

Meditation, Subconscious Mind and Intuition

by Swami Durgananda, PhD

One of the most interesting aspects of yoga for understanding your own mind are the three levels of consciousness. Patanjali Maharishi has defined the various levels of consciousness in a masterly way in the aphorisms of the *Raja Yoga Sutras*. Swami Vishnudevananda was himself a great Raja Yogi, who reached a deep knowledge of the mental techniques of Patanjali through the practice of *asanas* and *pranayama*. During the beautiful summers at the Sivananda Ashram in Canada he studied the teachings of Patanjali on the various levels of consciousness with us. Many times Swami Vishnudevananda reminded us that the subconscious mind is not equal to intuition. Very often something which is considered to be intuition is actually a reflection of the subconscious mind.

The three levels of consciousness in the astral body

Patanjali explains that the various levels of the mind are the subconscious, the conscious and the superconscious mind or intuition. Beyond all three stands knowledge of the Self. This is not a level of consciousness as such, but rather a level of Self-awareness, of absolute consciousness of unity, *samadhi* or *nirvana*. This state cannot be explained in words. All states which can be described and defined are part of the astral body, not of the physical body. When we leave the body and enter into other planes we take these experiences with us. This corresponds to the near-death experience, during which you are still connected to the body but without having an awareness of being in the body anymore. Such experiences can be had during a coma, clinical death or anaesthesia, when one can be lying on the operation table able to see and hear the doctors. The physical body is parked as it were, and does not form part of the awareness anymore – the real awareness is in the astral body and continues to function. The subconscious mind is part of the astral body, which vibrates around the gross physical sheath made of the five elements. It is a subtle body of light which goes beyond the existence of the physical body. This is the basis of all yoga philosophy. The sages tell us, “Oh man, be wise, do not live in *maya* or illusion thinking that you are the body.”

Subconscious mind and past lives

Once we consider that there is more than one life – according to the scriptures of the Vedas we have thousands of lives – and that the various experiences of these lives are being stored in the subconscious mind, then the subconscious mind can be understood much more easily. It is said that all the experiences which you have ever had can be re-experienced and that all talents which were developed at one time are stored in the subconscious mind. The skill of Mozart suggests that his knowledge and art did not come in this life – he had deep impressions in the subconscious mind. Modern yogis compare this with computer technology in which everything is saved on to the hard disk. It can also be deleted; however this is not done by mistake as happens frequently on a computer, but rather with very conscious yogic techniques. Once something has been deleted the person feels as if a big weight has been taken off their shoulders.

Samskaras

When you are young, your mind is filled with the happenings of the world, but then you calm down and reflect more, wondering “Why did my life go in this direction?”, “Why do certain things always happen to me?”, “Why do I feel at home in certain places?”, “Why do I feel more attracted to certain people?”, “Why do I have certain talents?”, “Why do I like to do certain things and not other things?”.

Patanjali explains in the *Raja Yoga Sutras* that these are deep impressions from past lives, like big sand banks in the subconscious mind, called *samskaras*. Whilst these impressions are still fresh, they glow like diamonds in the dark, and often this light reaches even into the next life.

Instinct and subconscious mind

However we are not aware of these *samskaras* – we are sleeping with open eyes and do not see the reality of life – because we are constantly veiled by our senses, which allow us to see only that which we desire at the given moment. Thus the subconscious mind is a strong instrument which guides us, yet we believe that everything comes from our own intellect, or that we think, speak and act out of some great “intuition”. We believe that we are thinking something very special, but really it is just a quiet diamond glowing in our subconscious mind, bringing up impressions either from this present life or from past lives.

Instinct within the subconscious mind constantly directs us towards the experience of the senses. The study of animal life is highly interesting in this respect. The yogis very often refer to the example of animals and many asanas have the names of animals. Modern psychology also refers to it: fear, the fighting instinct, territorial thinking. When we observe animals we see a part of ourselves; the main difference is that we have intelligence which animals do not have. We can cover up many things with our upright body and our hands. It all appears so elegant and we call our behaviour socialised, but in reality we have just wrapped our instincts in nice Christmas paper and always according to the latest fashion. The closer we look, the more we see how much we are being dominated by the instincts.

The more we allow ourselves to be guided by the senses, the less close we are to intuition. Intuition has nothing to do with the instincts; intuition is an experience of bliss, whereas instinctual behaviour is an animal experience which works through the senses. The sense of satisfaction is an animal experience. Swami Vishnudevananda always addressed this very directly: the average person without *viveka* or discrimination is mostly occupied with eating, sleeping, procreating and building a house or a nest. It sounds harsh, but if you meditate on it, looking at it from all sides, you will recognise that these are all instinctive actions. If we build a beautiful house, raise our children and arrange everything in a proper and orderly way, we believe that we are great. But these are all things which come from the instinct. In yoga it is important to consider this again and again.

It is a major trap of the ego to think that we are unique and irreplaceable. On the other hand, however, it is important to be somebody with a specific task in life. Yoga puts everything into the proper light. It is important to know that we are part of the Whole, allowing the ego to melt while we are still in the body. The more we are aware of the instincts, the more intuition can take over.

Animal behaviour

Most people relate to life from the subconscious mind, the animal plane. What is predominant in the animal kingdom? It is fear of the people and objects that are not known – territorial thinking. When we observe this behaviour in animals we consider it quite sweet, but if we look closely we are behaving in the same way: we put our name next to the doorbell to say, “This is my place”.

Human beings combine instinct with intellect. When we are building a nest, that is animal behaviour. The intellect asks: what type of nest? A very special nest, a skyscraper out of glass. Then we sit in it, drink, eat and sleep just like the animal. Animals hide food underground for winter and we build big refrigerators, dry food or put it into tins. With air cargo we ship fresh mangoes in the middle of winter. It all comes from the survival instinct and has nothing to do with real intelligence as such.

Automatic functions of the subconscious mind

The subconscious mind contains many unnecessary thought waves, unfulfilled desires, memories and dreams of the future. None of them relate to the present moment at all: “I feel cold”; “I am hungry”; “Is he going to call?”; “Where do I have to go?”; “What do I still have to do?”; “I need to clean up, but I feel lazy”; “I want to lose weight”; “I want to gain weight”. All our life our mind has been occupied with this ‘me and mine’ thinking. As long as our intellect does not have the strength to apply proper discrimination, this type of automatic thinking continues like a tape recorder. If you allow yourself to be dominated by the subconscious mind in this way, you will remain a prey of your past.

Self-awareness and detachment

It appears that we are thinking something unique and new. On closer observation we realise that we are being guided by thoughts which we have absorbed unconsciously. In Raja Yoga this is called *viveka* or discrimination. You take a step outside of yourself and just watch what is going on. Swami Vishnudevananda compared it to a movie, watching our own film. It requires a certain detachment from our own emotions, which can only be found during the protected silence of meditation, undisturbed by the telephone or other interruptions. Then we can detach ourselves from our own mind and contemplate the movie of our life. Certain impressions in the movie tend to repeat themselves and these come from the depth of our subconscious mind to which we have not had any access so far.

Purifying the subconscious mind

Finally all three levels of consciousness have to be transcended. However, the subconscious mind is the main task because this is where we are stuck. We merely believe ourselves to be intelligent beings, but at present we are still very limited. It is only whilst learning a new job or studying at

school or university that we apply our intelligence and then we go on automatically until the end. After the age of fifty we talk mostly about the past, from the subconscious mind. Our subconscious mind is stuck as in the story of the three young men who were rowing in a boat at night. They were drunk and wanted to cross to the other shore of the river. They felt very strong and rowed the whole night. Only at sun rise did they realise that they had forgotten to pull up the anchor! They had rowed the whole night but the boat had not moved an inch. We also feel strong and keep rowing, but forget to lift the anchor. The subconscious mind dominates our thinking. “Who am I?” is the real question, but this question can only be asked by those who start having a subtle doubt that maybe they are not that which they believe to be. This is the beginning of the inner journey.

Sublimation of the subconscious mind

Yoga affirms that every conscious positive input enters the subconscious mind and sublimates its negativity. Therefore we must cultivate positive thoughts. In the West we have psychological studies such as the works of E. Murphy on how to become positive and how to overcome depression. Yoga relates to all levels of our being, because Self-realisation requires more than overcoming depression. The sublimation of the subconscious mind is absolutely necessary and takes many years of practice. According to the yogis it requires twelve years, if we practise every day. Due to the strong force of habit, things that we have been doing for lifetimes cannot be levelled out and sublimated in a short time. During this period of practice the positive experience increases year by year.

Sublimation towards courage

The yogic exercises of positive sublimation towards courage and love naturally include ethics and morals. It is the source of self-transformation, of becoming a different person and leading a happier and more peaceful life. To the present day the masters prescribe these ancient yogic techniques: during meditation or before going to sleep one should fill the subconscious mind with courage. Even though the subconscious mind is also filled with things like hatred, greed and fear, courage will be on top and will manifest. Fear vanishes.

Finding your vocation in life

At the same time we find greater clarity about our own talents. Many people choose their

profession according to traditions, the influence of family or a specific image which is attached to the work. The intellect reflects: if I choose this profession, I will have no financial worries until the end of my life. When the consciousness begins to quieten through techniques such as yoga, many people realise that their chosen profession does not really correspond to their vocation and that there are things which are much more important to them. Some young people with good karma from previous lives and a strong tendency to the path of Self-knowledge follow their vocation from a very early age. Others start to consider these questions only later in life or after retirement. They evolve quickly and start doing what they always wanted to do in the depth of their heart, following their real inner calling. Nobody can say what our path in life is. It is by tuning to the subconscious mind that we reach an understanding of our real vocation, both in terms of our personal evolution and our role in society. More and more we begin to realise who we are. This is part of Self-realisation. Self-realisation does not mean that suddenly an inner light is switched on and we only hear angels singing and no other sights or impressions are left. It is the understanding of who we are, of how the whole universe is a moving network. Once we have understood this, we cannot simply call it nature anymore, but we understand it as a divine manifestation which has not been created by man. The more we calm the mind, the senses and the intellect, the more we realise that we are part of the wonderful play of divine nature. The intuition begins to manifest.

The real intelligence: Who am I?

Real intelligence begins with the question “Who am I?”. Am I this person who is building houses, earning money, eating, sleeping, giving birth to children and dressing in the colours which are in this season’s fashion magazines? Is this what I am? I live in a specific moment in time, with a certain hairstyle, taste in fashion and make-up. Should I really invest all my energy just to be on top in these external material levels of the body and all that goes with it – building a nest, building a house, eating, drinking, sleeping and procreating? Of course you can enjoy these things, but you should not become a toy in their hands. “Who am I?” – this question is only asked by the independent intellect. Once it asks this question it is independent from the instinct. An animal cannot ask this question. “Who am I?” is a question that comes from the pure intellect, real logic and discrimination. Once I sincerely ask “Who am I?”, I am already aware and actually accept that in fact I am something other than what I think I am. Otherwise I would not be able to ask this question. This is where the inner struggle begins. We realise that it is the subconscious

mind that so far has been ruling our life. It takes prolonged effort to sublimate the subconscious mind and to fill it with positivity. We cannot just follow a book; we need guidance from those who have already accomplished it. Otherwise we may lose our way and fall into extremism.

Oversimplification – a street to nowhere

Unfortunately there are many people in the West who become simplistic in their efforts to sublimate the subconscious mind. In an extreme approach they try to change everything at once and in the process they become useless for society, for their job and their family. They actually become incapable of living with themselves, because their view of society is disintegrating at tremendous speed. A definite warning has to be given not to undertake sublimation without guidance.

Asanas and the awakening of the intellect

In the sincere effort to cultivate the intellect we discover that the practice of *Asanas* awakens the intellect. Asanas lead us away from the subconscious mind to the present moment: which leg will I be moving next and to which place? The body is different every day so we cannot just practise automatically. Thus the asanas help us to remain in the present moment.

Necessity for practice

The exercises which the masters taught through the example of their own life, such as asanas, pranayama, relaxation, vegetarian diet, positive thinking and meditation, are the actual elements which should be practised daily. They clean up the subconscious mind. The masters do not like mere philosophising: “Let us see, what is this real ‘I’, according to this or that philosophy?” This is just the showing off of our intellectual knowledge. Afterwards we go home, have a drink, watch TV and fill our stomachs. Yoga consists in applying the knowledge and actually working through the subconscious mind.

Diving into the positive side of the subconscious mind

Through the stilling of the mind we learn to dive deeply into the positive impressions of the subconscious mind – into love, patience, self-respect and cosmic love. Like the two sides of a coin, the subconscious mind contains both the good and also those things which prevent us from knowing the truth; with the help of yogic techniques we try to activate the virtuous *samskaras*

(impressions). Many of us have already experienced a wonderful unity with another person, with nature, with an animal or with a plant. The power of love is also present in the subconscious mind and we try to invoke this golden side of the coin. As soon as we dive into the luminous side of the subconscious mind – full of positivity and loving, pure virtues – the subconscious mind reflects directly back to the intuition and like a laser beam penetrates the consciousness. This is a meditative experience. *Mantra* meditation is the most effective and direct technique of yoga to still the mind, as we dive into the cosmic sound OM and the inner light. In all traditions there are manifestations of light and sound: candles, gongs, etc. We are enveloping ourselves with that which forms the existence of the universe. As soon as the pure subconscious mind reflects into the intuition, which is the plane of wisdom, the intellectual game – this mixture of ego and emotions such as fear, hatred, jealousy, greed, anger – stops. This level of the consciousness remains untouched, as the ray of light shines directly into pure intuition, bypassing the actual thinking apparatus. The thinking capacity is not negative as such – we need it, but not when we are trying to still the mind. This is because it will just produce habitual thoughts that interfere with meditation: “Oh God, why am I here now? I wonder whether all this is the way it should be?”. Intuition is light as a feather, it is luminous and subtle; thoughts of doubts are heavy and push the intuitive thoughts back to a level where we cannot reach them anymore. Once, however, you get closer to the luminous side of the subconscious mind, these are some of the experiences that may be had: the body feels light, the mind feels light, and there is a bliss or inner joy that is untouched by any material objects.

The weakness of the intellect

These facts should be considered by the intellect. Even though it listens to everything, the intellect does not believe anything. It wants to be very smart, it likes to think, talk and discuss, it wants to come up with great wisdom, but once it stops doing that, it is not acting intelligently at all, going back to fully automatic behaviour. And that is the subconscious mind.

New learning

In order to know new things, we need the conscious mind. It is not as easily activated as the subconscious mind. It takes much effort, self-discipline and regularity to activate it to the point that the things we are learning are actually settling down in the subconscious mind.

Pure consciousness

Intuition or superconsciousness, cosmic love and cosmic knowledge, is the purest level of consciousness, which cannot be understood by the intellect. It is a knowledge which relates neither to external objects nor to our own memory power. Highly evolved yogis who have been working on themselves for many years use this purest and most divine level of intuition as their main resource, which finally leads to Self-realisation.

Intuitive answers in daily life

A yogi with many years of meditation experience solves all the questions of life in this way. I remember very well how Swami Vishnudevananda was directing the worldwide organisation of centres and *ashrams* single-handedly, and we were constantly asking him all kinds of questions. Sometimes he would say, “Ask me again tomorrow at 4 am”, and at that time he would receive the answer in meditation. Not like us who are asleep with open eyes and only the next day, when the streets are busy and we are standing in line on the subway, do we try to think of what we really want to do today. It is in the early morning, during the silence of *brahmamuhurtha* – the hour of *Brahman*, when all earthly energies are resting – that it is the easiest time to tune to the voice of the intuition. I want to inspire you to practise stilling the mind. Not at 4 am, but at 6 am, or at 10 pm when you are back home after a full day. For half an hour try to calm down the consciousness with all its contents, to stop the movie of the mind and to enter the inner silence.

Yoga has many techniques to control the mind, to still the thoughts: *japa* (mental mantra repetition), *likhita japa* (mantra writing), *kirtan* (mantra chanting), asanas, pranayama, *pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses), and meditation. The length of the practice is not the only criterion; you do not have to sit for hours to reach intuition. Sometimes it happens very quickly and the answers come up like switching on a light. It requires some practice to distinguish whether an answer comes from the instinct or from intuition. If it is an answer which is only good for you, then it definitely comes from the instinct. But if the answer is selfless and requires some more work than a comfortable answer, it most probably comes from the intuition. This is how you can gradually find your own inner answers. You cannot always consult other people, even if they are very wise; you have to be able to find the answers yourself. We should become independent of any system; we should rather use the system, until we reach our own inner freedom, which finally makes us free from the system itself. This is intuition.

Cosmic intelligence

Intuition has nothing to do with reflection – it comes directly from a level of cosmic wisdom. Everything that is being learned already exists in an energy form in the cosmos; each thought and all inventions already exist. Once you rise above the instincts during meditation, slowing down the thoughts of the intellect, you reach the consciousness of the cosmic intelligence. It is this cosmic intelligence that makes us give birth, opens the flower buds, governs all processes in nature – full of regularity, beauty and wisdom. The working of a healthy person is breathtakingly beautiful. The physical conception of a new being is breathtakingly beautiful. The lustre of pure eyes, the natural perfume of a body which is nourished by proper food and its flexible movements are all breathtakingly beautiful.

Cosmic intelligence is everywhere, all over the universe and also within us. Our inner universe and the outer universe are one. This is where we come from; we are an artwork of cosmic intelligence. How can I reach this cosmic intelligence? The answers are found in yoga. *The connection, the union of what I think I am with that which I really am, this is yoga.* It is reached by filling the subconscious mind with positivity, by directing the thoughts and saying, “I want to think in a different way, not just the way I am used to; from now on I am the driver of this chariot.” This ‘I’ is manifesting in the intellect, which has received new information from the living example of the sages.

The blockade of the ego during meditation

The very consciousness that we are having a certain experience can act as a brake during meditation. Many people react with doubt or fear: “Now I am about to take off, I am losing my existence.” But who is this ‘I’? Who is about to lose its existence? Who speaks, who thinks? The ego! The ego does not lead us to intuition. The ego is identification with the body, identification with the idea that I am separate from the experience of cosmic unity. The ego holds on, it wants to organise everything and be the driver of the chariot.

Transcending the three levels of consciousness

It is possible to transcend the subconscious, the conscious and the superconscious mind or intuition. Even intuition is a level which is transcended when the yogi enters into the cosmic

being, because even in intuition there is still a separation, a duality between that which is unchanging and that which we think we are.

Self-realisation comes of its own accord; we do not have to worry about it. Many people in yoga speak about Self-realisation. It is a philosophical debate which brings some positivity. But as soon as we leave the place, we forget all about it.

“Intellect gives the knowledge of external objects.

Intellect is struggle.

Intellect guesses, believes.

Intellect is finite.

Intellect is a product of prakriti (nature).

Intuition is the eye of wisdom.

Intuition is infallible.

Intuition is a flash and illumination.

In intuition time becomes eternity.

Therefore develop intuition.”

Swami Sivananda

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