

Creating an ambience for effective Meditation

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When we see a *r̥ṣi* in a movie doing penance, what invariably captures our attention is his seating posture. The sage sits in an upright posture, unmindful of what is happening around and repeatedly chants some *mantra*. We always wonder if it is a special effect created to make him and his *tapas* look special. Even when we do some *pooja* at home, we are told about certain aspects such as seating posture, dress code etc. We have no idea whether these are simple ideas casually laid out by our ancestors or meaningful prescriptions which can significantly affect the efficacy of our efforts that we take.

Quite interestingly the conditions that Shri Krishna has laid out in chapter 6 of *Bhagavad Gītā* for performing meditation are very similar. These are aimed at ensuring that a nearly perfect experimental condition is available for a person truly interested in winning over the mind through meditation. We shall see some of them in this writing. As we will see many of the conditions prescribed appear simple and rudimentary.

The need for the right ambience

One may wonder why such rudimentary lessons are given by Shri Krishna while discussing a profound idea such as meditation. In order to appreciate the importance of these apparently simple instructions, we need to first remind ourselves that the very purpose of mediation is to catch the mind ever wandering into a myriad of thoughts. In our efforts to make headway in this process, we need to plug all possible loopholes through which the mind can easily escape.

Mind is the subtlest of the faculty we have, unlike the organs of action. When something is very subtle, and we want to conduct a controlled experimentation, the focus must be first on the experimental conditions. Only when the experimental conditions are conducive are the chances of ever succeeding in the experiments themselves. Think of any experiments pertaining to particle physics. The typical examples include the X-Ray or a MRI Scan done in the radiology department in a hospital. In these cases, there is enormous care exercised in setting up the experimental conditions. Extraordinary care is taken to prepare the patient, the base and the chamber in which the patient is asked to lie down for taking the required data. We need a similar approach to catch the mind and keep it under our disposal.

Details on preparing a place for Mediation

First of all one must select and appropriately prepare the place for meditation. Shri Krishna specifies four conditions for selecting and preparing a place for meditation. One must position (*pratiṣṭhāpya*) himself/herself in a clean place (*śucau deśe*). One must also have a seating which is firm (*sthiram-āsanam*). The place must be such that it is neither too high (*nātyucchritam*) nor too low (*nātinīcam*). Finally he specifies three layers of material to be

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spread on the chosen place so that it is comfortable for meditation. This includes a layer of *kusa* grass (*kuśa*), followed by a layer of skin (*ajina* - deer skin) and finally a layer of fine cloth (*caila*).

शुचौ देशे प्रतिष्ठाप्य स्थिरमासनमात्मनः ।
नात्युच्छ्रितं नातिनीचं चैलाजिनकुशोत्तरम् ॥ 6.11

*śucau deśe pratiṣṭhāpya sthiram-āsanam-ātmanah
nātyucchritam nātinīcam caila-ajina-kuśottaram*

The details on the three layers need not be taken literally. It is meant to convey that on the whole, the seating place must be comfortable and free from any possibilities to distract the mind while we make an attempt to do meditation.

Details on physical posture in Meditation

The second set of instructions pertains to the physical posture. Shri Krishna first specifies that the axis connecting the body (*kāya*) – the neck (*grīvam*) and the head (*śiraḥ*) must be aligned in a single line. Further he says the whole frame must be in an unshaking condition (*acalam sthiraḥ*). After ensuring that the body is firmly placed in an aligned fashion, Shri Krishna next suggests that the eye must be directed (*samprekṣya*) towards the tip of one's own nose (*svam nāsikāgrīvam*). To make the instructions clearly unambiguous, he finally concludes that we must not let our sight stray into other directions (*diśaśca-avalokayan*).

समं कायशिरोग्रीवं धारयन्नचलं स्थिरः ।
संप्रेक्ष्य नासिकाग्रं स्वं दिशश्चानवलोकयन् ॥ 6.13

*samam kāya-śirogrīvam dhārayan-acalam sthiraḥ
samprekṣya nāsikāgrīvam svam diśaśca-avalokayan*

These instructions are indeed very valuable and important. If one needs to do meditation on an ongoing basis, then the ergonomics of the posture is very important. It has been the experience of those who are engaged in daily meditation that the aligned sitting posture is the most appropriate one ergonomically speaking. Otherwise we may develop back pain, neck pain etc. over prolonged practice of meditation. This will turn out to be an excuse and an opportunity for the mind to run away from the focus of attention. Similarly, the eye has a natural tendency to loiter around looking for objects in the vicinity. This will be another escape route for the mind. Therefore, specific instructions for the eye sight have been laid out.

Details on eating and sleeping habits

The next set of instructions focus on eating and sleeping habits. Eating too much can create bodily troubles which may bother one's mind. On the other hand, eating very little or nothing can make one physically weak and may not provide the required vitality to focus the attention in a concentrated fashion, which is the critical aspect of any meditation. Therefore, Shri Krishna concludes that neither a person who eats too much (*atyāśnatastu*) nor the one who stays alone and abstains from eating (*caikāntam-anaśnataḥ*) will be able to be a good yogi (*na yogo'sti*) practicing meditation.

Another related issue is the amount of sleep that one has in his/her daily cycle. Those who dream (sleep) too much (*ati svapnaśīlaḥ*) will be more *tāmasic* in nature and may not have the right energy to perform meditation on a sustainable basis. Alternatively, those who abstain from sleeping (*jāgrataḥ*) will be physically and mentally fit to perform meditation. Therefore, Shri Krishna states that these behavioural patterns will also be not conducive for meditation in a sustained fashion.

नात्यश्रतस्तु योगोऽस्ति न चैकान्तमनश्रतः ।
न चाति स्वप्नशीलस्य जाग्रतो नैव चार्जुन ॥ 6.13

*nātyāśnatastu yogo'sti na caikāntam-anaśnataḥ
na cāti svapnaśīlasya jāgrato naiva cārjuna*

The value of moderation in behavior

These instructions pertain to different aspects such as seating place, body posture and eating and sleeping habits. However, in a nutshell the message is clear. One can succeed in his efforts in bringing the mind under his control through meditation only when he leads a life of moderation. If one wants to do meditation just once then these issues are not important. However, if meditation has to be done in a sustained fashion for a longer period of time then these finer details are very important. Swinging to the extremes will only agitate the mind even more and make the process difficult.

Therefore, Shri Krishna summarises these instructions by saying that for a person who is able to modify his habits of eating and engaging in worldly activities (*yukta-āhāra-vihārasya*), and doing various work (*yukta-ceṣṭasya karmasu*) and sleeping (*yukta-svapna-avabodhasya*) into one of moderation, the meditation practices may be the basis (*yogo bhavati*) for removing all unhappiness and stress in his life (*dukhahā*).

युक्ताहारविहारस्य युक्तचेष्टस्य कर्मसु ।
युक्तस्वप्नावबोधस्य योगो भवति दुःखहा ॥ 6.17

*yukta-āhāra-vihārasya yukta-ceṣṭasya karmasu
yukta-svapna-avabodhasya yogo bhavati dukhahā*

Taming the mind is a long drawn process and it may require a life time of efforts. Therefore, doing meditation in a sustainable fashion becomes very critical. Nowhere can you find such a simple step by step approach to doing meditation in a sustainable basis.