

Meditation and Modern City Life

by Swami Durgananda

If you look at modern cities, it is almost impossible to meditate, even if you live in a yoga centre. Each time you return from outside, you feel the vibration of the city, and it takes time to get rid of it. And thus you all come to the Sivananda Yoga Centre, some by public transport, some by foot. In the city it is difficult to practise high meditation, and it is getting ever more difficult.

During meditation we try to put our mind into positive and relaxed thoughts, into a divine, cosmic state. At this time the body should not feel any pain. The back and the hips should not hurt. The digestive system should work smoothly. Slow digestion, gases, an overloaded stomach, accelerated heart beat due to too much coffee or tea, high blood pressure due to consumption of a lot of red meat, indigestible food items, all these make meditation impossible.

Maybe your job is filled with so much stress, that you can only relax with cigarettes, an occasional glass of wine, champagne or cognac. This of course makes meditation difficult. If we really look at city life and our working conditions, we see that everybody is taking something just to get along. This is not in itself anything bad, we are just human beings trying to deal with our situation. But if we want to meditate, we must understand that our life has to be adjusted accordingly. In the city this is difficult.

The best way to start a real meditation practice is to go to an *ashram* for 3–4 weeks, finding a real rhythm. There you do not have to go to work, you do not have to see your boss, who is maybe an overweight chain smoker, who constantly counts the money and only looks at you if you are productive for his business. You do not have to see your home, all the responsibilities. You forget your daily life and enter into a very orderly spiritual life.

You get up at 5:30 am and meditate every morning at 6 am. The whole day is filled with activities which calm the mind. You do not have to worry about food; vegetarian meals are being prepared for you. You do some physical exercise, go for a walk or a swim, read

or have a nice conversation with people who do the same, and in the evening you meditate again.

After 3–4 weeks you get a taste of how it is to have a calm mind and to withdraw the senses inside. This cannot be explained in words, just as you cannot explain taste. The vegetables should have a certain taste, not sour, a little bit spicy, yet mild, slightly sweet, but not too sweet. It is impossible to explain this. But if somebody who knows about the combination of spices prepares it for you, you eat it and immediately understand how the taste is supposed to be. Then when you are cooking yourself you can try to find the same taste.

It is the same with the mind. The master says: go within, become quiet and concentrate. Then you will feel good. But you do not know how that feels. This is why for most people the beginning of the practice of meditation is very difficult. When you come directly from city life to a place where there is a talk on meditation, it is difficult to relate to it. It is a deep topic, because we are not just sitting still, we are actually trying to overcome negative forces, which requires more effort. Even if you know the meditation techniques, but you have never experienced that deep silence in an *ashram* or meditation centre, it is difficult to pursue this goal, just like the taste.

If you are sincerely interested to learn it, you should go to an *ashram*. Swami Vishnudevananda has prepared everything for you there. It is like an automatic washing machine – you go there, choose your program and come out shining white. Once you have been white, you know what dirt is. Once you have experienced silence, purity and a regular spiritual practice, you actually feel dirty when you do not practise anymore. Nobody can teach you this. You have to do it yourself.

Advice for meditation: Questions to the practitioner

When a few days ago during a meditation workshop I mentioned that it is impossible to meditate in a city, some people lifted their hand and said, this is not true, I am practising myself. Is anybody amongst you also practising? What are you practising? At what time are you meditating?

– *In the morning or in the evening.*

These are the best times. The best time is sunrise. In the summer this is around 5:15 or 5:30 am. The sun is rising early, the birds are singing, and getting up early is easier than on a dark winter morning. This time is called *brahmamuhurta*, the hour of *Brahman*, the hour of the cosmic truth, of the cosmic energy. At this hour most people are still asleep, work has not started yet, the energies are very quiet. It is a good time. When are you meditating, at 9 or 10 am?

– *Between 9 and 10 am.*

That is better than not meditating at all. But early morning is the best. And then again during sunset. However in the city this is the rush hour. In the countryside sunset is a very beautiful moment, or on the sea shore, like in our *ashram* in Nassau, Bahamas: sunset is at 5:30 pm, dinner at 6 pm. After the *asana* class you take a 10-minute walk on the beach watching the immense ball of fire dipping into the ocean. This is a wonderful time for meditation. In the city this is the time of rush hour, you don't want to meditate then. You may want to meditate a little bit around 10 or 10:30 pm, before going to bed.

How do you meditate? You just close the eyes and fall asleep? That's what I always do...

– *I concentrate on my heart and repeat a mantra, and then the energy comes from within.*

And what do you do then? Are you just beholding the energy? All that is very good, I would just like to add, that you should try to regulate your breath. This will make it much easier, and you will see that the energy will be less aggressive. At times when the energy arises it comes with an aggressive sensation. And many people think: "Oh now it is really happening, surely my *kundalini* is rising." When the *kundalini* is rising in a real practitioner, who is balanced and purified, the energy ascends very gently, never in an aggressive way. You hardly feel it. Thus you should focus more on your breath as an additional practice: Inhale – the abdomen comes out, exhale – the abdomen goes in. *Pranayama* exercises such as *anuloma viloma* will help you to guide the breath as imperceptibly as possible through the body. It brings the mind to a firm concentration, and you can dive deeper into yourself. Then you do not feel anymore what is happening

to you. You will remove yourself from the senses. Finally you transcend the senses, and then you are on the way, meditation really begins. Sit facing north or east – that is the best.

Anybody else? What do you practise? At what time do you meditate?

– *Sometimes at 5:30 am, sometimes a bit later.*

So you are getting up, you take a shower, then you sit in your concentration place, whatever this place may be. You cross your legs and close your eyes. What happens then, what do you do then?

– *I practise some pranayama and then I repeat my mantra along with the breath.*

Which direction are you facing?

– *North.*

You are practising correctly. I just would like to add that you should try to practise always at the same time, if this is possible for you. Some of us are travelling a lot and must meditate at all possible times of the day. I still remember how it was when I was still spending a long time in the same place. I always meditated at 6 am. As soon as I sat down, I was gone. The body has its inner clockwork. If you do something with real precision, like for instance your bowel movement, the body will be ready at the exact time. It is the same with meditation. It would be better for you to meditate every day at 6:30, rather than sometimes at 6:00, which you like best, and sometimes at 6:30. Because this is how it is at present, isn't it? Then it will be better to say: I will meditate everyday at 6:30. Then it is really clear, and body and mind will be tuned to it. If you practise this way, the length of the sitting is less important than the intensity. It is better to sit for 15 minutes and really concentrate, forget all the things you still have to do that day, everything you did, what you are and what you want. You should even forget the goal of meditation; there should not be any expectation. This is how you transcend the mind. The mind is simply switched off. Even if it is only for 15 minutes, it will be very refreshing. Every cell of your body will be rejuvenated. Then you are well prepared for the day, the mind is more relaxed than after the 8 hours of sleep you had. During sleep you are

dreaming and this is not always restful. We believe it to be restful, but often it is not so. The real rest for body and mind is found when we switch off all the senses. That is the goal. Thus you should sit for 15–20 minutes, really letting go of everything. Enter your sitting with this conscious intention: I will forget all the things around me. Then follow the sound of the *mantra*. Dive deeper and deeper into the sound, finally the sound will become one with you and replace all thoughts. You will be in a very beautiful state then. Try it.

Who else meditates? Do you meditate in the morning?

– *I have more time in the evening.*

Are you tired then? Do you feel heaviness in your body? Or are you so wide awake after meditation that you cannot sleep?

– *That does happen. I take this time for reading then.*

Is it not too late for you to get up the next morning?

– *I do not mind that.*

It is not good to sleep too late in the morning. It is not healthy. One should get up at a healthy time, between 6 and 8 am. 8:00 is already late, because life already starts at that time. Specially in the city the whole energy starts moving, people get up, their fears come up, the anger, the greed, the jealousy and all the thoughts for the coming day. The thought world becomes very thick then. During sleep you are picking all this up. During sleep you don't have any control; whatever surrounds you is being picked up. For this reason we have very strong dreams in the morning, which you still remember after waking up, especially if you sleep longer in the morning. If you are becoming a more meditative person who sincerely wishes to develop a spiritual life, you should not sleep too late. I want to tell you that, because if you meditate between 10 and 11 pm, you probably do not sleep before 1 am. And then you need 7 hours of sleep. Where do you meditate, on the sofa?

– *On a chair.*

I am asking, because it is better to meditate on a place where nobody reads the newspaper, watches TV or speaks about things from the world. These vibrations penetrate into your body and will make it difficult to detach from your present life. For meditation you should sit on a special blanket. If you prefer to meditate on a chair, you should place the blanket in such a way that it also covers the back of the chair to neutralize the vibration. Try it – you will see a big difference. Put on clothes which you do not normally wear on the street. The clothes I am wearing now, I do not put on for the street. I only wear them when I speak about things like meditation, they remind me of purity. The vibrations of this dress are purely meditative. It does make a big difference. If possible take a shower before, wash off the whole day. It is not necessary to wash your hair each time. Maybe in the winter you do not want to take that many showers to avoid dryness of the skin. Then you should at least wash hands, face and feet. Because these are the main accumulators of energy. We walk on the earth and take in the vibration, we touch everything with our hands and we look at everything. It is just another help to put aside worldly energies. A shower is of course better, because it neutralizes anger and all kinds of emotions.

Then you go into your breath and then repeat your mantra?

– *Only in the beginning.*

It is better to continue repeating the mantra.

– *For a while there are no thoughts, and when they come back, I start repeating the mantra again.*

Thoughts are always there. You just do not realize it. When you repeat the mantra, you are much more protected. It puts a protective cover around you, which keeps away all negative forces. After a few years of practice, when you have made progress in meditation, then you only repeat the *mantra* consciously in the beginning, then it continues repeating itself by itself. You should try to reach this state. The active repetition of the mantra in itself is an interfering factor. Active repetition is like pushing a weight ahead of you. The first years of meditation require a lot of energy, as you are constantly pushing the world out of your mind, applying spiritual force against negative force. The negative force says: “I am afraid, I am this or that, I am poor, I am rich, I am

thick, I am thin, I like this, I dislike that.” Overcoming these negative forces requires great effort; it is like driving uphill on a bicycle. This is only possible if you bicycle everyday, otherwise you will have to get off the bike and push it uphill walking next to it. When the downhill slope comes, you feel like the king of the universe. Stopping to repeat the mantra is the beginning of the downhill descent, back to where you came from. If you constantly push the spiritual force into your consciousness, the negativity gets tired and finally gives up. Then the mantra keeps repeating itself. You just listen as it is repeating itself. This is the state which you want to reach. Therefore never stop the repetition of the mantra.

Who else meditates? You do? You look like somebody who is meditating. You like it, don't you?

– I meditated up to some years ago

Are you still practising meditation at present?

– Sometimes.

Are you meditating at present, yes or no?

– I meditated this morning

Very good, what did you do?

– I sit down behind my paravent, on the Yellow Pages ...

Excuse me, did you say Yellow Pages? Up to now everything was good, but I don't agree with the Yellow Pages. There are so many names in the Yellow Pages, each name has its own vibration, so you are sitting on the whole city ...

– No, actually it is not the Yellow Pages, it is a fashion catalogue.

Don't you think that it also contains the vibrations of other people? Better to not sit on the catalogue. And this does not mean that you should sit on a spiritual book instead. One

should never sit on any book. This is a cosmic law. Whatever gives us information should be treated with respect. Buy a piece of cloth, some buckwheat, sew it on three sides, fill it with buckwheat, adjust the height to your needs and then sew it closed. This is the best. Or roll a few clean towels which nobody else has used before. Even after putting something into the washing machine, the vibration of other people remains. Buckwheat is the best, it has a very good vibration. Then you cross your legs, and what do you do with your hands?

– I use a mala, because otherwise I will be distracted.

That is good. Keep the left hand on the knee in the *chin mudra*, to keep the energy internalized. The other hand holds the *mala* with the small finger, ring and middle finger. Do not touch the *mala* with the index finger, as it has a negative energy. In Yoga we learn that each finger has a certain energy and is connected to a certain organ, and each organ in turn is connected with a specific energy system in the astral body. Instead of the index finger use the thumb to move the beads. Repeat OM with each bead or your own mantra, until you reach the *meru* bead, which represents the absolute cosmic energy or the *guru* who is the divinity itself. Out of respect never cross over the *meru* – turn the *mala* around and continue in the opposite direction. Also please be careful not to have the beads hang below your navel, as the energy below the navel pulls you back to earthly things like procreation, sleeping, eating, enjoying the senses in a comfortable way. In meditation we want to move into higher spheres. If the *mala* hangs too low, it absorbs these earthly energies, they reach your finger, and from there move up to the brain. The mind becomes tired and gets filled with all these thoughts. Whatever you touch and whatever you do is being multiplied during meditation. Concentration works like a magnifying glass. It is good that you are using a *mala*.

– I always repeat the mantra while exhaling.

Have you been initiated into a mantra?

– Yes.

If it is a longer mantra, you can repeat part of it during the inhalation and the other part during exhalation. For example with “*Om Namah Sivaya*”, you can inhale “*Om Namah*”

and exhale “*Sivaya*”. When the breath is very quiet, you can inhale “*Om Namah Sivaya*” and exhale “*Om Namah Sivaya*”. In case the breath is out of balance after a heavy day or some emotional stress, then you should inhale “*Om Namah*” and exhale “*Sivaya*”. This is better than repeating the mantra only during exhalation. You should always connect the whole breath with the repetition. Does this help you? Otherwise please come and see me afterwards and tell me your mantra, then I will explain you the coordination of your mantra.

Swami Vishnudevananda had us practise daily for 30 minutes – 30 minutes in the morning, and in the ashrams also 30 minutes in the evening. In the centres we meditate for 30 minutes in the morning and in the evening we practise *arati*. In the centres we see so many people everyday that we are too exhausted to sit down for meditation again in the evening. *Arati*, the ceremony of light purification, is then more appropriate. Some still practise in addition their personal meditation in the evening. We only have group meditation in the morning, and this is fully sufficient. To meditate twice a day in the city is impossible – nobody is able to do that, except if you have a completely different lifestyle. But if you have a job, a family and friends, it is impossible. If you can meditate daily for 30 minutes in this situation, it is quite an achievement. If you do not find 30 minutes, practise less, but do practise every day.

Just begin to practise. It is like dirty laundry, you just have to put it into the machine or start washing it by hand – it is a necessity. When the hair is greasy or if you do not like the hairstyle anymore, you wash the hair or you go to the hairdresser. It is the same with the soul. Body, mind and soul need this refreshing regeneration in the silence. I cannot imagine how anybody is able to live without it. You really have to start. There will not be an immediate result, because the mind finds it very strange to just sit and not do anything.

When you sit with eyes closed without doing anything, the mind wants to sleep. This is quite normal, because this is all the mind has learned. But then you start to train the mind and direct it to the focus on the inner point, either the point between the eyebrows or the heart area. This is not the physical heart – it is on the level of the heart, but in the middle. A meditation teacher in India described it in this way: measure one hand span from the chin down, this is the location of the *anahata chakra*. If you are an emotional or artistic type, you should focus on this point. Of course we are all emotional. What is meant is

that if you are over-emotional, seeing everything from an emotional perspective, then it is good to meditate on the *anahata chakra*. If you are more intellectual, asking from your head the why of things, then it is better to go to the *ajna chakra* during meditation. Once you have found a point in meditation, you should definitely not change it, because body and mind get used to it. It takes some time to establish this physical movement. It is like a light highway at the speed of light. If you want to change it, the whole structure is being turned upside down. Once you have chosen a point, stick to it. Then you should complete the meditation with a prayer. We are teaching various prayers in Sanskrit, such as the *Om Tryambakam* mantra. If you do not know any of them, simply say: "I thank you, oh Lord, for the inspiration to go into silence." Say something from your heart. "Please protect me on this day." Once you complete the meditation, you are firmly enveloped. It is necessary to close yourself up again consciously after meditation.

Who else is meditating?

– *I meditate every morning.*

That is wonderful. Do you live in a quiet area?

– *Yes, in a quiet place. I meditate in front of an altar on which my Ishta Devata is placed.*

Very nice, are you sitting directly in front of it, or from the side.

– *Directly in front of it.*

Are you burning incense and a candle?

– *Yes, candles.*

Do you bring sometimes flowers?

– *Yes.*

Speak with your *Ishta Devata*. When you come to meditation, prostrate first, and then sit. It would be good to first invoke your god with a prayer. Because the image always closes

itself up. Do you have a picture or a statue of the *Ishta Devata*?

– *A statue.*

If you treat the statue in such a way as if the *Ishta Devata* is actually living in the statue, you can actually invoke the living presence of the *Ishta Devata* during your practice in the statue. For this, *puja* is practised in Indian temples – it is actually very scientific. I would advise you to bathe the statue everyday with milk and water mixed with rosewater. For this you place the statue in a bowl and recite the *mantra* of the *Ishta Devata* during the bathing. Then you dry and decorate it with a beautiful cloth. Just wrap a piece of cloth around the statue. I am practising this myself.

You can do this everyday. Then you place a flower in front of it. Through this invocation you are opening the flow of energy, and when you sit afterwards, you receive this energy – an energy exchange is being established between the statue and you. When you invoke the name, the name goes into the statue, and it reflects through the statue back to you. For this it has to be purified every day. Because during the day it attracts different energies from the thought world. These you neutralize with milk, water with the fresh fragrance of rose water and a fresh piece of cloth. Place the statue on a beautiful plate, burn incense and a candle and then begin your meditation. You yourself are also pure – surely you are taking a shower before meditation – you prostrate, and then you will see how strong the energy will be. At the end, say: “Thank you for the beautiful *darshan*” – the energy. Then the energy withdraws itself again. It is a real communication. If you go to a temple, where this is being practised twice daily, you actually feel how the statue is speaking to you and answers your questions. Just to be in the presence of such a statue is the high point of a visit to an Indian temple.

You can do this at home. We are practising this here. The statues are already quite strong, because they have been purified.

This is my advice for you, because you have this inside of you, you have a tendency for this. Later on you can learn a complete *puja*. This takes about 15 minutes and it is very beautiful. It softens the heart and purifies the whole house.

Anybody else is meditating?

Now nobody dares to say anything. All this is very individual – you do not have to do it this way. We brought from Poland a beautiful cross made of crystal. These crosses were specially made for the upcoming visit of the Pope. The people in Krakow have deep reverence for the Pope. He originally comes from Krakow, and he himself has deep reverence for the people there. We bought six crosses: one we installed on the altar of our small yoga group in Krakow, and the others are now being placed on the altars of our European centres. You can also worship the cross – it does not have to be something Indian. Purify it everyday and envelop it with a white cloth. Then you can recite a Christian prayer and start your meditation. Remember why Jesus allowed Himself to be put on the cross. He did have all the *siddhis*, the supernatural powers – he could transform water into wine and walk over the waters. Surely he also had the capacity to put these people asleep for some time and thus escape. But he did not want to do this. He wanted to show to us all that we are neither body nor mind. You cannot destroy somebody by destroying his body. The soul lives for ever. This is the message of the cross. If you meditate thus in front of the cross in your home, you transcend at that time body and mind and you are tuning to Jesus Christ, our Lord, asking him to lift you up out of this *maya*, this illusion. This is another way to meditate.

Is anybody else meditating? Some of you are meditating, but they feel too shy to say so. I understand it very well. When I started I would not have said a word, I was also very shy.

During meditation, the negativity of the mind is overcome. While you are fully focusing on the object of meditation – be it a statue, a cross, your mantra or your breath – you are transcending then and there the negative thoughts. The mind can only concentrate on one thing at a time.

After intense spiritual quest in India and North America, Swami Durgananda was initiated and trained in Yoga by Sri Swami Vishnudevananda (1927–1993), founder of the International Sivananda Yoga Centres and Ashrams. As one of his senior-most and closest students, she accompanied him on many travels to both East and West. As per the wish of her teacher, Swami Durgananda established the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres in Europe. Swami Vishnudevananda guided her personally in the training of yoga teachers and conferred on her the title “Yoga Acharya”, as one of his spiritual successors.

With deep intuition Swami Durgananda is guiding many people on the inner path and teaches Meditation, Yoga Psychology, Nutrition, Positive Thinking, Mythology and Eastern Philosophy. In 1998 Swami Durgananda founded the Sivananda Yoga Retreat House in Reith bei Kitzbühel/Tyrol. People from all over the world come for yoga vacation year round. The classical Yoga Teachers' Training Course and the Advanced Teachers' Training Course are the highlights of the year. www.sivananda.eu