being in which are locked the untapped potential of the spiritual Self—the immortal, enduring part of ourselves. Unfortunately, we are caught up so much of the time with the pressures, demands, attractions, sorrows, pains, and excitements of daily life that most of us have little time to think about the unseen part of ourselves or even, perhaps, to be aware of the existence of any consciousness beyond our sensations, feelings, and thoughts. Yet, if the ancient tradition be true, we are only really partly living if we do not open the inner portal that reveals the Self within, not only to discover its reality, but also to permit it to have expression in our lives. Furthermore, the Self, according to the same tradition, is not an isolated entity, but is rooted in the one Divine Consciousness which pervades and sustains the universe and all its creatures. What a tremendous concept! What infinite power and beauty may be discovered and brought into action, if we but begin the inner search and penetrate beyond the outer personality to the depths within.

To begin this process is one of the functions of meditation. It is a technique of self-exploration leading to the experience of heightened and expanded awareness, which is beyond the area of psychism or drug-induced changes of consciousness. It involves the opening of one's heart and the turning of one's mind in new directions, giving time to commune with oneself, with nature, and with life. This may require the breaking down of old patterns of thinking and feeling, and therefore it is not a simple undertaking.

Meditation has other functions also, including the directing of thought to help others, and for healing. In addition, it has value in the development of a new sense of serenity and inward peace, a feeling of greater strength to meet the problems and stresses of each day, seeing things from a broader perspective, finding new values and meanings.

Whether meditation is undertaken for self-exploration or for other purposes such as have been mentioned, it involves bringing the mind first into a state of freedom, from which can proceed either creative and abstract thought, or a state of stillness in which the thinking process ceases, allowing intuition and new insights to arise from the deeper part of the Self. For many people it is not an easy practice. It depends on the individual's temperament, his one-pointedness, his interest, his circumstances, and his earnestness.

Some people think that meditation should be free and unstructured. Inward exper-

ience can arise spontaneously in a mind that is silent and alert, that does not exclude anything, but merges, as it were, with the life around. There can be exaltation also in awareness of nature and its beauty or in the inspiration of great music and art. It can happen at various brief moments in the day without any set discipline.

On the other hand, as a regular daily practice, meditation has great value if a few minutes can be set aside for this purpose, perhaps in the morning before the rush and activity of the day begin. One needs to have a quiet place, free from disturbance, and begin to bring the mind to a state of rest. Unfortunately, this is where the troubles of many people commence. As soon as they sit down to meditate they find that the mind will not be still; it is caught up in turmoil, in inconsequential, superficial daydreams; it is filled with fears, worries, memories, and anticipations; it is like a butterfly, flitting from one point to another; it is clouded by biases, prejudices, and doubts. So there come frustration, disappointment and discouragement and, despite all the beautiful statements that are said about meditation, nothing happens.

That this is an age-old problem is clear from some of the ancient writings on yoga. In the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna cries out to his Guru: "Manas (the mind) is very restless, it is impetuous, strong and difficult to bend; I deem it as hard to curb as the wind." Then the answer comes from the teacher Krishna: "Without doubt, Manas is hard to curb and restless; but it may be curbed by constant practice and dispassion."

About three centuries B. C. the great Indian sage Patanjali described this mental turbulence as "the modifications of the mind." He gave his famous teaching, which is as applicable today as it was so many centuries ago. What must be achieved, he taught, is the "inhibition of the modifications of the mind." If that is reached, "then the Seer is established in his own essential and fundamental Nature." But how to do this? There are many helpful methods, but Patanjali's classic system of Raja Yoga, as set out in his Yoga Sutras, still stands as one of the most valuable. In a simplified form it can be a very useful guide for the Western mind, especially for the beginner. Perhaps this is because the various steps prescribed are so logical.

Patangali prescribed eight *angas* or aids. The first of these is concerned with a clean moral life, for obviously one's aims must be based on right ethics if one is to undertake a spiritual discipline, which is what meditation really is. It cannot be achieved for selfish reasons. So we find prescribed five self-restraints: one must abstain from injury to others through thought, word, or deed; from falsehood, from stealing, from passions and lust, and from avarice. The second *anga* has been described as self-culture; there are five observances: external and internal purification, contentment, austerity, study, and devotion to God. This means that the individual undertaking this practice is turning his thoughts in the direction of the goal of yoga, which is union, in consciousness, with the Supreme.

The third *anga* is given as right posture. While those who are practiced in the East would use the lotus posture, the main need is to be seated in an upright position with head, neck, and back in a straight line. Then comes the fourth *anga* which is breath control. Again, if one is going deeply into yoga there are special exercises, but one can proceed with even breathing which will slow down naturally to the rate which occurs during sleep. Next there is what is called “sense withdrawal,” which can perhaps be interpreted to mean the withdrawal of one’s attention from objects and ideas which impinge upon the mind through the senses. If one’s eyes are open one can be distracted by various things around. If one is disturbed by extraneous noise, it is difficult to concentrate. As suggested already, therefore, the aspirant should find a quiet place, free from disturbance, and then, seated in a comfortable posture, withdraw his awareness from the world without, turning his attention completely and utterly to the practice of introspection, directing his consciousness to the world within.

The first five *angas* are known as the external aids to yoga, and constitute preparation for the internal steps which now follow. In Patanjali’s system we find three more *angas* given, and these really constitute the heart of the yoga practice. Although separately stated for the purpose of study they actually merge one into the other, and are not distinct and separate. These *angas* are stated as concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and contemplation (*samadhi*).

When one tries to meditate one can understand why Patanjali began his system with concentration. I have already mentioned the turbulence of the mind, which is so difficult to curb. One way in which to bring it to a point where there is some control is to concentrate on something, thus confining the mind within a chosen area. One can concentrate on an inanimate or animate object; it can be a concept or aphorism; it can be a mantra which is repeated. Again it depends on one’s temperament, but as far as my own limited experience goes, I find it helpful to choose something which has its own element of beauty. It can be a delicate flower, for instance, or a sparkling crystal—something which draws an aesthetic response. Of course it can also be something quite prosaic such as a matchbox or a stone. Each one can experiment for himself and find out whether there is some particular object which helps in the concentration process. Having decided on the object of concentration, place it before the mind’s eye. If it is a physical object, observe it very carefully and in detail before closing the eyes, and then hold it in the mind. If it is something intangible, such as an aphorism or a concept, it can be read or repeated and then taken into one’s mind. To concentrate on something in this way means focusing one’s full attention upon it. From the state of concentration one moves gradually into the deepening process of meditation and concentration.

To understand the movement of consciousness which can occur, let us follow in imagination what may happen to a person who begins this practice. As an example let

us say that an aspirant has decided to concentrate on an amethyst stone, which he may happen to have. When he starts thinking about it, he does not bring his mind to a halt, but he is directing it along a deliberately chosen channel. He thinks of the amethyst in all its aspects—its hardness, its weight, its facets, its deep, rich purple color which sparkles in the light. He may imagine it lying in the earth, perhaps for millennia. He becomes absorbed in the jewel and all its aspects to such an extent that he shuts out all the other thoughts which are clamoring for attention, the irrelevancies, the day-dreams, the worries, the distractions which normally impinge upon his thinking. He is thus taking the first step in becoming master of his mind. Up to this point, he is analyzing, he is aware of facts regarding the jewel, and his mind is simply working at the analytical, concrete level, which in Theosophical terminology is called lower mind, or lower *manas*.

Gradually, if he is successful in the process, he begins to change the level of his thinking, taking it up into more abstract realms (higher mind or *manas*). He becomes aware of the beauty of the amethyst, he may begin to think about its qualities and characteristics; a sense of wonder begins to arise as he considers the many processes which have gone into its making, realizing its relationship with the earth and other elements, thinking of its archetype of perfection which perhaps exists in the Universal Mind. Now there develops a steady flow of creative thought with regard to the stone, which invests it with new meaning. Somehow the individual begins to know the amethyst in a new way, to feel its life, so that he merges his own consciousness with it, and it is no longer just an object outside of himself. Without pausing he may move into a state of meditation, by which the knower and the known become one, separateness disappears, and there is a new sense of unity, an expansion of consciousness. There is a breaking down of the usual barriers of time and space, and in that moment of absorption there may come a stillness of the mind, which is not negative or passive, but is dynamic and alert. This is the state of contemplation. Now, it is suggested, the image of the stone should be dropped altogether from the mind, while the mind remains in that still, absorbed, poised state of consciousness. The mind is now emptied of images and forms, and in that moment it is free and open to receive intimations from the inner world of the Self, to experience intuition, *buddhi*. To use a well known analogy, the mind is as a clear placid lake, able to reflect the divine consciousness from within. As the Taoist phrase goes: "Bide in silence, and the radiance of the spirit shall come in and make its home."

In that state of contemplation, which is a state of consciousness beyond form, the individual can have spiritual insight which, however brief, can transform his understanding, can expand his awareness, lifting him out of his usually limited field into a new vision and a realization of the deeper reality which exists, within. It may not happen for a long time. It requires constant practice, but if only the preliminary stages are reached, these can be helpful in the direction and control of the mind. Furthermore,

the process is a never-ending one, and one should realize that there are various levels of *samadhi*. The experience mentioned in the example given above is but the beginning.

As already suggested, there are various valuable ways for beginning meditation. If one decides to concentrate on a flower for instance, one can try to enter into its life and to know it from the inside, to feel its life, to become, as it were, the flower. One can sit under a tree and merge consciousness with that growing thing, as it stretches its limbs up toward the sun. Ernest Wood, in his book *Concentration*, suggests even entering into the consciousness of a cat: “. . . experience its sensitiveness, its beauty, its being in poise and motion.” In yogic literature we find references to concentration on such things as the tip of the nose, the point midway between the eyebrows, the lotus in the heart, the image of the deity, and the breath coming in and going out. There are also different *mantras* to be chanted while concentrating on the Divine Being.

In some Buddhist schools we find among the classical objects of meditation such things as: earth (in the form of a heap of sand), water (a bowl full), air (in the sensation at the surface of the skin), fire (the flame of a candle), a small round disc (blue, yellow, red, or white), light (entering through a small hole in a dark room), space (the open, heavenly vault). In Tibetan yoga there are the symbolic designs known as *yantras* and *mandalas*. It is a vast subject, involving much study and practice.

Having developed the art of meditation with objective things, then the more abstract themes—aphorisms and concepts and virtues, which are also recommended—will be less difficult to tackle. In this approach there is an entering into the meaning, penetrating behind the words and ideas to the reality beyond. Another important practice is to begin to probe into one’s own being, asking the question “Who am I?” and seeking to realize the spiritual Self, rooted in the universal life, until one can make the affirmation of one’s unity with One Divine Consciousness: “I am That, That am I.” In each case, after the flow of steady thought on the subject of meditation has been achieved, there can come that point which transcends thought, when consciousness moves into a formless state where the experience cannot be fully described in words.

Meditation is, of course, of value only if it brings a change of heart, if it develops new meanings, and helps one to act more from the center of oneself in daily life. It can bring new poise and inner peace, and therefore is of as much value to the man in the street as it is to the yogi who retires from worldly life to the ascetic life of the forest or cave.

Whenever, through meditation and with right aspiration, the mind of the seeker is brought to a placid state, like a clear and calm mountain pool, unruffled by the winds of anger or desire, or other disturbing elements, the mind will then be able to reflect in its depths the light of the spiritual Sun, and the aspirant will grow in spiritual insight and understanding.