# Essential Meditation - Class 3 Notes

## Asana

Asana, simply translated, means 'posture,' or 'pose.' Anyone who is familiar with the common practice of yoga knows that each of the individual postures in a yoga session is called an asana. For our purposes, asana in meditation is simple: sit upright with your back straight. You can sit cross-legged on a cushion, kneel on a bench, or sit on the front few inches of a standard chair. The important thing is to avoid slouching to the best of your ability, in order to give your body the best chance of having a free flow of circulation and breath without bringing on too much sleepiness.

There is, of course, plenty more to be said on this topic. The lore of yoga has it that the stretching poses and exercise of yoga was developed in order to aid in the physical health of monastic individuals who were meditating too much and allowing their bodies to break down due to inactivity. Since the history of yoga is so vast, it's difficult to know if this is true - there is, however a lesson in this story. The purpose of asana in the 8 Limbs is to ensure that there is adequate movement to ensure good health of the physical body.

It's not my purpose to lecture anyone here in this class on the importance of exercise, so, suffice to say, that to have some degree of cardiovascular fitness, strength, and flexibility will allow your body to support a robust meditation practice. If one is not paying any attention at all to their physical well-being, one will have a difficult time progressing in meditation.

## Mindfulness

Another aspect of asana is the "posture" of your mind. We discussed this last week to a degree, but it bears repeating that in order to have a meditation that achieves quietude and depth, one must work with his/her/their mind and attention throughout the day. Mindfulness can be seen as a type of asana that we adopt throughout the day; an asana that helps us to quickly establish the correct posture of our attention once we sit down to our actual practice.

Again, mindfulness is about more than just 'being in the moment.' This is the start, just like it is within a sitting practice, but true mindfulness involves observing the interaction between one's sensory experience - sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and physical feelings - and the reactions of the mind to that exterior world. Place your awareness in a state of inquiry: "Where is my attention right now?" "How am I reacting to the world around me?" "Are these thoughts that are repeating in my mind true?" Mindfulness asks us to bring our attention from constant projection to the future or residing in the past into a state of presence. This presence is one of a deepening awareness of how our attention tends to be in our day-to-day lives, as well as the habits and cycles that our thought patterns construct throughout the day.

## Pranayama

We are already at the 4th Limb! The translation of Pranayama is broken into two parts - Prana, which means breath or vital life force, and Yama, which you remember from the 1st Limb means to restrain. So Pranayama means to consciously control the flow of breath or life force. There are literally hundreds of

pranayama practices out there, I recommend trying some different ones out to see how they affect your practice. For our purposes, stick to one or two pranayama practices, and do it for five minutes before your daily meditation practice. Generally most pranayama practices help to produce a clearer mind, an invigorated body, and a more productive meditation.

Breath is the wind that moves, that circulates, that renews the body and the mind. There is a hidden secret hidden in the practice of pranayama - front-loading your brain with oxygen helps your brain to function better! Most people in our modern world spend way too little time breathing deeply. Anxiety, stress, and the fight-or-flight reflex place us in a state of constant shallow breath that can lead to concentration issues, exhaustion, and poor sleep. Taking a few minutes out of your day to consciously regulate your breathing - to force your body to breathe more deeply and rhythmically - can actually drastically improve your health.

Our brains comprise of only 2% of our body, but consumes over 20% of the oxygen circulating in our blood! Neurons in the brain need a tremendous amount of energy, and oxygen plays a critical role in the production of that energy. So by performing pranayama, you are vitalizing all of the cells of your body, but especially your brain to function with more clarity and readily-available energy.

I am going to introduce just a few practices of pranayama. The first comes from the Daoist tradition and is called the Microcosmic Circuit. There is an audio meditation on the website explaining how to do this practice. With a deep in-breath through the nose, use your imagination to visualize a river of light or energy moving from the base of your spine, all the way up your spine, through your brain, and up over the top of you head to your third eye in your forehead between your eyebrows. Then, with your out-breath, let that energy descend down the front of your body, back down to your pelvic bowl, where it will collect and be ready to circulate up your soon on your next in-breath. Keep doing this circulation for five minutes.

Another pranayama is called Ujjayi Pranayama, or Victorious Breath. This is a common pranayama, and can help calm your mind and increase clarity of consciousness. Take a steady breath in through both nostrils. Inhale until you reach your lung capacity; maintain a tall spine. Hold your breath for a second, then constrict some of the breath at the back of your throat, as if you were about to whisper a secret, and exhale slowly through both nostrils. This exhalation will sound like an ocean wave or gentle rush of air. You should feel the air on the roof of your mouth as you exhale. Continue this practice for five minutes or longer.

A third practice is known as 2 to 1 breathing, where you take approximately twice as long to exhale as you do to inhale. This practice is great if you are experiencing heightened anxiety or stress. It activates the parasympathetic nervous system and can help take you out of the fight-or-flight repsponse. Breath in deeply through your nose, expanding your lungs and chest fully. Slowly exhale through pursed lips, as though you are breathing through a straw. Retain just a little bit of breath at the end of your exhale, and repeat.

With any of these practices, find a rhythm that makes sense and feels good in your body. If you feel light-headed or short of breath at all, just stop the practice and return to breathing normally. It will pass. When you feel ready, start the practice again. If you continue to get lioght-headed, you might be doing the practice with a bit too much intensity.

**Homework!**

We are continuing with our practice of Anapanasati, following the breath. We are maintaining the 10-minute length for this week, so breathe easy!

Add in one 5-minute pranayama practice at the beginning of each 10-min meditation session. Take note of any differences you notice from the addition of pranayama.

Keep it up, you're doing great!