



School of Spiritual & Cultural Studies

Aids to Meditation

Dr. P. Rammanohar, MD (Ay)
Amrita School of Ayurveda,
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham

MA OM- Mastery Over Mind

Learning Objectives

Learn how to prepare for meditation

Understand the aids that can help in effectively practicing meditation

Understand the role of sleep, physical activity, and balanced diet to support meditation

How to prepare for meditation



Meditation has many benefits. But we need to practice it properly to benefit from it.

It is very important that necessary preparation is done before initiating the practice of meditation.

The Astanga Yoga of Patanjali is a combination of the preparative steps and practice of meditation.

Ayurveda emphasizes the need for proper sleep, physical activity and food to lead a contemplative life.

The aids to meditation

Yoga Darshana classifies the eight steps of practice (Ashtanga Yoga) broadly into the Bahiranga Sadhana – external techniques and the Antaranga Sadhana – internal techniques.

The Bahiranga Sadhana helps to prepare for meditation whereas the Antaranga Sadhana represent various stages of meditation.

Yama (abstinences), Niyama (observances), Asana (yoga postures) and Pranayama (breath control) constitute the Bahiranga Sadhana or external techniques for meditation.

Interface to meditation

Pratyahara or the withdrawal of the mind from the sense organs is the interface between the Bahiranga Sadhana and Antaranga Sadhana.

The practice of Pratyahara gradually draws the mind inward and establishes one in the practice of meditation.

The Process of Meditation

What we understand today as Meditation refers to the Antaranga Sadhana in Yoga Darshana.

This comprises Dharana (focused attention, concentration), Dhyana (absorption in the object of meditation), and Samadhi (transcendence to a higher state of consciousness).

Aids to Meditation

To become successful in the practice of meditation and to obtain the full benefits, it is important to make use of essential aids to meditation.

Ayurveda emphasizes that a proper lifestyle and diet are essential aids for the successful practice of meditation.

Especially, Sleep, Physical Activity, and Balanced Diet.

The three sub pillars of life



Food, Sleep, and Control of senses are considered to be the three sub pillars of life in Ayurveda.

We can say that these three sub pillars are essential aids for the practice of meditation.

Control of senses is not possible without a regulated lifestyle that includes physical activity.

Healthy Diet

A healthy diet is very essential for the proper functioning of the body and mind.

Food is classified into Satvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic based on its effects on the mind.

Excessive use of spicy foods which stimulate the senses can increase rajas and agitates the mind and creates anxiety.

Food that is stored for long periods or heavy to digest can increase tamas and make the mind lethargic and depressed.

Sattvic Food

Eating fresh vegetables and fruits, freshly cooked food, food prepared at home by loved ones, foods that are not excessively spicy or processed are considered to be Sattvic and can help the mind to be naturally relaxed and calm.

Several nutritional deficiencies, such as vitamin B12, B9 (folate), and zinc, can cause symptoms of depression and dementia such as low mood, fatigue, cognitive decline, and irritability. Dietary patterns high in processed foods, or a “western dietary pattern,” are strongly correlated with an increased risk of developing depression, mild cognitive impairment, and ADHD.

Proper Sleep

It is now increasingly being realized that sleep is associated with mental health.

A review of research found evidence that insomnia preceded the development of not only depression but also bipolar disorder and anxiety.

Alexander J. Scott and colleagues found that greater improvements in sleep quality led to greater improvements in mental health.

Physical Activity

Physical activity can influence mental health by bringing about chemical changes in the body.

Running can increase endocannabinoids, which is known as the bliss molecule. Practice of Asanas increases GABA, which is the anti-anxiety molecule, Intense physical activity increases endorphin, which is the pain molecule. Exercise in general can increase serotonin, the happiness molecule and dopamine, the reward molecule.

Regulated physical activity can help us to be in control of our mind.

Preparing for meditation

We learnt that preparation for meditation is essential for its success.

Following the path of Ashtanga Yoga is a safe and effective way to move in the path of meditation.

Ayurveda advises three sub pillars to support meditation.

External practices for meditation



Yama (abstinences), Niyama (observances), Asana (physical Yoga postures) and Pranayama (breath control) are external practices to prepare one for meditation.

Pratyahara (withdrawal of the mind) is an interface to enter into meditation.

Three Sub Pillars to support meditation

Balanced diet, Sleep and Physical Activity are the three sub pillars advised by Ayurveda to help cultivate a contemplative life.

References

1. Young SN. How to increase serotonin in the human brain without drugs. J Psychiatry Neurosci. 2007 Nov;32(6):394-9.
2. Heijnen S, Hommel B, Kibele A, Colzato LS. Neuromodulation of Aerobic Exercise-A Review. Front Psychol. 2016 Jan 7;6:1890. Doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01890.
3. Swami Satchidananda, Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Integral Yoga Publications, Reprint Edition, September 2012, ISBN-13: 978-1938477072

References

4. Astangahridayam of Vagbhata, Sutrasthana, Chapter 7, Verse 52
5. Sensi S, Paoletti P, Koh J, Aizenman E, Bush A, Hershfinkel M. The Neurophysiology and Pathology of Brain Zinc The Journal of Neuroscience. 2011;31(45):16076–85.
6. Scarmeas N, Luchsinger J, Schupf N, et al. Physical activity, diet, and risk of Alzheimer's disease. JAMA. 2009;302(6):627–37.

References

7. Alexander J. Scott, Thomas L. Webb, Marrissa Martyn-St James, Georgina Rowse, Scott Weich, Improving sleep quality leads to better mental health: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials, Sleep Medicine Reviews, Volume 60, 2021, 101556
8. Firth J, Gangwisch J E, Borsini A, Wootton R E, Mayer E A. Food and mood: how do diet and nutrition affect mental wellbeing? BMJ 2020; 369 :m2382 doi:10.1136/bmj.m2382

References

9. Rusch HL, Rosario M, Levison LM, Olivera A, Livingston WS, Wu T, Gill JM. The effect of mindfulness meditation on sleep quality: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *Ann N Y Acad Sci*. 2019 Jun;1445(1):5-16. DOI:10.1111/nyas.13996. Epub 2018 Dec 21.
10. Your lungs and exercise. *Breathe (Sheff)*. 2016 Mar;12(1):97-100. DOI: 10.1183/20734735.ELF121

References

11. Di Liegro CM, Schiera G, Proia P, Di Liegro I. Physical Activity and Brain Health. *Genes (Basel)*. 2019 Sep 17;10(9):720. DOI: 10.3390/genes10090720
12. Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 6, Verse 17