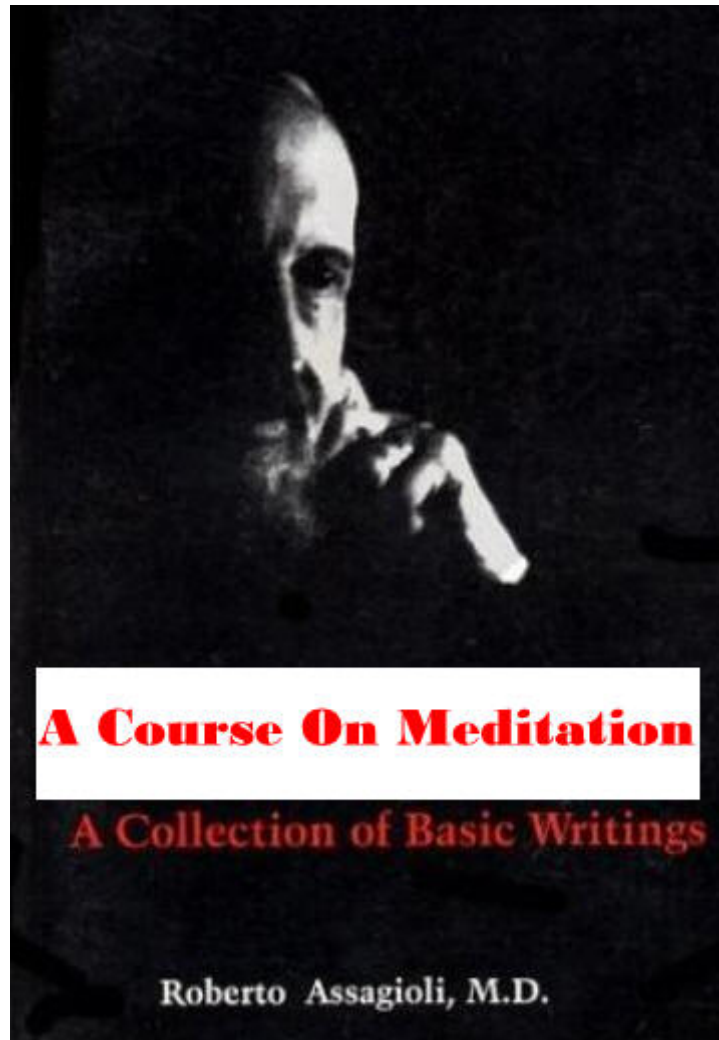


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A Course On Meditation

By Roberto Assagioli



A Course On Meditation

Roberto Assagioli was one of the masters of modern psychology in the line that runs from Sigmund Freud through C. G. Jung and Abraham Maslow.

Himself a colleague of all these men, Assagioli was among the pioneers of psychoanalysis in Italy, though he pointed out that Freud had largely neglected the higher;reaches of human nature.

Over many years until his death in 1974 Dr. Assagioli developed a comprehensive psychology known as psychosynthesis.

Psycho-synthesis sees man as tending naturally toward harmony within

himself and with the world. Dr. Assagioli's concept of the will is a key part of that vision. Penguin Books also publishes Roberto Assagioli's *Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques*.

The Act of Will

AN ESALEN BOOK

The Esalen Publishing Program is edited by Stuart Miller



Also by Roberta Assagioli, M.D.
Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques

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Chapter 01

Introduction

There are today many approaches to meditation. Some are quite new; some have been known and practiced for thousands of years. The approach described here draws from classical Eastern systems, such as Raja Yoga, and Western psychological systems that include the transpersonal dimension, such as psychosynthesis.

It aims at expanding, elevating, and illuminating consciousness through the harmonious and integrated action of body, feelings, and the

mind. It harnesses the considerable power of the mind, directing it toward higher or more profound states of consciousness. It is well-suited for many of us today as a bridging process, a mediatory means by which we can expand our awareness beyond our normal level of concrete mental activity, and reach to the world of meaning, of pure ideas and to the superconscious region, thus building a usable path between these realms, Insights that flow through this path permeate and vivify the whole of our being, and as the process continues, we become more and more in harmony, with ourselves and with all that is around us.

What is Meditation

The urge to discover more about the inner side of life is stimulating many today to a new interest in meditation. In the past this kind of "*higher thinking*" was considered a passive, reflective form of devotion, but meditation as it is becoming widely practiced today is a positive and creative use of the mind, actively linking the inner and the outer worlds. It entails concentration, reflection, a clear conception and formulation of ideas or thoughts, and then considering and visualizing ways and means of relating them to life, thus taking into account the affective domain and physical activity. The usual contraposition of meditation on the one hand and action on the other is misleading. Meditation is inner action.

The "*inner action*" of thought is something that we use all the time, even though we may not notice it. Thought lies at the back of everything we do: building our attitudes, our relationships and our whole way of life. In the world of the mind are born the practical beginnings of everything that man creates on earth. From the architect's thinking before he makes his blueprints, to the scientist seeking a new formula, from the world statesman to the educator, the fabric of everyday life is being woven out of thinking. In this way the future is hourly being created, thinkers are building the pattern of things to come.

Each one of us can consciously use creative thinking, and with it participate in building the inner structure of the world that is to be. For it is not only the thought of the inventors, the scientists and the nations' leaders that is bringing in the new civilization—the weight of the mass of public thought and the power of all men's aspiration are bringing

into being the circumstances and the conditions that we shall have tomorrow. Each of us can play a constructive part in this if we so choose.

The mind can become a great creative instrument as well as a vital "*activator*." Its vision can link us with our higher possibilities, and through it we can probe the outer boundary of our existing knowledge and catch sight of the world of meaning and values. This enables us to gather in the higher ideas of the true, the good, the needed, bringing them down to everyday recognition and making them part of life.

Creative thinking is a definite stage in objectifying ideas and higher concepts; and because thought is an energy we can use its power to develop the qualities, the attitudes, and the conditions that we think should prevail. If we use thought consciously and creatively, we can bring about changes in ourselves and our lives, as well as in our environment and in the world.

But thought often plays through us unconsciously and haphazardly, and frequently it has us instead of our having it, bringing worry and depression and sweeping us along with its own force. If we use it selfishly it can even be destructive. Therefore, at the same time as we realize the power of thought we must see the vital need for right thought, for right motive behind thought, and for right understanding of its subtle processes.

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Chapter 02

The Process of Meditation

Most people have only a vague idea of what meditation really is, and we need to clarify how it is accomplished, how it functions, what it achieves, and the service it can give.

Thought is an energy, an unseen but real power, and through meditation we can focus it to build, to feed, to maintain an idea, a quality or a rule or law of life. As we have said, meditation is inner action - action in the inner worlds. There are many kinds of inner

action; all thinking, hoping, imagining, all aspiration and desire, are activities of this type, but they are generally carried on without conscious intention and without a sense of responsibility.

Meditation, on the other hand is conscious deliberate inner action to fulfill a specific purpose

We can get a good idea of the different kinds of action and their definite stages, which we propose to master in meditation—from the analogy of a missile being sent into space, pursuing its course and returning to earth. A corresponding cycle takes place in the meditation process.

The first stage is that of projection. The propelling energy of the missile conquering the downward pull of gravity projects it upwards into orbit around the earth, or beyond. In the same way we can project our center of consciousness upwards, through the sphere of feeling and imagination, and penetrate to the world of thought and even further—to transpersonal levels. Our propelling energy is that of aspiration, which has aptly been called "*fiery aspiration*", and we direct it—as in fact we must direct the whole meditation process by the great unrealized potency of the will.

The second stage for the missile is its approach to the gravitational field of another center of attraction. In meditation this corresponds to coming into contact with some higher center of energy or life, some realm of thought, or some specific region in the inner worlds.

The next stage is the delicate one of utilizing the pull from the new center. If this is rightly achieved, the self-propelling energy still existing in the missile will enable it to circle around the new center, keeping in orbit. The same is true of the individual consciousness in penetrating to higher, inner levels. It has to attain the region towards which it is directed, but must maintain its freedom and not become a prisoner of it. It must remain in that area only as long as is required for its purpose, that is, the experiencing and registering of whatever can be gathered from the center with which rapport is being made, or from the region of thought attained. Then we should bring the meditation to a close harmoniously and intentionally.

The essential task of receiving information from the instruments in the missile corresponds to our registering and rightly interpreting the ideas that we find in the higher realms; and, finally, all of this has to be

utilized and integrated into our existing knowledge and experience, as is the information obtained from the missile.

There is still a further point in this analogy; control of the missiles and knowledge of their position with respect to the earth is maintained throughout their whole course. So it is with meditation, conscious control should never be lost. It is possible to fall into a state of unconsciousness, but projection to this extent is wrong and dangerous.

Meditation must always be a conscious process, we must remain fully aware the whole time, and from this point of awareness—here, where we are—direct the whole process, watching it, controlling it, and regulating its extension and duration.

Preparation

Much of the success of meditation depends upon *right* and *careful preparation*. To begin with, as quiet a place as possible should be chosen at least until we are used to meditating—where we can feel that our privacy will not be disturbed. We should sit in a comfortable position. While the Eastern way of sitting cross-legged has the advantage of keeping the spine erect, it is a difficult posture for those who are not accustomed to it, and is not necessary. An effective preliminary to meditation is to read or study something connected with the theme we will be meditating on, and if there is time we should do this as it greatly facilitates the tuning in of the mind.

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Chapter 03

Relaxation

Next, we should try to eliminate all physical, emotional, and mental tension, because such tension is a quite useless expenditure of both nervous and muscular energy.

Relaxation is an art that has to be worked at, and it is not as simple as it may appear. In trying to achieve it, we are apt to fall into the opposite extreme—a state of passivity which ends in drowsiness.

The aim is to eliminate all superfluous tension, while retaining the muscular tone necessary for alertness and for full attention to what we

are doing.

The various techniques of relaxation cannot be described here, but there are many books which go fully into the different aspects of this subject.

One of the most effective ways of achieving relaxation is through slow, rhythmic breathing. But breathing exercises *should be done with caution*, for they can be harmful if carried out too strenuously.

An adequate exercise consists of a deep breath with short pauses held at the end of each in-breathing and each out-breathing. This can be done about ten times, rhythmically and slowly. There should be no sense of strain, either in breathing or during the pauses, steady rhythm rather than length of time being the aim.

The respiratory muscles should be relaxed with the out-breathing; this "*letting go*" of tension can then be diffused to all the other muscles of the body and a general relaxation achieved.

Physical relaxation is a first and necessary step to the more important one of psychological relaxation. The latter comprises *emotional* and *mental relaxation*, which have to be achieved in two distinct phases corresponding to the two different levels of the inner worlds on which we will be working—the *emotional and mental*. Each has to be handled separately and in its own way.

If, after *relaxing physically*, we begin to observe ourselves psychologically, we *generally find that various feelings come and go*. These emotions have to subside. It is not good to repress them forcibly, but the very fact of calmly observing them from what might be called "*above*", without being identified with them, causes them gradually to lose their hold and their intensity, so that they cease to sway us and quiet down—if not completely, *at least to a degree in which they no longer constitute a serious obstacle; and that is good enough*.

This forms the *first part of psychological relaxation*; the *second part is mental relaxation*. By nature the mind is restless and in continuous activity, and this is increased by the high tempo of modern life and also by emotional stimulation. If we have managed to exclude for the moment the activities of ordinary life and *have quieted the emotions*, it will be *less difficult to deal* with the natural restlessness of the mind itself.

This cannot be done completely in the preparatory stage; it will be the *chief task in the first part of the actual meditation, which is concentration*. In the preparatory stage it is enough to reach a certain degree of disidentification from the mind's activity and to resist being carried by it this way and that, distinguishing this activity from the consciousness of the self, whom we could call the "*Observer*."

This provides what might be regarded as a platform from which to go on to the actual meditation. Here, also, the aim is not to suppress by violence, or by an effort which immediately brings tension and therefore defeats its object. The method to be used is more that of attrition, of not feeding with interest any stray thoughts or images which remain in the mind; they will not then interfere seriously with the inner action of meditation.

This preparation could be described as making room in and around the center of consciousness for the exercises of concentration that are to follow, yet without attempting to clear the whole area completely at this stage.

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Chapter 04

Concentration

In taking up the subject of concentration the first point to realize is the difference between spontaneous or *automatic concentration* and deliberate *controlled concentration*. They are different both in nature and in the way they work. What is called spontaneous concentration is the functioning of the mind under the impulse of a strong interest, desire or feeling, which keeps it working along a certain line. A typical example is the businessman as he plans for the success of his organization. Another example is the student's *concentration on the*

subjects on which he expects to be examined.

Those who can concentrate effectively in this way are under the illusion that their power of concentration is good.

And it does indicate a certain aspect of it, but the ability to keep the mind on a task or subject when driven by intense interest, need or fear, does not necessarily mean that it can be done when that incentive is lacking. The fact is that when we try to concentrate on some abstract subject, or on something which entails no personal interest or benefit, *we find it much more difficult and frequently discover that we have no real control over our minds after all.*

It is evidence that our emotions, drives, and thoughts play, almost dramatically, through us and are the strong forces in our lives. In other words, we are driven by them and are not ourselves the choosing, directing, controlling factor.

This is one reason why the more purely mental or spiritual interests have not the driving potential of the usual personal interests of the average nun. Another reason is an inherent difference in the nature of these interests.

Abstract subjects are "*thinner*"; they are more intangible for the mind to take hold of and focus on. The mind, being less accustomed to this subtler and more difficult way of functioning, is reluctant to face it and turns away

It is a new kind of activity, and generally speaking any new subject or new area of knowledge presents difficulties to begin with. Our minds do not like starting to work in new fields; in those with which they are familiar much work has already been done; there is a background or experience and there are connections which make the work easier. *A new subject requires much more concentration and effort.*

The realization that we are not the masters of our minds may shock us, but if it does, that is good; it will galvanize us into making efforts towards such mastery, and will help to provide the emotional incentive which was lacking previously. Another important result of these discoveries about ourselves is awareness that there is a difference between ourselves and our minds and emotion

The unsuccessful effort to keep the mind at work has shown that there is a conflict and conflict means that there are two factions which

disagree. This awareness of conflict is valuable, therefore, in bringing to light the difference between the "I" with its own will, and the mind, which is often unruly, reluctant or lazy, and has, in a way, a life of its own.

These preliminary but vital recognitions provide a foundation for the task of *learning to concentrate the mind at will*. They bring understanding of ourselves and give the incentive we need to become masters of this precious instrument, the mind, which is so excellent a servant when dominated, but which gives such trouble when it goes its own way.

The initial technique to be used in acquiring mastery over the mind, and ability to concentrate at will is to begin with concentration on simple and neutral subjects which have no interest for us. In this way we learn to hold the mind steady without the help of personal interest and desire

There are many types of such exercises in concentration which can be practiced Visual perception is a simple one and consequently a good one to work with first.

It is a training of attention, not of thought processes, and it develops an elementary ability to focus the attention, which is the first step in the more advanced and complex processes of meditation on abstract subjects

A simple exercise in visual perception is to observe a set of objects rapidly and accurately. For instance, observe the contents of a room for half a minute, and then write as detailed an account of the same as possible. The same exercise can be done by looking in a shop window or examining a picture.

Exercises in observing outward objects are a preparation for *concentration on inner objects*—on inner pictures or images. An exercise which provides a transition between the two is to observe a picture for twenty or thirty seconds, then close the eyes and try to keep the image of the picture in the "*mind's eye*" or "*inner eye*."] "

We all have this power of imagination in the sense of being able to picture objects, faces and so on, which are familiar. It is more developed and vivid in some people than others, but for the present purpose it is not so much the vividness which is important as the power to keep the picture steady before the mind's eye, and to be able to concentrate the attention on it.

Looking at the picture for a time helps considerably in getting a clear image, and therefore in the holding of it.

A second exercise of this type is to evoke an image and keep it steady for a short time without having looked at it just before. One can start with some familiar object, such as a building that is seen every day, a view one knows, or a member of the family. The image should be built precisely, with concentration on the details, and then held steady for a certain time.

Here begins a real fight—an interesting but sometimes exasperating skirmish—between our will to keep the image steady and the fluid nature of the imagination, which is accustomed to pass from one thing to another in rapid and often disordered succession.

It will play all sorts of tricks; it will distort the image, enlarge, add some alien element to it, divide it into two or more parts, substitute something else for it, in fact do anything and everything except *let the picture remain quietly before the mind's eye*.

This fact is again revealing. Once more we have undeniable evidence that we are not the masters of our mechanism and that there is conflict between it and ourselves. It is here that the process of *self-mastery really begins in the sense of controlling*, directing, and using—at will—our whole mechanism.

Apart from these specific exercises, there is ample opportunity for us to *train our concentration during everyday life*. It means simply giving full attention to the matter at hand without letting the mind wander.

Habitual actions are frequently carried out in a more or less dreamy way, with stray thoughts about extraneous things playing through the mind. This creates a state of passive dissociation which can grow to harmful proportions, and is in any case a waste of energy.

Concentration on the other hand enhances the ability to live in the present in general, and specifically in that focused section or area of the present where our immediate activity lies.

There is a higher and more important form of concentration than those types so far dealt with. It is that of the *Observer* or inner *Spectator* who, perfectly concentrated himself, observes the flowing

panorama of the psychological life—called by William James the "*mind stream*"—and in a detached way perceives it, assesses it and, when needed, intervenes to change it.

Such an inner attitude is not at all easy to maintain consistently. Being what might be termed "*on the bank*" of the mind stream, we tend to be drawn into it by its currents.

The attention is easily caught by some surge of emotion, by some interesting idea, by some impelling drive, and we have to draw it back *continually to the center of concentration*, to the self, the awareness, the part in us which is persistent and unchanging throughout all the variations of the psychological flow.

The key to acquiring the power of concentration is, as in every other skill, prolonged patience and repeated practice. Two extremes should be avoided. One is doing these apparently uninteresting exercises in a more or less perfunctory way, as a kind of routine; this would be too superficial to serve much purpose. The other extreme to be avoided is working with them too strenuously and forcibly. Nor should we attempt to do these exercises when tired for then there is little likelihood of success, and any progress made will be at the cost of too great a strain.

Another point is that we should not be discouraged by initial lack of success, especially the inability to maintain concentration for a certain time. At first it is good enough if we can achieve real concentration for ten and then twenty seconds; a minute or two is quite long.

So it is better to carry out *repeated short exercises* with some success than try forcibly to keep the attention fixed for a longer time.

Finally there are two helpful attitudes which, as the *Observer*, each of us should try to maintain through all the experiments and exercises. The first of these is patience with ourselves or, more accurately, with our mechanism—the attitude that we would adopt towards an unruly child whose cooperation we hoped to gain in the end. The other attitude is confidence that persistence will bring success. The following words of Hermann Keyserling—from his *Travel Diary of a Philosopher*—will reinforce our confidence as well as emphasize the value of what we are attempting to achieve.

Undoubtedly the power of concentration is the real propelling power of the whole of our psychic mechanism. Nothing heightens our

capacity for performance as much as its increase; every success, no matter in what domain, can be traced back to the intelligent use of this power.

No obstacle can resist permanently the exceptional power of utmost concentration. Attention forces every problem sooner or later to reveal all of its aspects which are capable of recognition by a specific nature.

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Chapter 05

Types of Meditation

In keeping with conventional practice, we can call *meditation the process of sustained, controlled mental attention and activity*. Under this general heading qualifying words will then define the various specific kinds, stages, and techniques.

We have already dealt with the *first stage of meditation-concentration*. The principal types of meditation should now be looked at briefly, before we go on to deal with some of them in detail.

First there is *reflective meditation* which is a strictly mental process. It is sequential, coordinated thinking on or about a definite subject, theme, word, or thought—such as those which are called "*seed thoughts*"; this is an apt term because the original or starting thought is the "*seed*" of all the subsequent development of the subject.

Then there is what can be called *receptive meditation* because its purpose is the reception by the mind of "*light*" on some subject, truth or realization.

It is important to realize that receptive does not mean passive or negative; it indicates, instead, a state of intense alertness without any autonomous functioning. It can be compared to listening or trying to see something which is far away, or, using electronics terms, *to the mind acting as a receiving station* and trying to tune itself to the transmitting station.

This transmitting station is primarily the *Transpersonal Self*; the process is called inspiration, or in some cases intuition, and the result is illumination of the mind. But the effects of such meditation are not limited to that alone, for the new and higher truths perceived have a transforming and elevating power over the whole personality; they change the whole man.

The third type is creative meditation which aims first at the building of a dynamic, effective, well-defined thought or idea, then at changing it with the energy of feeling, and finally at animating or propelling by will, so that it fulfills a definite function or purpose; this function may work out either in the inner worlds, or in the world of outer action by supplying a pattern or an incentive.

There is still another aspect of meditation which has been called elevation or ascent. Initially it leads to receptive meditation. Here the endeavor is to raise the center of consciousness deliberately to ever higher levels of the inner world.

It is like mounting an inner ladder towards the *Transpersonal Self*, and sometimes contacting it for a brief moment. When the highest point has been reached, an active interplay between the mind and the Self may take place; this has been called by Martin Buber and others the inner dialogue.

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Chapter 06

Reflective Meditation

The simplest definition of the first kind of meditation mentioned reflective meditation—is just "*thinking*". This is a correct definition as far as it goes, but it does not go very far, for generally we do not give much thought to thinking! We imagine that, being intelligent, we can think whereas just thinking about anything that interests us is in fact only an elementary state of mental activity.

It has been said that usually the mind "*thinks in us*", rather than that

we think. This means that the activity of the mind is a process that as a rule goes on pretty much by itself promoted by stimuli or drives of different kinds and flowing in a disorderly way, one train of thought driven out by a second, the second by a third, and so on.

To describe this state of affairs in amore exact way, we can say that normally the mind is largely independent from the "I" and from the will; it is interfered with all the time by emotions, drives, images, and external stimuli, and reacts to them. Such mental activity scarcely deserves the name of real thinking, for it is only when a strong urge or interest keeps the mind at work that it functions in an orderly and productive way.

Spontaneous—what we might call unconscious or unrealized—meditation is often practiced by people who do not give it that name. The scientist working out a problem, the philosopher thinking out a concept, the business man intelligently planning the organization of his affairs, are all examples of this, for they are all demonstrating coherent organized use of the mind—of the thinking function.

As a preliminary to true meditation, we must realize that the mind is in fact a tool, an inner tool, from which we must dis-identify ourselves in order to facilitate its proper use.

The practice of concentration teaches us the first step—how to control the mind, how to keep it steady and one-pointed in the chosen direction.

Now comes the next step—that of not keeping it still but making it proceed, walk, so to speak, along the way we want it to go, towards some chosen goal.

Thinking in this sense means reflecting or brooding upon a given, well-defined subject, and working out all the implications, ramifications, and meanings implicit in it. And meditation can be said to be an unbroken flow of thought toward the object of concentration.

The first requirement, then for *developing the art of thinking* is to give close *attention to the actual process of thinking*, for example, to notice immediately when its course begins to deviate as a result of either emotional reaction or preconceived mental attitude, or—as is frequently the case—in response to the process of mechanical association, which carries the mind through a series of allied subjects to a point far from the starting place.

The second requirement is persistence—thinking through. Here some rather curious things happen. At first, after a few minutes of reflective thinking, it may seem that the subject has been exhausted, that there is nothing left to think about.

But if we persist through this blank period and continue to reflect, we begin to discover other unrealized aspects; we may even find what appeared at first to be a dearth of content is, in fact, an overabundance—what the French call an "*embarras de richesses*," Then a new difficulty appears—how to explore all the now perceived aspects and complexities of the subject, and how to deal with the inrush of new thought trains.

In numerable subjects are suitable for reflective meditation, and mention can be made here only of the different categories. Psychological and spiritual qualities offer an almost endless series—courage, harmony, serenity, joy, will, and so on. Symbols constitute another type.

One can also meditate on a phrase embodying a thought. Such "*seed thoughts*" are, of course, also innumerable, but they can be divided broadly into two classes;

- *first those* that appear simple and obvious, but which turn out to conceal a world of meaning;

- *second those* that are formulated in a paradoxical and therefore challenging way.

These are often in the form of an apparent contradiction, the reconciliation of which lies in a higher or more comprehensive synthesis of the two opposite terms, for instance -

"Act with interest and without interest."

"Suffer with joy" (Which does not mean to enjoy suffering)

"Make haste slowly." (An old Latin saying, "*festinalente*.")

"Live in the eternal and in the moment."

"See action in inaction and inaction in action"

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Chapter 07

Technical Suggestions on Reflective Meditation

The first suggestion is never to concentrate on negative aspects but to direct the attention to those that are positive.

The second is to write down immediately any worthwhile thoughts or conclusions arrived at.

Concepts that seem clear and vivid at the time have a way of disappearing from the consciousness very quickly and are lost—at least

temporarily—if not fixed right away.

The formulation of thoughts verbally also forces us to clarity of thinking and precision, and exposes any confusion and vagueness in our minds.

The process of writing is itself a stimulus to meditation, and may lead to further valuable thoughts, "*flowing from the pen*," so to speak.

Writing in this sense is a meditation technique; it definitely helps in keeping the mind oriented and active along the desired lines and in maintaining its focus.

The length of time to be spent on meditation varies, but to begin with *it should not exceed ten or fifteen minutes*; that is quite long enough. The length of period during which one subject should be used as the theme also varies, but it should not be less than a week, and after some practice one often finds a month none too long.

In fact some subjects appear to be virtually inexhaustible. A good method is to meditate on certain themes cyclically, that is, a series of subjects may be listed and each one be used in turn for a week, after which the series is gone through again.

At this point the time factor should be mentioned. This is a problem that everyone comes up against. Nearly all feel that they have so much to do, their lives are so complicated, there is so little privacy today and the demands of work and family leave so little spare time or energy, that, although they realize the value of a time of meditation each day, they feel that they cannot undertake it. These difficulties are real.

The whole organization and machinery of modern living take no account at all of the rights of the inner life, and so the whole trend at present is against it. But in spite of these formidable problems, if we feel the value of the inner life strongly enough and really intend to give it some time, we can usually find a way of making room in the day for at least a short meditation. Ten or fifteen minutes is not a long period to fit into a twenty-four hour program.

It is plain, however, that it is almost impossible to have ideal conditions for this in modern life, and any quiet time that we find in the day is an oasis to be taken advantage of. A good rhythm to establish is that of meditating in the same place first thing every morning, before entering into the melee of the day.

Regularity is most valuable, but we should not be dependent upon such rhythm and, even if it takes longer to attune ourselves to the inner

work and is more difficult, it is better to learn to do this quite independently of our surroundings.

Each one of us has his own problems on this and each has to solve them as best he can.

The rewards of reflective meditation are many. First it brings increasing proficiency in using the mental tool and a growing sense of mastery of the mind.

This, of course, is reached only by degrees, and we cannot expect to achieve perfection; but even a fair degree of control of the mind is gratifying and most valuable, for the mind is a bad master, but a most useful servant.

Other results will emerge if we seriously undertake and continue this form of inner action, which is also a necessary preliminary step to the other types of meditation.

It begins our training in this field of work and lays the foundations for all future achievement.

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Chapter 08

Receptive Meditation

Receptive meditation is a most valuable part of our mental training, but, although it may seem quite simple, it is actually the most difficult kind of meditation and one in which we are quite likely to commit mistakes.

There are also real dangers attached to it and we might, therefore, feel inclined to leave it alone. Indeed, it is not advisable for everyone, but there are good reasons for training ourselves in it and adopting it as a regular part of our inner action, and so its right and safe use will be

explained.

First of all we should realize how invaluable receptive meditation is and how helpful is the insight it can bring, both in our spiritual realizations and in guiding our personal lives.

Second, increased sensitivity, or receptivity to "*impressions*" is a natural and spontaneous result of inner harmonization, and of relationship or contact with the Transpersonal Self.

Third, if rightly practiced it is not only without dangers, but is of great help in avoiding the dangers of unconscious receptivity

This point is so important and of such constant application that it will be good to deal with it at some length.

We should start with a clear recognition that we are exposed to countless individual, group, and mass influences all the time. These last take the form of waves of excitement, of panic, or of hostility which sweep through humanity, or large sections of it, and sway or even engulf those who do not know how to deal with them.

These waves or impacts, increasingly recognized today under the general term of "*vibrations*", may reach us through the normal channels of the senses, telepathically through psychic impressions, or from mental levels.

It is most useful—although it may shock us—to realize how much we are tools or victims of influences of which we are unconscious, or to which we yield in a passive way. An outstanding example—which can be regarded as a gigantic experiment in mass suggestion and in influencing behavior is advertising, the effectiveness of which can be evaluated in billions of dollars.

At first it was used more or less empirically, although with unconscious psychological skill; but today it is being used quite deliberately, consciously utilizing definite psychological techniques.

It might seem, therefore, that we should try to become non-receptive to outer influences, but this is not the true solution. It is practically impossible to be non-receptive and it is also undesirable.

We do not live in isolation; we are intimately connected and interacting with both individuals and groups. Isolation would mean self centeredness, and this is such an unnatural condition that it often proves painful and even unbearable. The anguish of solitude produced by isolation has been described vividly by several existentialist writers,

such as Kirkegaard and Kafka.

Human relations imply receptivity, and lack of receptivity excludes love. The true solution requires clear thought and skill in action, and is arrived at through three stages of inner activity—awareness, control of mastery, and wise utilization.

These functions of receptive meditation offer the best way to turn the liabilities, the mistakes, and the dangers of receptivity into assets.

It is well to realize and remember that receptive meditation is a definite form of meditation—it is a conscious and controlled mental activity.

It is quite different from merely psychic receptivity which opens us to influences of an emotional and imaginative character, and its mental quality enables us to discriminate between the various kinds of impression, to register them correctly and later to interpret them rightly.

These points will be developed further when describing the techniques of receptive meditation.

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Chapter 09

Stages of Receptive Meditation

As the first condition of safe receptive meditation is the ability to keep our consciousness steadily on the mental level of awareness, it should be done only after the preparation described as necessary for reflective meditation.

That means we must go through the *stages of relaxation*, mental preparation by means of appropriate reading, disidentification of the self from the body and the emotional life, the elevation of the center of consciousness and the achievement of the inner attitude of the

Observer.

This is a condition of positive, wide-awake awareness. It is also advisable at this point to make whenever possible a short reflective meditation; this will consolidate the positive inner attitude and develop the ability to use the mind as an obedient tool.

To realize the difference between reflective and receptive meditation it is useful to consider the mind as an "*inner eye*", which in a certain respect it truly is. In reflective meditation the eye of the mind is directed, figuratively speaking, horizontally, trying to see beyond the apparent, or rightly interpret what has entered the field of consciousness.

On the other hand, in receptive meditation we direct the mind's eye "*upwards*" and try to discern what is "*above*", on a higher level than that on which we are aware. This can also be described in terms of hearing—we try to catch some inner sound or message coming from a higher or subtler region.

Silence

This stage should be defined carefully, because *there are various kinds of silence*. The safe and true kind needed is a *positive silence*, that is, the maintaining of an alert inner stillness for the desired period, in which we eliminate as much as possible all the spontaneous activity of the mind.

This phase of silence is a necessary condition for receiving and registering higher influences. Someone endeavoring to reach this inner silence once wrote of it in the following amusing way: "I was in deep meditation and knew I had reached a very clear and lucid place and like a flash came the thought: 'I know that I am in a very, real inner place and yet I am deaf and blind, seeing and hearing nothing

Another split second and there came a sort of humoring response: 'If you were also dumb you might possibly see and hear.

To achieve and maintain the inner silence is a difficult task which calls for persistence and a firm determination; it is a sustained act of the will.

Our psychological mechanism is not accustomed to such discipline, it resents it and tries in every way to shake it off.

A flood of impressions, sensations, emotions, images, and thoughts

invades the field of consciousness and a fierce fight for mastery begins.

It seems we will never succeed in expelling the intruders which appear to come from every side at once. But it is not necessary to be drastic; too strenuous an effort is undesirable and defeats its own ends.

There are several techniques we can use; one is to repeat over and over a phrase or word; another is to evoke an image and keep it clear and steady at the center of the consciousness.

The best words and images for this purpose are those which suggest a state of calm, of peace, or silence. An effective phrase for example (from a Hymn used in the Greek Mysteries) is:

"Be silent, O strings, that a new melody may come to me."

Images such as the following are helpful in stilling the mind: a quiet lake reflecting the blue of the sky; a majestic mountain peak; the starry sky in the stillness of the night.

Those who have already had some training or practice in meditation will be able to use the technique of watching the flow of the mental stream in a detached, dispassionate way, as something objective and not belonging to oneself.

If we succeed in maintaining this positive watching attitude long enough the stream of emotions and thoughts becomes slower and slower until it becomes still.

An opposite condition, that of drowsiness sometimes occurs. This is to be firmly avoided because it is not conducive to the receiving of higher impressions and, instead, it may bring about a condition which is undesirable and even dangerous.

The achievement of a true inner silence is well worth the effort and the persistent training which it takes.

Besides being necessary for receptive meditation it has a value of its own; it is conducive to a condition of harmony, peace, and quiet joy, and it produces a sense of expansion of consciousness; it is also essentially restful and refreshing.

Methods of Reception

When a state of silence has been reached, that is, after a period of effort and struggle to achieve silence, then we are ready for the further

stage of reception.

The inner attitude is one of quiet watchfulness and patient waiting; it can also be described as a state of keen but unemotional interest in what may happen and of what we may become aware.

The source from which we await impression, and to which therefore we direct our one-pointed attention, should be the Transpersonal Self.

That is the sure source of true impression. But it is not the only source; impressions from other sources, if these are high and true, are often channeled or conveyed through the Self to the conscious mind.

Inner Seeing

The methods of reception are various; an impression may reveal itself to our consciousness through seeing hearing contact urge to action and in other ways.

The most frequent is perhaps through seeing or illumination. The mind is indeed symbolically an inner eye, and the symbolism of vision is often used.

We speak of insight, of illumination, of "*seeing*" in the sense of realizing the meaning or significance of some fact or event, and we talk of "*seeing*" the solution of a problem and of having a "*bright*" idea.

Sometimes an abstract geometrical figure or some other symbolic form enters into the field of consciousness.

However, a series of concrete images and forms and colors may also appear, but these are the product of the imagination and are not mental in character.

During receptive meditation this latter type of image should not be paid attention to or at the most can be observed quietly for a short time without undue interest.

A higher form of spiritual "*seeing*" can be called *intuition*. This word may be misleading because it has been used in different senses.

Etymologically it is connected with vision, it means "*seeing into*." Intuition in its higher and purer sense can be considered to be a direct, suprarational understanding or comprehension of the true nature and reality of something—comprehension of its true quality, purpose, and essence.

It is quite different from what are called "*hunches*," which are psychic impressions about people or events of a personal character and having personal interest.

Inner Hearing

The second way of receiving impressions is that of inner hearing. Here, too, we must discriminate carefully between the psychic hearing of voices and the much higher inner spiritual hearing.

This discrimination is not easy and calls for a subtler sense than that needed for discriminating between images and true spiritual insight. The difference can be termed one of quality and level

After some practice in receptivity one becomes more and more aware of the level on which the consciousness functions.

If it functions on the emotional and imaginative levels the voices heard are apt to give messages or impressions of a personal character, highly colored with feeling of some kind.

Inspiration coming from high levels, on the other hand, is generally impersonal in character. The messages are short, incisive, and meaningful. They are generally concerned with one's spiritual advancement and will contain wise advice, perhaps pointing out some fault to be eliminated, some spiritual quality to be developed or some high aim to be attained.

Sometimes the message is symbolic in character, even though the phrase may appear to have a concrete meaning. Such was the case with the well-known message received by St. Francis— *"Go, and restore my church."*

He interpreted it at first as an injunction to build up a half-ruined little church, but later he recognized that it was a command to restore the Roman Church of his time.

To this kind of impression belong also many artistic, literary, and musical inspirations. The poet or musician has the impression that something in himself or somebody else dictates them; he seems to *"hear"* inwardly, and the poem or idea or theme appears spontaneously in his field of consciousness.

The symbol of the Muse inspiring or speaking to the attentive ear of the poet has expressed this through the ages.

Sometimes a dialogue is established between the conscious personality and the Self; a question put by the meditating mind receives a prompt and clear inner answer which seems to formulate itself and appear to the consciousness.

If the personality comments on it and replies, a further reaction is

then registered. This dialogue has been dealt with in its more general sense by Martin Buber in several of his books, and he applies it to all kinds of spiritual relationships.

This dialogue can be facilitated through the use of one of the symbols of the Self—that of the Old Wise Man.

Inner Contact

The third form of receptivity can be called contact, because it is analogous to the physical sense of touch or feeling by contact. But this expression should not be taken too literally; it corresponds to our meaning.

When we say we "*contact somebody*," or are "*in touch with someone*." It does not mean that we touch the person physically, but indicates a relationship, a rapport, an easy interplay at will.

The same can be said of inner contact, alluding specifically to the Self. It means an easy rapport or alignment with the Self which permits receptivity to its influence and awareness of its quality and nature, and gradually enables us to identify or unify ourselves in consciousness with it, however partially and momentarily.

By this inner nearness, by this "*touch*" of the Self, we are harmonized, vivified, recharged with energy, or with that which we specifically need at the time, and which the Self is trying to convey to us.

Its effects are clarifying, and enlightening; we are filled with certainty, courage, joy; we feel renewed and ready to go back to the arena of personal life and meet its emergencies and challenges.

We feel that some higher power has descended upon us and added a certain degree of blending or infusion by the Self of the radiation from superconscious levels.

Urge to Action

The fourth way in which we may receive impression from the Self is through an urge to action.

We become aware of it as a definite urge to do something, to undertake a task or duty in some field of service, or sometimes it may be an urge toward inner action of some sort, to the changing of something in ourselves

This type of impression is what the Quakers who have practiced

extensively this art of receptive meditation and silence, call "*concern*."

Again we need to discriminate carefully between urges coming from the Self or some high, superconscious level, and those coming from the middle or lower unconscious.

The way in which they appear in the consciousness is similar, but a difference will be found in the quality and content of the urge.

Whenever it takes the form of a call to a great mission or to some action of personal advantage we should regard it with suspicion. An urge of this type is normally of lower origin and is spurious and should be dismissed.

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Chapter 10

Registration

After reception comes the *stage of registration*. Every impression whatever its type or the way in which it is received, should be accurately and immediately registered in writing.

As mentioned previously in connection with reflective meditation, the higher impressions are often vivid and clear at the moment of reception, but they have a curious tendency to disappear rapidly from the field of consciousness and if not caught and registered at once they are apt to be lost.

Also, the very fact of formulating them and writing them down helps us to understand them better; sometimes during writing the impression will develop, and we will continue to receive it.

Writing can, in fact, be used as a technique for evoking inspiration; it creates a convenient channel for the higher impressions. But while writing one should always remain alert and fully aware, not permitting any form of "*automatic*" writing, which can easily have undesirable and even dangerous effects.

Delayed Reception

Another interesting aspect of receptivity is the delayed reception of impression. It often seems that nothing happens during receptive meditation; we remain in a state of blankness and do not become aware of anything new except, perhaps, a sense of quiet, rest, and refreshment.

But this does not necessarily mean the meditation has been useless and unsuccessful, for quite frequently some impression or inspiration will come into our consciousness later in the day or even another day.

It may be in another meditation or at some time when we are engaged in quite different activities; it may be in some moment of relaxation or on waking in the morning, but whenever it is we will recognize a connection between the apparently unsuccessful meditation and the subsequent inspiration.

This connection will be evident when the answer which we sought to some question or problem flashes into our minds, but there can also be a less dramatic but equally true delayed reception of impression to which we should be alert.

Therefore, after meditation we should always keep an inner attitude of watchfulness and attentiveness—what is called, when developed, a "*meditative attitude*"—during the whole day.

We can train ourselves to develop a state of dual consciousness, that is being normally concentrated on our outer activity while at the same time keeping a part of our attention turned toward the inner world.

This is the "*attitude of the Observer*", watching what happens both in the outer world and on the various inner levels of life.

Dangers and Mistakes of Receptive Meditation

There are several possible dangers which are real and therefore should be understood and carefully offset.

The two main dangers are negativity or passivity on the one hand and over stimulation or excitation on the other. A state of passivity allows the intrusion into the fields of consciousness of forces or elements coming from the unconscious, including its lower levels.

They are not always recognized, but even when they are it may be difficult to offset their influence and resist their onrush. The difficulty is even greater when they delude us by an alluring appearance; they may seem harmless or even of a high order, yet not only are they without real value, but they can be entirely misleading.

The consciousness can also be invaded by influences from sources outside the individual unconscious. Using a general expression, we can say that they come from the collective unconscious; this term may include general psychic currents, general symbols and forms (called by Jung "archetypes"), and specific group centers of influence.

This field is extensive and as yet relatively little known and we cannot enter here into further discussion of the subject. It is enough for our present purpose to point out the reality of the danger.

The chief safeguard against this danger is a constant positive watchfulness, as has been said already.

Another safeguard is the striving to make a clear distinction between spiritual impressions and the multifarious psychic influences of a lower kind.

Psychic phenomena have no inherent value toward spiritual or even personal development, and undue interest in them can become a definite sidetrack to our growth.

It is wise to remember that primitive people and even animals have psychic faculties. Scientific investigation of such phenomena on the other hand has its definite place, but that is quite a different matter and it requires different methods from those used in receptive meditation.

The other danger which must be guarded against is over stimulation. This is independent of both the nature and the source of the impressions received, for even a high spiritual influence, if it rushes into the personality with full force, can cause undesirable effects in some cases; effects which range from nervous tension and exhaustion to emotional excitement, fanaticism, excessive and feverish activity, or manifestations of uncontrolled psychic phenomena.

But undesirable consequences can be prevented by wisely regulating the practice of meditation or by suspending it for a time when there are indications of trouble.

The reality of the dangers certainly calls for caution but should not arouse fear or discourage the practice of meditation.

Everything effective can be a source of danger; even the most beneficial medicine can be harmful if taken in excessive doses. And to use another analogy, both inner ascensions and mountain climbing can be dangerous, but with proper preparation, caution, and skill in action the dangers are minimized—and in the case of meditation the benefits far outweigh the risks.

It should be repeated that receptive meditation rightly carried out—that is, with constant, positive watchfulness— and followed by discriminating and wise interpretation of the results, can protect effectively from influences and suggestions coming from either the outer or the inner worlds which may not have been previously recognized or satisfactorily dealt with.

Meditation focuses the consciousness on the mental level, from which it can on the one hand exercise an intelligent guidance over the realm of emotion, imagination, and psychic phenomena, and on the other receive light, inspiration, and power from above.

End Of This Chapter 10