

Lesson 14

All the problems that you face in life, all the ups and downs are really the means to your personal evolution. Everything that you face in life, whether pleasant or unpleasant, is really the means to higher awareness. They really help you. Though they may seem to hinder you from a limited and personal viewpoint at this stage, they are really the tests, the means to your eventual transcendence and total understanding of reality. Though mental disturbances during meditational practices, during everyday life may seem obstacles, they are really the things that help you to become aware of, to confront and remove the personal blocks or hindrances that prevent the flight into higher awareness. Without these apparent obstacles you would never become aware of the imperfections in yourself that prevent higher experience. It is only through your enemies that you can recognize personal hang-ups. It is only through unhappiness that you can recognize seeds of disharmony within yourself. Without day to day problems, you would never try to overcome obstacles. All the turmoils of everyday life are the indicators that stimulate you to overcome your own imperfections. So recognize your problems and use everyday life as the means to attain perfection.

Swami Satyananda Saraswati

Hatha Yoga: Moola Shodhana

If someone advised you to stick your finger in your rectum, you would probably be offended. Yet this is exactly what we will ask you to do in this topic. The following practice, *moola shodhana*, is concerned entirely with cleaning the anus and rectum with one's finger. It may seem a most unlikely yogic method, but in fact it could help to transform your life, especially if you suffer from constipation or haemorrhoids. It is a simple practice, yet it has numerous beneficial repercussions. Overcome your hesitancy and try it for yourself.

This practice comes more easily to eastern people who habitually clean their anus with water after passing stool. In fact, in countries such as India, there is almost a general tendency to regard the use of paper as unclean, which is exactly the opposite attitude to western people. Each method has its good points: the use of paper prevents direct hand contact with the stool. Water, on the other hand, undoubtedly cleans the anus more thoroughly. In either case, one has to wash one's hands afterwards. Therefore, we feel that water washing of the anus is best, for it ensures that the anal region is perfectly clean. However, this is true only if there is sufficient water available; if there is not, then paper is probably better. We are not really interested in changing your habits in this respect for there are far more important things.

Definition

The Sanskrit word *moola* literally means 'base' or 'root'. In this context, it means anus and rectum. The word *shodhana* means 'purification'. Therefore, *moola shodhana* can be translated as the practice which 'purifies the anus and rectum'.

This technique has various other common names. It is called *moola dhauti*, which means 'anal cleansing'. It is also called *ganesha kriya*. Ganesha is the name of the plump elephant deity of India, and the word *kriya* means

'action'. Therefore, this name can be translated as the 'elephant action'. Ganesha is closely connected with mooladhara chakra (the psychic centre near the region of the anus). This is one reason for the name *ganesha kriya*. Also elephants wash themselves thoroughly with their trunk; possibly they also clean their anus in the same manner, at least externally. This practice is also called *chakrikarma*, which means the 'rotation practice'. It is so called because the finger is rotated within the anus and rectum.

Scriptural references

This practice is widely mentioned in yogic texts. The *Gherand Samhita* says the following:

"If a person does not practise *moola shodhana*, then the *apana* (function of elimination) does not pass freely." (1:43)

"Clean the anus with the finger. Then repeatedly wash it with water." (1:44)

"This practice removes the hard, fermented stool from the lower colon. Abdominal ailments are removed, the body becomes graceful and healthy and one's digestive fire improves." (1:45)

Turmeric root or finger?

Traditionally, a turmeric root is recommended for this practice. This plant is widely available in India and has great medicinal value as an antiseptic, blood purifier and general cleanser of physical impurities. It has astringent properties and it is for this reason that it is used in *moola shodhana*. It tends to stimulate the nerves of the inside of the anus and rectum, which helps to encourage bowel movement (peristalsis) and a free flow of blood. Thus it physically removes waste material and also stimulates the natural function of the bowels.

Turmeric is not widely available to many countries, but one's finger can be used instead for *moola shodhana*. This is as good as turmeric, for though it is not astringent, there is more facility for manipulation. The essential

point to remember is that your nails should be short and you should carefully clean your hands after the practice.

Position

The best position to practise in is a squatting position. This again is ideally done in the Indian squat toilet. Incidentally, it is worthwhile pointing out that the squatting position is the best for elimination of stool. This is widely accepted in modern medical circles and can be tested by personal experience. The seat toilet may be very comfortable, but this position does not encourage the best possible evacuation. If everyone adopted squat toilets, there would be far fewer cases of constipation. The squat allows the anus to open and function more freely. Furthermore, the squat position applies a firm pressure on the abdomen; this tends to help push the stool towards the anus for expulsion.

If you use seat toilets, then you can at least adopt the squatting position for moola shodhana. We see no reason why you should not try to squat by standing on top of the seat, though it may look a little strange. Make sure you don't harm yourself.

MOOLA SHODHANA

Assume a squatting position.
Insert one finger (either middle or index) into the anus.
If necessary, you can use ghee or some other type of oil as a lubricant; or you can use soap or water.
Push your finger inside to a depth of about 2 cms as first.
Then gently rotate your finger in both directions.
By doing this you will slowly be able to push your finger further into the rectum.
Don't force. The sphincter muscles will relax.
Continue to rotate your finger, inserting it as deeply as possible; this will stimulate the nerves and functions of the rectum.
Then remove your finger and wash it.
Reinsert your finger and again rotate it for some time.
Again remove and wash.
Repeat a number of times.
Make sure you apply a firm but gentle pressure on the walls of the anus and rectum.

Precautions

1. Make sure that you cut the nail of the finger that you insert. The anus and rectum are very sensitive, and long nails could easily cause damage. If you don't want to cut your nails, then you will have to use a turmeric plant.
2. Make sure that you scrupulously wash your hands after the practice.
3. If you suffer from haemorrhoids, then you should take great care when you insert your finger. This practice will help to remove the ailment but you must insert and massage carefully. As your condition improves with practice then you can increase the pressure of massage. Your own common sense will guide you in this respect.

Muscle contraction

If you wish you can intensify the practice by alternately contracting and releasing the anal sphincter while your finger is inserted. This will increase the stimulation of the nerves and the blood supply in the rectum, which in turn will lead to improved health and functioning of this important part of the body.

Water

When you wash your hands during the practice use cold water. Also, if possible, try to wash the anus with cold water. This is important, for cold water specifically stimulates blood flow to the region. This further tones the anal sphincter and prevents stagnation of blood and the possibility of haemorrhoids. Cold water also contracts the blood vessels which helps to alleviate extended veins. Hot water is not to be used for it tends to act in the opposite manner.

This, incidentally, is another good recommendation for washing one's anus with cold water after passing stool: it tones up the entire anus and rectum.

When to practise

This depends on your personal circumstances. The stimulation induced by moola shodhana is sufficient to start off a chain reaction of peristalsis. Therefore, those who are constipated are advised to practise before trying to defecate.

If you have a regular motion then you can try moola shodhana after passing stool. This will further stimulate the associated nerves

and muscles and lead to the best possible evacuation and cleanliness of the anus and rectum. The best time is early in the morning.

Benefits

Let us first of all briefly discuss the anatomy of the area. There are two parts: the anus proper and the rectum. The anus is comprised of two sphincters, which can be dilated and contracted at will. You can test this for yourself. These sphincter muscles seal the exit of the anus until the time of defecation. The anus is about two centimetres long, after which it merges with the rectum. The rectum continues upwards for a short distance to join the lower part of the descending colon.

If you insert your finger you will feel striations or projections. There are seven or eight of these, and are about one centimetre in height. There are also valves in this area. There is a rich supply of nerves and blood vessels. It is these blood vessels that so easily distend to form haemorrhoids. This region is directly supplied by nerves from the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems.

So how does moola shodhana help us? It acts as follows:

- Stimulates the nerves and blood vessels - this encourages the whole eliminative system to function efficiently.
- Encourages regular and strain-free defecation.
- Cleans the whole area of hard, encrusted and putrid waste matter.
- Removes and prevents ailments such as constipation and haemorrhoids (piles).
- Helps to change one's attitude towards life. The wonder of a regular free motion leads to a more relaxed disposition. Such a simple practice, but it has far reaching effects.

Constipation is an ailment of sedentary modern life¹. It is caused by excessive worry and frustration and by insufficient exercise. It is caused by irregular toilet habits, straining, and stodgy food such as white bread, dumplings, etc. There are other causes but these are the main ones. Sedentary life leads to insufficient blood flow and nervous stimulation of specific areas of the body. The body processes lose their strength and efficiency. In the case of constipation, it is the region of the large intestine that suffers.

The elimination of constipation is important for it has repercussions on other parts of the body. When the flow of faeces is constant, then the rest of the digestive tract will also work more efficiently. This is because the entire tract functions as a whole, even though each organ has a different name. It is an integral system. If the process of defecation is normal, then the associated organs such as the liver, pancreas, etc. will also be able to work more easily and effectively. The whole system is less susceptible to ailments. We recommend that sufferers of constipation follow the suggestions previously given, and start to regularly practise moola shodhana¹. It will only take a few minutes daily, yet the benefits will be vast.

Haemorrhoids is also a common ailment associated with constipation. It can arise directly from constipation. It also arises through coagulation of blood through bad circulation. This is related to lack of exercise and is similar to varicose veins. Near the end of the rectum, the numerous blood vessels group together to form bunches or plexuses. During constipation, hardened stool accumulates in the rectum, exerting a pressure on these vessels, which are very thin-walled. This causes the blood flow to slow down, stagnate and even congeal. This congealed blood (thrombi) forces the blood vessels to expand in order to allow some blood flow to take place. This distension occurs inwards towards the centre of the rectal cavity. It initiates a vicious circle. The dilated vessels expand against the hardened stool. If the stool moves it produces irritations, inflammation and pain in the vessels. Because there is a large amount of blood in this region, and because the walls of the stretched veins are even thinner than normal, bleeding occurs very easily and scabs tend to form. This is the trauma of haemorrhoids.

For haemorrhoids we specifically recommend inverted asanas to help drain the blood and also alternate contraction and relaxation of the anal muscles (ashwini mudra)². Also fasting is recommended. We suggest that you practise moola shodhana regularly, taking special care, and using some form of lubrication. This will encourage smooth movement. Also this lubricant will prevent the area becoming too dry. This dryness, which is most common in old age, leads to irritation and clogging of faeces in the rectum. If this

clogging becomes serious, then the whole system becomes totally blocked. This leads to ill health of the whole body. Therefore, we especially recommend moola shodhana for those people who suffer from constipation and haemorrhoids.

Moola shodhana is a simple yet effective technique. It is well worth your while to overcome all hesitations and doubt and experience the benefits for yourself.

Notes

¹ For further details on constipation refer to Book I, Lesson 9, Topic 1

² Book II, Lesson 16, Topic 3

Asanas: Practice

The asana we will describe in this topic is called *yoga mudrasana*. Though it is known as a mudra, it is really best described as an asana. In a sense, it is a combination of *paschimottanasana*¹ and *padmasana*². Those people who can sit in *padmasana* will have little difficulty in doing *yoga mudrasana*. Others however, who still find it difficult if not impossible to sit in *padmasana*, even though they have been practising earnestly and regularly for some time, will not be able to do the full form of *yoga mudrasana* at this stage. Instead, you should try the simpler alternative method done in *ardha padmasana*, that is described at the end of this topic. Furthermore, you should spend more time practising the premeditative exercises, in order to eventually master *padmasana* and *yoga mudrasana*³.

Many of the people who can sit in *padmasana* will not be able to do so for more than a few minutes without extreme discomfort. *Yoga mudrasana* is an excellent practice for further loosening up the knees and the hip joints and thereby allowing you to sit in *padmasana* as well as other meditative sitting poses, for prolonged periods of time. This is most important in order to gain the most out of meditational practices in general, and *kriya yoga* in the future. It is essential in order to be able to forget the body and to be able to introspect. It is impossible to introspect or even think about doing meditational practices if your attention is overwhelmed by pain in the legs. *Yoga mudrasana* is useful for overcoming this initial hurdle, as well as helping to promote the right mental attitude.

YOGA MUDRASANA (PSYCHIC UNION POSE)

The Sanskrit word *yoga* needless to say means 'union'; and a *mudra* is a 'mental or physical expression of an inner feeling' or 'attitude'.

Furthermore, it is not only an expression of a feeling, but it is also a means, if properly used, of invoking inner power and realization. There are far, far more implications, but this is not the place to discuss them. This asana is so called because it is said to unite the practitioner with his inner being.

In English, this asana is usually called the 'symbol of yoga' or the 'psychic union pose'. These are in fact inadequate translations, for the two words '*yoga mudrasana*' convey far more and have vast implications. We much prefer the Sanskrit name.

Loosening up exercises

Before sitting in *padmasana* and doing *yoga mudrasana* the legs should be loosened up. This also applies to people who have no difficulty sitting in *padmasana*, for the legs quickly stiffen up. Stiffness can be most effectively removed from the legs by doing the following simple exercises: (i) half butterfly (ii) hip rotation, together with other useful exercises previously described³, you can choose any that you wish to practise, though we recommend the above two. Of course, if your legs are not stiff, it is not necessary to practise these preliminary exercises.

Position of hands

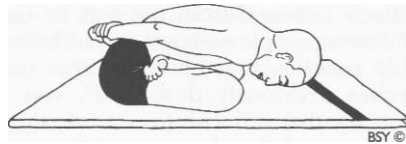
During the performance of *yoga mudrasana* the hands can be held in a variety of positions. You should experiment to find the hand position that you prefer.

1. Arms behind the back, with the fingers of both hands interlocked.
2. Arms behind the back, with the left hand holding the right wrist.
3. Same as 2 but with the right hand doing *jnana mudrasana*⁴. Any other suitable hand mudrasana can also be utilized.
4. Hands in front of the body. Fold your fingers and place both fists on your lap, with the wrists facing upwards and the

thumb slightly out and downwards. The fists should be held in contact with the soft part of the abdomen, just below the ribs. This hand position will apply extra massage to the abdomen.

Basic technique

Sit in padmasana². Close the eyes.
Hold the hands behind the back in the way described in variations 1, 2 and 3 under the previous heading.
This is the starting position.
Relax the whole body.
Breathe slowly and deeply.
Then inhale deeply. Exhale while slowly bending the trunk forwards.
Try to touch your forehead on the ground in front of your body; if this is impossible, merely bend forwards as far as you can comfortably.
This is the final pose.
Relax the whole body, especially the back, as much as possible. Breathe slowly and deeply, feeling the expansion and contraction of the abdomen.
Stay in the final position for as long as you can. Then slowly raise the body to the starting position, while breathing in.
This is the basic technique.



Breathing

The breathing should be synchronized with the physical movement during yoga mudrasana. This is important. For clarity, the breathing sequence is listed below.

Breathe normally in the starting position, while relaxing the mind and body. Then inhale deeply once before bending forwards. Exhale as you lean forwards. Breathe deeply and slowly in the final pose. Inhale as you return to the starting position.

Alternative techniques

There are useful variations to the basic technique. They are as follows:

Variation 1: ideal for beginners

Same as basic method, except that the breath

is held for a short duration in the final pose, after which the body is returned to the starting position. That is, instead of staying in the final pose, the body is lowered and raised a number of times. This is particularly useful for those people who have a stiff body and who cannot touch the floor with their forehead.
Take care that the physical movement is synchronized with breathing.

Variation 2: for elongating the spine

This technique can be practised by those people who can touch their foreheads to the floor. Take the final pose of yoga mudrasana as described in the basic technique.
Immobilize the body and inhale.
While exhaling, try to touch the floor with the chin and push it away from the body.
Immobilize the body and inhale.
Exhale and again try to push the chin as far as possible away from the body.
Repeat this procedure. Don't strain.
Then relax the whole body and remain in the final pose breathing slowly and deeply.
After a comfortable period of time return to the starting position while inhaling.

Variation 3: for optimum massage of the abdomen

This variation is ideal for those people who suffer from wind, constipation or various other abdominal ailments.

Place the hands in front of the body in the way described in the previous heading 'Position of Hands' for alternative 4. That is, the fists should be placed on top of the upturned heels, the right fist on the left sole and the left fist on the right sole.

The method is exactly the same as given for the basic technique.

This variation gives a powerful compression of the abdomen though it does not stretch the back as much as the other techniques.

Leg joint realignment exercises

After completing yoga mudrasana or padmasana the leg joints tend to lock. If you straighten your legs too quickly you might experience pain or injure your joints. This seems to apply to some individuals, and not to others. Therefore, you should take great care to slowly unfold your legs from padmasana, allowing the joints to realign themselves.

When the legs are straightened in front of the body, there may still be stiffness. The best way to remove this is to slowly bend each leg in turn, so that the knee comes towards the chest. You can do this once or twice with each leg. If you hear a slight cracking don't worry, for this is merely the joints clicking into position. If you hear a crunching sound, however, then you can start worrying, but this is most unlikely to happen if you carefully follow the advice we have given.

If you wish, you can also rotate your feet from the ankles a number of times to remove stiffness in this region, or gently move the legs up and down, keeping the heels on the floor.

General advice

- There is no reason why beginners should not place a cushion or folded blanket under the buttocks, because this will make the asana much easier to perform. Of course, when you become proficient then this aid should be discarded.
- Do not under any circumstances strain the legs and back. Immediately stop the forward bend if you feel excessive pain.
- Make sure that the breathing is perfectly coordinated with the physical movement.
- If possible, ensure that the heels (or fists in variation 3) press firmly into the abdomen. This will allow maximum efficacy of the asana.
- Try to remain as relaxed as possible, especially in the final pose.

Counterpose

Yoga mudrasana is a forward bending asana. Therefore, it is ideally preceded and followed by a backward bending asana, such as *ushtrasana*⁵, *bhujangasana*⁶, *shalabhasana*⁷ as well as many other asanas that we have yet to describe. The counterpose will bend the spine in the opposite direction, and stretch and compress the associated muscles and nerves in the opposite sense. This will encourage the best possible health of the body.

Awareness

Awareness can be directed to relaxation of the back, the abdomen and breathing. The last is preferred, especially in the final position, combined with awareness of the physical movement during the lowering and raising of the body.

Duration

Try to remain in the final pose for as long as possible. During your practice program, two or three minutes is a reasonable duration. Of course, beginners should not stay in the final pose for a long time; the duration should be slowly increased with practice. Beginners, especially those who are stiff, should do variation 1 for a few minutes, alternately raising and lowering the body to the final pose. If it is difficult to sit in *padmasana* for more than a few seconds then there is no reason why you should not unfold your legs, do the exercises given under the heading 'Leg joint Re-alignment Exercises', refold your legs into *padmasana* and repeat *yoga mudrasana*. This can be repeated a number of times. It is an excellent method of loosening up the legs for those persons who can sit, though uncomfortably, in *padmasana*.

After a long period of mental work, about fifteen minutes in the final pose of *yoga mudrasana* quickly brings revitalization and calmness to mind and body.

Limitations

If you suffer from sciatica, high blood pressure, hernia or any other serious abdominal ailment, you should not attempt to do *yoga mudrasana*, unless you have sought expert advice.

Precautions

Stiffness of the legs, particularly the knees, may initially prevent one from doing *yoga mudrasana*. Don't strain, for the anatomy of the knee joint is such that it is designed specifically to move in one plane. Its design is simplicity itself and its strength and support comes mainly from ligaments. If used properly its strength is more than adequate for normal use, yet misuse can easily tear the ligaments. If this happens many months are required for full repair. So be careful.

Benefits

Yoga mudrasana may be a little difficult at first, but the benefits it will give are well worth the effort. It is particularly useful for massaging the abdominal organs and helping to remove various associated ailments from constipation to diabetes. The upturned heels apply good pressure, which is transmitted to the inner organs. Variation 3 is especially powerful for

the massage is accentuated by means of the fists.

The asana reduces the blood flow to the legs and diverts it to the abdominal and pelvic region, which further helps to improve the functioning of these organs and can help to alleviate various types of sexual disorders.

During the practice, the individual vertebrae are separated from each other. This helps to release pressure on the spinal nerves as well as giving them a profound stretch and massage. These nerves connect the entire body to the brain and their improved health and functioning will have beneficial repercussions throughout the body.

The legs are not stretched as with other forward bending asanas, yet the articulations of the joints are loosened. With regular practise these joints will become permanently loosened and one will be able to sit in padmasana for many hours.

Yoga mudrasana, as we have pointed out already, is most useful for relaxing the whole mind and body. As such it is an excellent prelude to meditative practices, especially if there is no initial program of asanas. That is, there are times when there is no time or it is unsuitable to do a number of asanas before commencing meditative practices. Under these circumstances yoga mudrasana should be practised as a prelude.

Supplementary practice for beginners

Some people may have reasonable leg flexibility, but not sufficient to sit in padmasana and thereby do yoga mudrasana. Under these circumstances, there is absolutely no reason why you should not sit in ardha padmasana and practise a modified form of yoga mudrasana².

The procedure is as follows:

Fold your right leg on top of the left in ardha padmasana.

Perform yoga mudrasana in the manner described for the basic technique, bending down between the knees.

Resume the starting position.

Now go down to the right knee, trying to touch the floor with the forehead; don't strain, only try.

Come up.

Down on the left knee. Come up.

Repeat the same procedure bending down

between the knees again; you should find increased flexibility.

On resuming the starting position, straighten the legs and remove the stiffness in the joints in the way described under the heading 'Leg Joint Realignment Exercises'.

Then fold the left leg on top of the right leg in ardha padmasana.

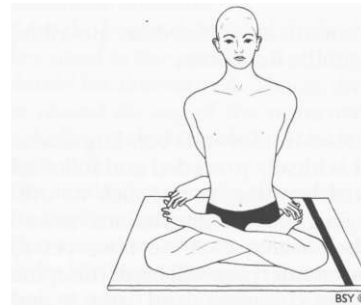
This is an excellent method of loosening up the legs in order to eventually attain padmasana as well as simultaneously obtaining many of the benefits of yoga mudrasana.

If one of your legs is stiffer than the other, then you should spend a longer duration doing this practice with that leg uppermost.

BADDHA PADMASANA (LOCKED LOTUS POSE)

Baddha padmasana is a wonderful asana for those persons who find yoga mudrasana easy to do; It is an asana that really deserves a totally separate treatment. However, we have introduced it at this point because of its close similarity to yoga mudrasana. It accentuates the benefits of yoga mudrasana and can in a sense be regarded as an advanced form.

The Sanskrit word *baddha* means 'bound', 'locked' or 'tied'. Therefore, this asana can be called the 'bound lotus pose' or the 'locked lotus pose'.



Technique

Sit in padmasana.

Place the feet as high as possible on the thighs so that the toes are near each side of the waist. Place the right arm behind the back and try to grasp the big toe of the right leg.

To do this, it is best to breathe out deeply, lean forward slightly and push the shoulder blades towards each other behind the back.

Grasp the left big toe with the left hand crossed

behind the back. This is not easy at first but becomes easier with practice.

Having grasped both toes, sit upright in padmasana. Breathe normally and relax the whole body.

Repeat the same procedure that we have described for the basic technique of yoga mudrasana.

Try to stay in the final pose for as long as possible, breathing slowly and deeply.

After finishing the asana straighten the legs and do the exercises given under the heading 'Leg Joint Realignment Exercises' for yoga mudrasana.

General details

All other details are as given for yoga mudrasana. Baddha padmasana gives all the benefits of yoga mudrasana and more. In particular it produces a good chest expansion and thereby encourages chest development. The internal massage of the abdominal organs is particularly profound because of the position of the heels; this is notably enhanced if one breathes deeply in the final pose. Baddha padmasana is particularly useful for alleviating back and neck ache. It is excellent as a preliminary for meditative practices.

Notes

¹ Book II, Lesson 13, Topic 2

² Book I, Lesson 7, Topic 2

³ Book I, Lesson 1, Topic 3 and Book I, Lesson 6,

Topic 4.

⁴ Book I, Lesson 8, Topic 3

⁵ Book I, Lesson 6, Topic 3

⁶ Book I, Lesson 4, Topic 2

Book I, Lesson 9, Topic 3

Topic 2

Bandhas: Jalandhara Bandha

Bandhas are a small but very important group of yogic practices. They are an essential part of kriya yoga, where they are combined with various other yogic techniques. It is therefore necessary for the reader to master each of them before beginning kriya yoga. It is for this reason that we have introduced them at this early stage in the course. Furthermore, the practice of nadi shodhana pranayama has reached a level whereby it can be powerfully combined with bandhas¹. This will intensify the entire practice by increasing the duration of breath retention.

The word *bandha* means 'to hold, 'tighten' or 'lock', and this exactly describes the physical action necessary to perform these practices. Specific parts of the body are gently yet powerfully contracted and tightened. This has vast repercussions. First of all various parts of the physical body are controlled. Organs, muscles, nerves and physical processes within the body are massaged, stimulated and brought under the will of the practitioner. The physical contraction or lock in turn has an extensive influence on the psychic body (pranic body). The flow of prana that continuously streams through our subtle body is redirected and even stopped. This has direct influences on the mind. The whole body and mind is tranquillized and made receptive to higher states of awareness. Such is the power of bandhas when they are perfected.

Traditional yogic texts speak of the three granthis called the *brahma*, *vishnu* and *rudra* granthis. These represent psychic blocks and mental problems that prevent an individual 'soaring' into the realms of meditation. These blocks or knots have to be removed if one wants to know the experience of higher awareness. They can be removed either permanently or temporarily. Bandhas are particularly effective in breaking open or removing these blocks, at least for a short period of time and this temporary removal

helps to eliminate these blocks permanently. In yogic language, these granthis prevent the flow of prana into the main pranic passage of the body - the *sushumna*. When they are released, prana immediately begins to flow through sushumna nadi, which leads to increased receptivity of the mind and in turn higher experiences.

These granthis are located in the following parts of the body:

Brahma granthi - pelvis (mooladhara chakra)

Vishnu granthi - heart (anahata chakra)

Rudra granthi - centre of head (ajna chakra)

Remember, these so-called knots are in the psychic body, not in the physical body, but physical manipulations such as bandhas can unlock them. Each level of manifestation has repercussions on other levels. It is not realistic to rigidly separate the physical body, pranic body and the mind body. They are all inter-related and really part of a whole. They are only divided or categorized for convenience of explanation.

Therefore, the physical body influences the mind and pranic body. The pranic body influences the mind and physical body. And the mind influences the pranic and physical body. If you doubt this then you should read the book entitled *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain*, where scientific evidence is given. Better still you should practise yoga, develop sensitivity and find out from your own experience.

Bandhas, like all other yogic practices, act on and influence different levels of individual being. They have profound effects on the physical, pranic and mental levels.

JALANDHARA BANDHA (THROAT LOCK)

The Sanskrit word *jalan* means 'net'. The word *dhara* means 'stream', 'mass of flowing fluid'. This leaves the meaning of the word *jalandhara*

open to various interpretations. The most likely is that it means 'net' or 'cluster of nadis' or 'pathways'. Therefore, jalandhara is the practice or physical lock that controls the net or network of nadis in the neck. These nadis can be either blood vessels, nerves or pranic passages. The 'fluid' or stream can cover all these different levels of subtlety, for jalandhara bandha will influence all of them.

There is another explanation of the meaning. There are sixteen specific centres in the body called *adharas*. This word means 'base' or 'substratum'. They refer to chakras which are located in the following sixteen regions of the body: toes, ankles, knees, thighs, perineum, coccyx, navel, heart, neck, tonsils, tongue, nose, eyebrow centre, eyes, back of the head and crown of the head. In various practices one's awareness is rotated through these centres. Prana flows through these regions within the pranic body. Therefore, jalandhara bandha can also be defined as the practice that locks the pranic network in the neck. This prevents flow of prana between these centres and directs prana into sushumna nadi.

Scriptural references

There are numerous scriptural references to jalandhara bandha. The following are a selected few from the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*.

"Contract the throat and firmly press the chin against the chest. This is called jalandhara bandha and helps to prevent old age and death." (3:70)

"It blocks all the nadis in the neck, checks the fall of amrit (divine fluid) which drops from the heavens. It should be done to cure throat ailments." (3:71)

"The contraction of the throat during jalandhara bandha prevents the amrit falling into the digestive fire. In this way prana is conserved (that is, the prana is controlled and directed only into the sushumna; flow of prana in the other nadis ceases)." (3:72)

"This contraction of the throat also immobilizes the flow of prana in the ida and pingala nadis (associated with the flow of breath in the left and right nostrils). Again this blocks the flow of prana to the sixteen adharas and directs it into the sushumna." (3:73)

These four verses give fertile ground for thought and indicate the importance of this

bandha. The *Yoga Chudamani Upanishad* also has much to say on jalandhara bandha:

"The sadhaka (aspirant) should sit in padmasana with hands folded across his lap. The chin should be firmly pressed against the throat. One should reflect completely on Brahman (the supreme) with the breath retained. In this manner, the sadhaka will attain immense power and knowledge." (verse 40)

"He who is able to retain the element akasha (ether) and the fluids which have a downward tendency, will remove all frustration and dissatisfaction." (verse 50)

"By the practice of jalandhara bandha, the nectar amrit which tends to flow downwards from the centre of the head is restrained. The nectar does not fall into the fire (is not burned up) and the pranic forces of the body are prevented from moving hither and thither." (verse 51)

There are many more quotations in other texts, but this is sufficient to give you an idea of the importance of this practice. We leave it to the reader to fully understand the meaning of these verses through personal experience.

Kumbhaka

The breath is to be retained during jalandhara bandha. The retention can either be antar kumbhaka (inner retention) or bahir kumbhaka (outer retention) or both, depending on the practice and integration with other techniques². That is, one can either breathe in deeply, fully inflating the lungs and then do jalandhara bandha, or one can exhale deeply and then do jalandhara bandha. Both methods have their use in association with other practices.

We have already emphasized that the duration of kumbhaka should not be more than is comfortable. This also applies to jalandhara bandha. Don't strain under any circumstances. Increase the duration of breath retention over a period of weeks and months. If you have been regularly practising nadi shodhana in the way that we have suggested, then you will find no difficulty doing jalandhara bandha for a reasonable period of time.

Position

Jalandhara bandha can be done in a large number of different positions. The best positions are padmasana, siddhasana or siddha

yonis asana³. In kriya yoga it will be necessary to practise jalandhara bandha while sitting in siddhasana or siddha yoni asana. At this stage however, you can practise in any pose that you find comfortable. This includes ardha padmasana, swastikasana and vajrasana³. It is essential that the knees touch the ground, therefore sukhasana is not suitable. Jalandhara bandha can also be done in the standing position but this is not so commonly used.

Your aim should be to eventually master jalandhara bandha while doing either padmasana, siddhasana or siddha yoni asana.



Technique

Take a comfortable sitting pose.
Make sure the knees are firmly in contact with the ground.
Place the palms of your hands on the knees.
Close the eyes.
Relax the whole body.
Inhale deeply.
Retain the breath inside the lungs.
Then bend the head forwards and press the chin tightly against the chest, in particular against the sternum.
Straighten your arms so that they are locked; that is, you have to gently but firmly push your elbows towards each other as though you are trying to bend your arms inwards instead of outwards.
Your hands should remain on the knees.
This action will tend to intensify the pressure applied in the region of the neck.
Simultaneously, hunch your shoulders upwards and forwards - this will help to ensure that the straight arms are firmly locked.
Stay in the final position for as long as you can comfortably hold your breath.
Then relax the shoulders.
Bend the arms outwards and release the lock.
Slowly raise your head.
Then exhale.
This is 1 round.

Breathe normally.

When your breathing rate returns to normal you can repeat another round.

Note: This practice can also be done with the breath exhaled immediately before doing the bandha. That is, it can be done with the breath retained externally.

Awareness

Maintain awareness on the region of the throat and on mental counting of the duration of breath retention.

Precautions

Don't exhale or inhale, whatever the case may be, until you have released the chin lock, arm lock and the head is raised. Slowly develop the length of breath retention over a period of time. This will allow your body mechanism to slowly adapt and accustom itself to the new duties. Don't strain under any circumstances.

Number of rounds

You can do as many rounds as you wish providing you experience absolutely no discomfort. Beginners should slowly increase the number of rounds, starting from five.

Conjunction with other practices

As we have already pointed out, jalandhara bandha can be combined with various other practices of yoga. It is particularly suitable and powerful when combined with nadi shodhana pranayama¹. In your daily yoga program, it is best to practise jalandhara bandha after asanas and immediately before meditational practices. This will help you to relax, and also to be attentive and awake, allowing you to gain the most out of the meditative techniques.

Limitations

People who suffer from high blood pressure or heart ailments should not do jalandhara bandha. Though it initially reduces blood pressure, the release of the bandha brings some fluttering of the heart.

Physiological viewpoint

Jalandhara bandha compresses the carotid sinuses. These are bodies located on the carotid arteries in the neck, which are the main arteries supplying blood to the brain. These carotid bodies are called baroreceptors and

help to regulate and match the heart rate and blood pressure with the respiration system. These receptors feed messages to the brain through the sinus nerves, which in turn takes the necessary actions to balance the circulatory and respiratory systems. The carotid bodies become compressed if the blood pressure rises. This sends a message to the brain which takes steps to prevent this high blood pressure. In jalandhara bandha, these receptors are artificially compressed. This tends to prevent a sudden rise in blood pressure which would be expected when the breath is held for some time. This increases the duration of breath retention and so increases the effectiveness of practices such as nadi shodhana pranayama.

These carotid sinuses were well known in ancient times, as were also the sinus nerves. In the *Shiva Samhita* it says: "Stop the flow of the vijnana nadis (sinus nerves) with the second fingers (that is, press the side of the neck with your fingers). This gives siddhi (perfection) in the form of happiness and bliss." (55, 56) We don't suggest you try this for you will more than likely become unconscious if you are not careful. This is caused by reducing or preventing the blood flow to the brain. But the implications of the above verses are obvious; if you gently press these carotid sinuses then you will become very relaxed and perhaps a little faint. This can be a help in various other yogic practices that lead to meditational experience.

These carotid sinuses are widely known in modern times. Many people have fainted by mere pressure of these bodies. Some people seem to be more sensitive than others; a slight pressure is sufficient to put some people on their back. It is also widely known in wrestling, boxing, etc. where through discreet pressure on the opponent's neck, it is possible to almost instantly finish the match. This is regarded as foul play.

It is also interesting to note that these carotid sinuses can be pressed to prevent or counteract tachycardia (fast heartbeat beyond the normal limit). This is often used in medical circles. A gentle massage of the carotid sinuses slows down the heart rate and brings about a faster normalization. However, this is not always the case. It depends on the ability to select exactly the right place for massage and to do it gently enough to prevent an increase in tension. That

is, overpressurization of the carotid bodies could easily bring into mobilization the emergency activities of the body to induce greater flow of blood to the brain. This will tend to increase the heartbeat again which is exactly the opposite to that which is required. So care must be taken.

We have not discussed the carotid sinuses to encourage you to tamper with them. We have discussed them to show how jalandhara bandha acts directly on the physical body, and how one must be careful of overexertion during the practice.

Benefits

Jalandhara bandha influences the individual at all levels: physical, psychic and mental. It controls the flow of prana in the body. This induces mental relaxation and can help to induce meditation. The pressurization of the carotid sinuses also helps to bring mental balance by slowing down the heart. Furthermore, this encourages introversion - one tends to become oblivious to the outside world. The whole nervous system and brain become sedated. One tends to become more one-pointed. All this is a great help in meditational practices.

Jalandhara bandha allows one to hold the breath for longer periods of time. Normally decrease of oxygen and increase of carbon dioxide in the system lead to an increase of the heart rate and harder breathing to compensate. This is initiated through the carotid sinuses. The artificial pressure of these sinuses during jalandhara bandha prevents this tendency. Therefore, one is able to hold the breath for much longer periods. This also helps to induce one-pointedness of mind for meditational practices.

This bandha closes the windpipe and compresses various organs in the throat. Notably it massages the thyroid gland which is located in the cavity of the throat. The whole body depends on this gland for perfect development and maintenance. Jalandhara bandha massages this gland and helps to render it efficient.

Notes

¹ Topic 4 of this lesson.

² Antar kumbhaka - Book I, Lesson 8, Topic 4; Bahir kumbhaka - Book I, Lesson 12, Topic 4

³ Book I, Lesson 2, Topic 5 and Book I, Lesson 7, Topic 2

Topic 2

Pranayama: Practice

There is a very close relationship between pranayama and meditational techniques. Control of prana through pranayama eventually leads to cessation of the ceaseless fluctuations of the mind. Systematic dampening and calming of the mind through meditational techniques leads to control of the prana. The mind and prana are directly related. If the mind is like a restless monkey jumping from one thought to another, how can meditation be successfully practised? The aim of both pranayama and meditational techniques is the same: perfect receptivity and quiescence of mind so that one can know higher experience.

In the state of samadhi the prana ceases to flow in the body. Pranayama, therefore, tries to bring about samadhi by directly controlling and eventually stopping the flow of prana. This leads directly to samadhi. In the monumental yogic scripture called the *Yoga Vashishthu* it says: "Through these practices (pranayama and meditative practices), the prana can be controlled. In this manner one is freed from sorrow, filled with divine ecstasy and becomes enraptured with the supreme experience. If the prana is controlled, the mind will also become very calm. There is an intimate connection between the mind and prana. If the mind is rendered perfectly quiet, then only Brahman (the supreme) remains."

Therefore, don't regard pranayama as mere breathing exercises - it has far greater implications. But it will only bring results if you practise carefully and regularly. Pranayama should become an important part of your daily practice. Asanas, pranayama and meditation all affect the differing aspects of your personality.

Practice

In this lesson we have explained the technique of jalandhara bandha¹. This is perfectly suited for integration with the stages of kumbhaka of nadi shodhana pranayama.

Integration of jalandhara bandha and nadi shodhana stage 4

In the previous lesson we gave the ratio of 1:8:6:2: 1:8:6:2 for the complete practice of nadi shodhana. Now while retaining the same ratio begin to integrate jalandhara bandha. Eventually you can practise the bandha for both antar kumbhaka and bahir kumbhaka, but at this stage the practice of jalandhara only with antar kumbhaka is sufficient.

The basic technique is as follows:

Sit comfortably in any position.

Breathe in through the left nostril for a duration fixed by the ratio ... 1

Then bend your head forwards and do jalandhara bandha.

Retain your breath inside for a duration fixed by the ratio ... 8

On completion, release the bandha.

Breathe out through the right nostril for a duration fixed by the ratio ... 6

Retain the breath outside for a duration fixed by the ratio ... 2

Breathe in through the right nostril for a duration fixed by the ratio ... 1

Do jalandhara bandha.

Hold the breath for a duration fixed by the ratio ... 8

Then release the bandha.

Breathe out through the left nostril ... 6

Retain your breath outside according to the ratio ... 2

This is 1 round.

Continue for as many rounds as you have time available.

Warning

If you feel any tendency towards suffocating then you should immediately stop the practice. Start again when you feel perfectly normal.

Notes

¹ Topic 3 of this lesson

Meditation: Japa (Part 1)

Many people are in a hurry for the experience of meditation. This is understandable, yet no amount of haste or aspiration will bring the experience unless the tricky and tempestuous mind is calmed. Meditation is a spontaneous process that can only occur when the mind has been brought to a certain level of harmony and one-pointedness. This applies whether the mind is calmed for a short or a prolonged time. It must be harmonized. Without this, meditation cannot arise. One of the simplest, safest and most systematic meditative practices is called *japa*. It is a method that is suitable for everyone without exception.

The prime concern of most people should be to confront and exhaust inner conflicts and suppressed desires. *Japa* is a useful method of slowly drawing out the negative aspects of the subconscious part of the mind, with much less likelihood of possible nasty or unpleasant side effects. It relaxes the personal arena of the mind, which in turn can lead to the natural occurrence of meditation. *Japa* is an excellent preparatory technique for *kriya yoga*, for it tunes the mind so that one can gain the most out of the practices. Furthermore, *japa* in itself is an integral part of *kriya yoga*. Therefore, if you practise *japa* then you will be laying a valuable foundation for the future.

Japa generally requires the use of a *mala* (set of beads).

JAPA-PART 1

The Sanskrit word *ja^a* means 'to rotate'. The practice is so called because it involves continuous rotation of a *mala*, synchronized with a mantra. Generally the practice is done for a fixed number of mantra repetitions, or for a set period of time. The chanting can be aloud or silent. *Japa* can be further defined as rhythmical mantra chanting with *mala* rotation and with awareness. For maximum benefits it must be practised regularly.

The universal system

Japa is probably the most widespread and universal meditative system. It is an integral part of *yoga* and *tantra* as well as Hinduism in general. Many traditional scriptures describe the practices and merits of *japa*, especially tantric texts. Many of the ancient yogis are pictured practising *japa*. According to tradition, Brahma, the creator of the universe caused everything to be created by continual *japa* of the mantra *Aum*. Such is the importance of *japa* in the spiritual life.

Japa is not only confined to India. The Buddhist path of Mahayana widely uses *japa* with a *mala* of 108 beads plus 3 extra beads, which represent the refuge in the Dharma, Buddha and Sangha respectively. The more orthodox systems of Christianity also widely use *japa*. Anyone who has been to a Roman Catholic monastery, nunnery or school will have seen the monks or nuns rotating their rosaries. Anyone who has been to Greece or other Balkan countries, where the Greek Orthodox Church is prevalent, will know that nearly all men carry a rosary with them. Whatever they do, whether walking, talking, sitting or working they continually rotate their beads wherever it is possible. Whether most of these people realize the reason for the rosary is uncertain, but nevertheless the tradition continues. It seems more than a possibility that this system was introduced so that each individual could practise *japa* throughout the whole day.

Rationale

Concentration is impossible for most people for there are too many inner and outer disturbances. During meditative practice one is either overwhelmed by a continuous stream of inner mental chatter, worries, etc. or on the other hand, one is unable to break away from external noises and other disturbances. Both of these distractions prevent meditation. Of

course, the inability to shut off outer noises is really a by-product of inner turmoil; if there is inner peace then one can automatically shut off outer influences.

Another trap in meditative practices is sleep. It is so easy for the practitioner to gain a little relaxation and, because this is such a rare thing, immediately start feeling drowsy and fall asleep. One must relax but remain wide awake. We have said this so many times before, but we are repeating it because this is a trap that many people fall into. Another trap is forced concentration. Many people realize the importance of concentration and try to force it, which causes tension and is not real concentration. Real concentration arises naturally through a relaxed mind.

So we have a dilemma, either:

1. One does not try to concentrate. This generally leads to the pitfalls already mentioned - namely sleep, absorption in outside noises, etc. or forgetfulness in the inner bubbling thoughts of the mind.
2. One forces concentration in an endeavour to prevent sleep or the tendency to lose oneself in the outer world or the thought process. This generally leads to mental tension.

Both of the above approaches are incorrect and will tend to lead one away from gaining the benefits of the meditative practice. The answer as we have already said is not to concentrate, but instead remain aware¹. Japa is a wonderful system of maintaining individual awareness. Furthermore, it prevents the practitioner becoming lost either in the outer world or in the inner world of thoughts. It also helps to prevent sleep or drowsiness. Let us discuss how this is achieved.

During *japa*, one has to do two things: chant a mantra and rotate the beads of the mala. These act as a point of reference for awareness. After a short time of practice one gets into a rhythm; the movement of the mala becomes synchronized with the chanting. Your mind and body (one hand) have to do something. This prevents the pitfalls that we have already mentioned in the following manner.

1. *Sleep*: If one tends to fall asleep then the mantra repetition and the movement of the mala will become unrhythmical or will stop altogether. This will tend to bring about wakefulness and if necessary one can wash the

face with cold water. Of course, if you totally lapse into deep sleep then the breaking of the rhythm will not help. You will be dead to the world. But in this case you are probably very-tired and need sleep. So there is no harm done. But the main point to remember is that the breaking of the rhythm of the mantra and the mala rotation tends to help you to be aware of sleepiness and then you can rectify the situation.

2. *Preoccupation with the outside world*: The rotation of the mala and the chanting of the mantra will quickly and automatically tend to make you introvert. This is particularly true if you chant the mantra with feeling and intensity.

3. *Absorption with the inner thought process*: The important thing is that you don't suppress the thoughts. Let them arise, but you must be aware of them. You must not be totally lost in them. Don't become identified with them. You must watch them as a witness. *Japa* is an excellent method of being able to watch the thoughts without becoming totally lost in them. The method is as follows. You must, in a sense, split your awareness. That is, you should simultaneously be attentive to all the continuous thoughts that arise, as well as the mantra and the rotation of the mala. Let the thoughts come, but also be aware of the practice of *japa*. If you start to become lost in your thoughts, then you will stop rotating the mala, or the rotation of the mala and the chanting of the mantra will become uncoordinated. Whatever happens, you will quickly notice this loss of awareness in the *japa* and you can then again equally split your awareness. You must keep on doing this.

Eventually, if you practise correctly and for a sufficient length of time, the thought process will tend to exhaust itself. Mental turmoil subsides. There is a gradual transference. The mind becomes overwhelmed by the repetitive mantra, instead of the bubbling thoughts. The mind automatically becomes calm and more one-pointed. Your awareness will become riveted by the mantra and the process of *japa*. This is exactly what is required. At this stage the mind will have become very relaxed, not by suppression, but by exhaustion of the surface thoughts and a gradual weaning away of one's tendency to lapse into a reverie of thoughts. This state of natural thoughtlessness combined with awareness is the prelude to meditation.

Actually the continual bubbling of the thought processes is positive, especially when they come from the deeper realms of the subconscious mind. These are your inner problems. By watching them you will remove them. But the thoughts that most people become lost in during meditative practices tend to be very superficial thoughts. These have to be gradually wiped away, through japa, so that one can see deeper. So japa initially acts to systematically wean away one's attention from these superficial thoughts, which are merely a distraction.

When your mind becomes one-pointed and you become deeply absorbed in the mantra, you may be suddenly confronted by a vision or thought that arises almost unexpectedly. This represents one of your deeper problems and it is this that needs to be removed. Mere awareness will do this. It is at this stage, where you are going below surface thoughts, that you are starting to clean out the mind.

4. *Concentration*: This will arise automatically, when you have exhausted the continuous bombardment of your thoughts through japa. That is, awareness leads to concentration of mind. When you have exhausted the disruptive thoughts of the mind then you will have no choice but to concentrate. You will be almost forced to concentrate.

Japa is a simple, yet effective method of overcoming all the pitfalls that we previously mentioned. This is why it is such a widely practised method. It provides a balance between absorption in the outside world and its opposite, total loss in the world of thoughts. It helps to bring concentration through awareness. It provides a method of calming the chatter of the mind, not by mental suppression, but by allowing the thoughts to arise, while anchoring awareness to a mantra and mala rotation. It is a very sensible, scientific method. It is a useful tool for people who don't have a concentrated mind . . . which is most people.

The mala and its use

The mala is an essential part of most of the techniques of japa. As we have already stated, it is mainly a tool to maintain awareness. It can be made of various types of material, depending on the tradition. The malas widely used in yoga are made of either sandalwood, tulsi or

rudraksha beads. The mala that most sadhakas use today for their japa is made of tulsi wood. Crystal stones can also be used among various other materials.

Malas with different numbers of beads can be used. In yoga the usual number is either 108, 54 or 27. The latter is called a *sumirani mala* and is used for japa practised during one's daily activities. We will discuss this later. The beads are generally strung on strong thread and are separated from each other by a special type of knot called a *brahma granthi* (knot of brahma).

Each mala has an extra, bead called the *sumeru* (junction or summit). This bead is offset from the main loop of the mala at the point where the two ends of the mala are joined. The bead is an essential part of the mala. It acts as a reference point, so that the practitioner can know the number of mala rotations he has made. That is, the practitioner starts the japa practice from the sumeru bead and proceeds to rhythmically rotate the mala, bead by bead. There is a smooth flow and rotation of the mala until the obstruction of the sumeru. This will immediately tell the individual that he has completed one round of the mala. It also has another use: it is easily possible, as we have already explained, to forget that one is doing japa. The mind wanders, even though the mala is being rotated. The mala is rotated automatically without awareness. When the fingers reach the offset sumeru bead awareness is once again returned to the practice in hand.

There is a special method of holding the mala: the mala should be held in the right hand. Support the mala by a loop formed by joining the tip of the thumb with the ring finger. The middle finger should be used to rotate the mala. The second finger and small finger should not be utilized but held clear of the mala.



You should count the number of times you rotate the mala. This can be done mentally or it can be done by using the left hand as follows: after one mala rotation place the left thumb on the first joint line at the base of the left little finger; after the second mala rotation, raise the thumb

to the second joint line; after the third, place the thumb on the upper line of the little finger. Then on the fourth rotation, transfer the left thumb to the first line of the ring finger. And so on. In this manner you can count twelve rotations. This allows you to direct all your awareness to the ongoing practice of japa.

Traditionally, japa is practised while holding the right hand in front of the heart. There is a lot of sense in this if you chant your mantra in rhythm with your heartbeat, and this is something that happens automatically almost without effort. Or it does if you chant a one syllable mantra such as Aum. It does not apply with polysyllable mantras. Also, holding the hand in front of the heart seems to intensify the feeling with which one chants the mantra. Feeling comes from the heart, so it is said.

If you prefer to hold your right hand in any position you can do so. The choice is yours. According to tradition, it is also said that a mala used for japa should not be worn during the day, and that when it is not being used for japa, it should be carefully wrapped in a piece of cloth. This is done to prevent any negative change in the vibrations associated with the mala. Also it is said that other people should not even see your mala. You can adhere to these rules if you wish; again the choice is up to you.

Which mantra?

There are innumerable mantras. Common ones are: *Aum, Kreem, Hreem, Shreem, Aim, Dum, Hum, Aum Namah Shivaya, Rama, Krishna, Durga, Aum Mani Padme Hum* and many more. The sound patterns of a mantra will stimulate a certain effect on the mental and psychic nature of the individual. Each mantra will tend to create (or perhaps draw out is a better term) a specific symbol within one's psyche.

Ideally the mantra should be received directly from a guru or a person with elevated awareness, for as it says in the *Kularnava Tantra*: "Only the mantra which is received from the guru will release its power." (15:19)

If you have received a mantra through initiation in this manner, then you should continue to use it in japa. It is best if you don't change it except for a very good reason. The following are the most valid reasons for changing your mantra:

1. Your guru gives you another mantra.
2. Through attaining an elevated state of awareness you realize another mantra, which is so overwhelming and compelling that you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is your mantra. This often happens and the new mantra should be adopted.
3. You receive a mantra in a dream. In this case, it is advisable to consult a guru for verification of the suitability of the mantra for your own use. It is too easy to auto-suggest oneself into dreaming up a mantra, and this is definitely not the correct mantra.

If you have not received a personal mantra from a guru, or if you have not realized your mantra in an intense flash of insight, then you should use Aum. You can also use its equivalents: *Amin* and *Amen*. It is a universal mantra and is suitable for all types of people. It is an ideal mantra for japa practice.

Don't disclose your mantra to anyone, even Aum.

The three modes of japa

There are three basic types of japa, defined as follows:

1. *Baikharijapa* (also called *vachika*) is audible or articulated japa. The mantra can be chanted as loud as you wish. This is the most suitable form of japa for beginners and those people who have a disturbed mind. In fact, when you feel depressed, tense, angry or unhappy, this is one of the most effective methods of making the mind peaceful.

Incidentally, *baikharijapa* is widely practised in groups throughout the world. It is very powerful. If the reader has been to an ashram and heard fifty people chanting early in the morning in a meditation hall, he will understand the power of collective chanting. The whole atmosphere is charged with positive vibrations. In some ashrams, *baikharijapa* is practised continuously day in, day out. Various people take it in turns to keep the japa resonating throughout the ashram. In the Sivananda Ashram, home of the Divine Life Society, the maha mantra *Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare, Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare* has been going unceasingly since 1943.

2. *Upanshu* is whispering or inarticulate japa. In this form, the lips are moved, but they create no loud external sound. Only the

practitioner can hear the mantra. This is the stage which leads from the simpler *baikhari japa* to the more subtle *manasik japa*. This mode of practice is often done by people who practise long periods of *japa* perhaps ten or twelve hours a day for a fixed period of time.

It is particularly useful in cases where one is unable to do *baikhari japa* to avoid creating disturbances in your environment, perhaps for fear of waking your sleeping children in the morning or late at night. If loud chants of *Aum* will disturb your family or neighbours then practise *upanshu japa*.

3. *Manasik* is mental *japa*. No audible sound is emitted, yet the mantra is clearly heard mentally. This is the most subtle of the three modes. It should be done when the mind is calm and reasonably free of thoughts. If you do *manasik japa* with a disturbed mind, then you are most likely to sink into a pleasant sleep, or become lost in the thought process. If practised with a calm state of mind, *manasik* is the best mode to delve deeper into the mind.

Combination of the different modes

The practitioner need not only use one mode of *japa*. He can transfer from one to the other to suit the circumstances, during each practice program. It is a good idea to always start *japa* with *baikhari*, whether your mind is calm or tense. If your mind is tense, then you should certainly chant aloud until it becomes peaceful. The loud vibrating sound, in a sense, overwhelms one's attention and gradually soothes the mind into a state of reasonable tranquillity. If you are calm then you can quickly transfer to *upanshu* or *manasik japa*. *Baikhari* is best for calming the gross tensions of the mind, and *manasik* is most suitable for exploring the deeper realms of the mind.

If you are doing *manasik japa* and the mind is wandering too much or becoming drowsy, then you should immediately transfer to *baikhari*. When you have brought the mind under some control again, then you can once more return to *manasik japa*.

As a general rule we can say the following: beginners and people with tense minds should practise mostly *baikhari* and a little *manasik*; when one makes progress in controlling the mind, then the *baikhari* should be reduced and the *manasik japa* increased.

Pronunciation and speed

The mantra should be chanted rhythmically and with clear pronunciation. It should be chanted with feeling and intensity. It should be synchronized with the rotation of the mala. This applies whether the mantra is whispered, aloud or mental. Chant quickly if the mind is disturbed, slowly if the mind is more relaxed.

Anushthana

The Sanskrit word *anushthana* means a vow to accomplish or perform a specific act. *Japa anushthana* is widely practised. It means that one resolves to do *japa* for a fixed period of time or for a specific number of mantra repetitions. Its purpose is to discipline the individual so that he actually carries out what he intends. Many people often start a project with intensity and interest, but this quickly fades away with time. As such they fail to accomplish their aim. This applies also to *japa*. The enthusiasm disappears and they don't continue to practise. So this vow is a help in overcoming this lethargic tendency.

These *anushthanas* are very popular in India and are usually prescribed for people with fickle minds, which is nearly everyone. They can be practised for one day, one week, one month, one year or however long one originally chooses. The duration, however, should be realistic. One should be sincere. Traditionally *anushthana* is associated with various rules.

1. Total silence or at least a reduction in one's speaking habits.
2. Cutting off one's contact with family, friends and responsibilities.
3. Diet restrictions.

There are other rules, many of which would be impractical for the average, busy person of today.

If you really want to take up an *anushthana* seriously then we suggest you seek the advice of a competent teacher on a personal level, who can prescribe rules to suit your nature and circumstances. We do feel, however, that each person could make a vow to practise a certain amount of *yoga* every day, whether for half an hour or three hours; and to practice *karma yoga* throughout the entire day. This is not an arduous *anushthana*, but will help to ensure that you practise daily.

Concerning *japa*, you can make a resolve that you will chant your mantra a specific

number of times over a set period. For example, you could decide to chant 100,000 Aums in 50 days. To do this you would have to chant 2,000 daily. If you can chant at a rate of one Aum per second, then you can chant 60 Aums per minute; therefore, the time required to chant 2,000 Aums would be 2000/60 which is about 35 minutes daily. This of course depends on the length of your mantra, if you don't use Aum, and the speed of your chanting. Or you can make a vow to chant 1080 Aums, or any other mantra, every day. This would be 10 rotations of a 108 bead mala. Or you can vow to complete 50,000 mantras, by chanting for one hour every day for as long as is required. There are so many possibilities and combinations. You must decide on a suitable figure for yourself.

This method of anushthana is an excellent method of cleaning and calming the mind. We recommend anushthana in association with japa, but you must not think that it is absolutely essential. If you don't want to commit yourself to a vow, then you can still do japa regularly or occasionally. It will still bring benefits.

Sitting position

Any comfortable meditative sitting pose can be used for japa. Traditionally it is said that you should face north or east.

VARIATIONS OF JAPA

There are a vast number of variations of japa. We don't intend to give all of them, merely a representative few which we consider particularly useful and effective. The methods need little explanation for they are very simple and we have already described many essential details.

Method 1: vak shuddhi

Take your sitting position.

Keep your spine and head erect, but without strain.

Be aware of your body; feel how steady and relaxed it is.

Do not be in a hurry.

Try to imagine that you are free from worries, or at least they can be held in abeyance for the duration of the practice.

Then begin to repeat your mantra and rotate your mala, starting from the sumeru bead.

Move each bead in turn so that it is synchronized with the mantra repetition.

Be aware of the mantra and the rotation of the mala, while simultaneously watching the thoughts that arise.

Don't reject any thoughts; let them arise, but be aware.

All you have to do is watch the process of the mind while simultaneously keeping in touch with the practice of japa, the mantra and the mala movement.

The same applies to outside disturbances; be aware of them, but maintain awareness of the mantra and mala.

Continue in this way until you return to the sumeru bead.

Don't cross the sumeru, but reverse the direction by turning the mala through 180 degrees with your fingers.

Continue the practice.

Many ideas or distractions will arise; let them for this is the nature of the tempestuous mind. Simply remain a witness.

After some time the thoughts will slowly reduce. Your concentration will automatically increase.

If you go deeper visions may appear.

Be aware of these.

Let them arise, but observe them.

Continue in this manner for the time that you have assigned to the practice.

Make sure that you keep count of the number of mala rotations.

At the end, watch chidakasha for a short time².

Method 2: pulse japa

There are various types of pulse japa. It is to be done in association with manasik (mental) japa. The method is basically the same as method 1, except that the mantra and mala rotation are synchronized with the pulse or heartbeat.

The most useful places to feel the pulse are:

1. the eyebrow centre
2. the heart
3. the throat
4. the navel

You can choose any other place, but it should be a place where the pulse beat is clearly felt.

We especially recommend awareness of the pulse with manasik japa, after a duration of baikhari japa. This seems to intensify the clarity of the pulse. We especially recommend awareness of the eyebrow centre (*trikuti japa*).

Awareness

Awareness should be on the mantra, mala and the activities of the mind. Also be aware of the pulse if you practise method 2.

When and where to practice

You can practise japa at any time and in any place. However, in order to discipline the mind, it is best to practise at a regular time every day. The best times are early morning and evening before sleep.

Japa can also be done as a preparatory practice before doing other meditational techniques. This will calm the mind so that one gains the most out of the concluding practice.

Benefits

Japa gives the same benefits as all other meditative practices. It calms the turbulent mind and helps to expel complexes, neuroses, etc. It does this slowly without disrupting one's life. Japa charges the mind with positive sound vibrations and this is wonderful therapy for even the most disturbed mind. It brings about one-pointedness of mind, without resorting to forced concentration. It helps to release the incredible dormant faculties and power that is the inheritance of us all. Finally it leads to meditation.

General rules and suggestions

For clarity, we will summarize the basic points on japa that we have already discussed:

- Use a mantra that has been given by your guru. If you have no personal mantra, use the universal mantra Aum.
- Rotate your mala with your middle finger, using the thumb and ring finger for support. Use your right hand.
- Don't cross the sumeru bead while rotating the beads; turn the mala so that it is rotated in the opposite direction.
- Relax your mind and body but don't sleep.
- Don't concentrate. Be aware. In concentration one withdraws the attention from all sides to one point. In awareness, one pays attention not only to that one point, but to all the thoughts that arise. One does not wrestle with the mind, but slowly tames it by being a witness to all activity.
- If necessary, alternate your practice between baikhari, upanshu and manasikjapa. If the mind is disturbed stick to baikhari; if

the mind is calm do manasik. If the mind wanders too much while doing manasik, then change to baikhari.

Pronounce your mantra clearly and rhythmically. If your mind starts to wander then the speed can be increased.

Don't disclose your mantra to anyone.

Try to practise japa regularly in accordance with an anushtana.

Reflect on the meaning of the mantra whenever you have time to spare.

Notes

¹ For details on the subject of awareness refer to Book I, Lesson 3, Topic 5

² Book II, Lesson 13, Topic 5

Daily Practice Program

If you have been practising surya namaskara regularly you should be able to perform the whole movement without the slightest hesitation¹. To this dynamic exercise you can now add the associated mantras, if you have not already done so. These will transform the entire practice and make it far more powerful.

Try moola shodhana. Overcome your trepidation and test it. If we did not think that it is a useful practice then we would not have discussed it at such length. It is a practice that everyone can do physically; it is only mental disinclination that stops most people from trying it. If you suffer from constipation, then you should definitely practise it regularly.

Practice	Rounds	Minutes
Program 1: duration 2 hours		
Surya Namaskara	—	10
Shavasana	—	5
Bhujangasana	—	4
Shalabhasana	—	4
Shashankasana	—	4
Ushtrasana	—	3
Paschimottanasana	—	4
Ardha Matsyendrasana	—	4
Yoga Mudrasana	—	4
Shavasana	—	3
Nadi Shodhana Pranayama with		
Jalandhara Bandha	—	20
Aum chanting	—	10
Japa	—	30
Chidakasha Dharana	—	15
		120

Program 2: duration 1 1/2 hours		
Surya Namaskara	—	10
Shavasana	—	4
Bhujangasana	—	4
Shalabhasana	—	4
Shashankasana	—	4
Ushtrasana	—	3
Paschimottanasana	—	4
Ardha Matsyendrasana	—	4
Yoga Mudrasana	—	4
Nadi Shodhana Pranayama with		
Jalandhara Bandha	—	20
Aum chanting	—	4
Japa	—	20
Chidakasha Dharana	—	5
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		90

Program 3: duration 1 hour		
Surya Namaskara	—	7
Shavasana	—	3
Bhujangasana	—	3
Shalabhasana	—	3
Shashankasana	—	4
Paschimottanasana	—	4
Ardha Matsyendrasana	—	3
Yoga Mudrasana	—	3
Nadi Shodhana Pranayama with		
Jalandhara Bandha	—	10
Japa	—	15
Chidakasha Dharana	—	5
		<hr/>
		60

Notes

Book I, Lesson 5, Topic 2

