

# THE ESSENCE OF MEDITATION

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Advanced Practices for  
New and Experienced Meditators

ANDRES PELENUR

MAHĀSĀRA SCHOOL OF MEDITATION



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## PREFACE

This book owes its existence to the three golden pillars that support my spiritual life: the endless grace of my Guru Sri Bhagawan Nityananda of Ganeshpuri; Abhinavagupta's Anutara Trika, otherwise known as the Kashmir Shaivism tradition; and the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi (hereafter Sri Ramana). In addition, I owe a debt of gratitude to the quiet yet powerful legacy that Sri Sadhu Om left behind. Sadhu Om was a direct disciple of Sri Ramana whose greatness continues to be discovered in the West, thanks in no small part to the efforts of the brilliant Michael James, also a disciple of Sri Ramana, who lived and studied with Sadhu Om for more than eight years. I also feel indebted to the equally brilliant David Godman for his impeccable scholarship and tireless efforts in making Sri Ramana's teachings available to a wider Western audience.

To be clear, Sadhu Om was no ordinary devotee. In addition to living with Sri Ramana for almost five years, Sadhu Om (like Sri Muruganar and Swami Annamalai) is considered to have attained complete Self-awareness. His greatness lies not only in his attainment of the Self, but on the strength of the indelible spiritual teachings he left behind. In particular, Sadhu Om's book *The Path of Sri Ramana* shines a deeply nuanced light on how to properly understand and practice Sri Ramana's method of Self-enquiry.

The book you are now holding in your hands is not just another presentation of Sri Ramana's teachings. Nor does it devote much time to explaining the philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism, which is so beautifully articulated in a handful of

other books.<sup>1</sup> When teachings are discussed, they are strictly in the service of improving our ability to meditate, since what matters ultimately is not how much intellectual knowledge we accumulate but rather how much meditative absorption we experience.

Specifically, this book focuses on several principles and methods of meditation which I have been practicing for over twenty years, drawing upon three primary sources: my own direct experience; the teachings of Swami Lakshmanjoo, an authentic Shaivite Master; and the revelations given by Sri Ramana (including Sadhu Om's clarifications). By synthesizing the essence of both Tantric and Vedantic approaches to meditation, we stand to benefit from an extremely powerful and well-rounded philosophy of meditation that, in my experience, greatly accelerates our ability to become established in Self-awareness.

Although Bhagawan Nityananda's presence and grace support every aspect of my life, readers may notice that throughout the text I devote more time to discussing Sri Ramana and Sadhu Om's teachings, with very little reference to my own Guru. The reason is because Bhagawan Nityananda did not engage in lengthy discourses. His immense power emanated from his presence, and simply standing before him was enough to still the mind. Most of the time people sat around him in silence, absorbing the flow of grace that continually emanated from his divine form. When on occasion he did speak, his words were short, terse, and cryptic. Moreover, many of his sayings, which are published under the title *The Chidākāsh Gīta*, were set down from memory by various devotees and later translated into English, so they cannot be said to constitute a direct record of his speech. While *The Chidākāsh Gīta* is a profound text which reveals many secrets and deserves our careful study, Bhagawan himself was

1. Two of my favorites are: *The Doctrine of Vibration*, by Mark S. G. Dyczkowski, and *Trika Saivism of Kashmir*, by Moti Lal Pandit.

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completely disinterested in the creation of books or written records of any kind.

In contrast, although Sri Ramana also spent many hours in silence, emitting grace to whomever approached him, over the years an invaluable body of well-articulated questions and answers has been preserved, as well as Sri Ramana's direct writings. The same can be said regarding the priceless revelations given by Swami Lakshmanjoo. So while Sri Bhagawan Nityananda serves as the direct current of grace that enables my meditation to unfold, Sri Ramana and Swami Lakshmanjoo serve as the voices of absolute wisdom. They are all complementary rays of light that emanate from the same Guru principle, which is of course one and indivisible.

## INTRODUCTION

If we have been practicing yoga for some time, we will be familiar with the teaching that everything is Consciousness, and that to experience ourselves as Consciousness requires a deep stilling of the mind. Yet no matter how eagerly we embrace this truth, our moment-to-moment experience of being a separate individual persists. Yet, at some point in our spiritual lives, there comes a time when the impulse to move beyond the distant promise of enlightenment and into the actual experience of unity Awareness begins to assert itself with great force. In other words, the question of how to make the attainment of *samādhi* (meditative absorption) a reality becomes our most pressing concern.

Although almost everyone is familiar with the concept of meditation, I have come to realize after speaking to numerous people over the years, that there is much confusion on exactly how to meditate. Should we limit ourselves to passively witnessing our thoughts or should we actively repeat a mantra? If we rely on a mantra, how exactly do we engage with it? Does meditation require phenomenal feats of concentration or is it something that should feel effortless? Should we try to consciously control the Kundalini Shakti (the dynamic power of Consciousness located in the subtle body) or should we simply surrender to it, allowing its grace and wisdom to guide us?<sup>2</sup> Is it best to stick to one method or should we try different things as we go along?

2. The scriptures assert that a human being is composed of four bodies: The physical body, which is experienced in the waking state; the subtle body, which is made up of light and includes the mind and senses and

When I ask people to convey their experiences, most invariably tell me about their struggle to arrest their thoughts, of catching fleeting glimpses of peace, or of seeing the flash of an inner light. But few have shared stories of resting in a deep stillness for prolonged periods of time or of feeling their identity shift into the bliss of formless Awareness, which raises the question: Is the promise of a truly transcendent meditation simply beyond our reach?

The answer is an emphatic “no!” I believe that instead of being reserved for a select few, a great number of aspirants can achieve states of meditative absorption they never thought possible. With this in mind, what I hope to share through these pages is a simple yet highly effective approach to meditation that is as powerful as it is direct. While the practices I recommend are not drawn exclusively from any single yogic tradition, they draw heavily from the teachings of the great twentieth-century sage Sri Ramana Maharshi and his disciples (in particular Sadhu Om), as mentioned in the preface, as well as from the Shaivite Master Swami Lakshmanjoo. By unifying the strengths of both the Tantric and Vedantic traditions, we can easily eliminate blind spots, refine our understanding of the nuances of practice, and establish a rock-solid foundation that will forever support us as we grow in Self-awareness.

The meditation practices presented in this book are available to all and do not require either formal initiation or insider access to any particular yogic lineage in order for them to be effective. All that is required is a proper grasp of technique, a strong desire to meditate, and an unshakable commitment to daily practice. It is my sincere hope that the following pages will enable us to strengthen our contact with

which we occupy during dreaming; the causal body which is a blissful void experienced in deep sleep, and the fourth or transcendental body which is nothing but pure Consciousness and which is experienced by yogins when they achieve a high level of meditative absorption.

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the inner Self, allowing us to experience the true promise of meditation, which is nothing less than complete absorption into Paramashiva, the supremely blissful and radiant Awareness at the heart of our being.

# CHAPTER ONE

## A Review of First Principles

Now that yoga studios have proliferated and can be found in almost every neighborhood across the globe, thousands of *āsana* practitioners are beginning to turn their attention toward the true aim behind the physical postures, which is to purify the *nāḍīs* (subtle energy channels) so that the body can tolerate the forces brought about by higher states of consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

When we talk about inner consciousness, we are not referring to the externalized awareness of thoughts, our body, or the world around us, but to the inner awareness of our own deepest being. In other words, awareness, in its pure sense, is the felt presence that we exist, and we naturally carry that awareness with us at all times. (From childhood to old age, we always know that we exist.)

Accordingly, to achieve a higher state of awareness means to focus so intently on our feeling of being that it gradually overshadows our limited body-consciousness, leading to the realization that awareness is what we truly are and that the entire universe is in fact contained within that awareness.

Our deepest awareness, or what I like to refer to as pure Awareness or pure Consciousness, is formless, changeless, and eternal. It exists beyond all notions of time, space, and

3. The subtle body, which is made of light, has thousands of energy channels running through it that resemble the physical vascular and nervous systems.

duality, yet it is neither a void or a mere nothingness, but a pulsating fullness of radiant bliss and unfathomable peace that shines forever. In fact, our meditation practice cannot really begin until we accept (or at least open our minds to the possibility) that Awareness is not a product of the brain, but on the contrary, that the brain and the entire universe are products of Awareness (just as the objects in a dream are nothing but an appearance within consciousness).

If, as the sages declare, we have always been nothing but Consciousness, then why do we fail to experience the vast ocean of bliss and peace that are supposed to be integral to its nature?<sup>4</sup> The answer is because our status as pure Awareness has been veiled or obscured by a movement of God's will. Specifically, the power of *māyā* (veiling) along with the ego (the force of self-appropriation which is like a magnet that fuses Awareness to the mind and body) cause the light of Consciousness to experience itself as a finite entity, or as one object among many. The experience of duality and limited identification is called bondage, and our liberation from bondage is simply a severing of our identification with our body and mind, enabling Consciousness to shine again without taint, just as the blue sky shines unobstructed in the absence of clouds.

So how is the severing accomplished? Fully realized sages such as Sri Ramana have taught that to attain liberation does not require a struggle against the manifold aspects or layers of *māyā*.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the only requirement is to neutralize or purify the ego; the latter occurs when our constant flow of thoughts is gradually arrested through proper *sādhana*

4. See *Taittirīya Upanishad* 3.6.1.

5. *Māyā* is a veiling principle of consciousness that is responsible for the split between subject and object. *Māyā* subjects the individual soul to limitations of action, knowledge, time, attachment, and natural law. From *māyā* also emerge the three defilements, *ānava*, *māyīya* and *kārma malas* as well as the three *gunas* or states of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.

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(spiritual practice).<sup>6</sup> Achieving total stillness of mind, or meditative absorption, is known in Sanskrit by various names including *samādhi*, *samāpatti*, or *samāvesha*.

To illustrate how the ego keeps its hold on Consciousness, Sri Ramana likens the ego to a caterpillar which is able to crawl from leaf to leaf so long as it maintains contact with a leaf. The moment both leaves (i.e., thoughts) are removed, the caterpillar falls to the ground.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, when all thought is arrested, the ego has nothing to hold onto, and all of a sudden we are able to move from limited body awareness into the experience of pure Consciousness.

If cessation of thought is the key to neutralizing the ego, what is the most efficacious way to achieve it? The answer is somewhat elusive since effective spiritual practice does not depend on any single factor, but is rather a combination of proper technique, inner feeling, commitment to practice, devotion to God, and other variables. And yet, among the totality of factors that make up spiritual practice, both meditation and devotion (which at the highest levels are one and the same) are the keystones that enable us to still the mind. Now while there is no end to what can be written about devotion, for our purposes we will focus our lens on the formal practice of meditation as the principal means of attaining Self-awareness.<sup>8</sup>

### Our Greatest Obstacle

What is the single greatest obstacle facing a spiritual seeker? Put simply, the inability to accept that our mind, body, and

6. Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Nāṇ Yār?*, trans. Michael James, verses 4, 5, 6, 8.

7. David Godman, ed., *Be As You Are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi* (London: Penguin, 1985).

8. This is not to suggest that there is any dichotomy between meditation and devotion. On the contrary, deep meditation flows from devotion and devotion rises as a result of deep meditation.

world are all a product of Consciousness. Because we are surrounded by inanimate objects, and because we cannot feel anything outside the confines of our own body, it is quite natural to assume that consciousness is a product of our brain's neural activity. The latter reinforces the experience that we are only a physical body, and it is this very experience that we need to overcome.

One of the classic arguments put forth by science is that damage to the physical brain induces immediate changes in consciousness or cognitive abilities, proving that consciousness is a by-product of the brain. The yogic response is that as long as consciousness is married to the body, changes in the body affect how consciousness is able to manifest through that particular body. But that does not mean that the innate witnessing Consciousness is truly affected. The example of a radio is useful: when a radio is working properly, the broadcast of its electromagnetic waves are clear, but if the radio becomes damaged, the sounds may become fuzzy or the radio may not work at all. Yet it cannot be said that the electromagnetic waves are themselves damaged or changed in any way. Only the waves filtering through that particular radio appear distorted. In the same way, pure Consciousness is never affected, even though the consciousness expressed through an injured brain may appear compromised. In fact, the damaged brain, body, hospital bed, and entire world are all a reflection, unfolding within the expanse of pure Consciousness, much as the images within a television set unfold within the screen. Similarly, the Self is the "screen" on which the projection of creation unfolds, and no matter what the images portray, the screen remains blissfully unaffected.

Another way to look at it is by comparing the Self to the moon. When reflected onto water, the moon can either appear wavy or motionless, depending on the water's condition, while in reality the moon is neither one nor the other. Similarly, Consciousness may appear affected in any number

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of ways, but in reality it stands behind creation in its pure state. On this point, Sri Ramana stated that to believe that Consciousness is a product of the brain is like believing that the white movie screen exists within the film image.<sup>9</sup>

Our ability to get past the wrong understanding that our consciousness is a by-product of our brain is essential if our meditation is to flourish. The study of high-level texts such as the *Shiva Sūtras*, the *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, the *Yoga Sūtra*, or the collected sayings and writings of Sri Ramana are of enormous assistance in helping us understand the true nature of existence. At a minimum, we must be able to entertain the possibility that the clear division between conscious subjects and insentient objects is not as it appears to be. As our mind grows one-pointed, i.e., concentrated, through sustained practice, we will inevitably begin to experience that everything is a manifestation of Consciousness and that all objectivity is actually contained within an unlimited and eternal subjectivity.

Even after we accept that the universe is an expression of Consciousness, a second and more serious obstacle emerges, namely the feeling that we are a small self in search of a higher Self. When we read about the bliss, peace, and perfection of pure Consciousness, the chasm between the descriptions of pure Awareness and our ordinary, limited sense of being is so vast that we cannot accept that our moment-to-moment subjective awareness is in fact the same great Self we are searching for. Since our everyday I-feeling is confined to the body-mind and rotates endlessly between the waking, dream, and deep sleep states, we are unable to equate it with the stable, infinite Awareness we are trying to become.

As we shall see, while at present our I-feeling is indeed a veiled and limited expression of pure Awareness, it also

9. Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Ēkāṇṁya Pañcakam*, trans. Michael James and Sadhu Om, verse 3.

happens to be the doorway into the Self. Specifically, if we focus all our attention onto our I-feeling as if it *already were* the pure Consciousness we are seeking, our I-consciousness will eventually open and reveal the actual Self. Subconscious resistance against this simple realization is one of the toughest challenges we face, so as we practice we must continually guard against the misunderstanding that we are a small self that is one day going to stumble onto a higher Self.

## A Word of Caution Regarding Scriptural Traditions

India is a holy land not only because of the vast number of enlightened beings born to its shores, but because of the unparalleled number of sacred texts the country has produced. From the numerous yogic traditions that have flourished in India, two in particular have caught the attention of Western seekers: Advaita Vedanta and, more recently, Anuttara Trika.

While both of these traditions are extremely rich and nuanced, we need to be aware of how easy it is to be drawn into them to the point that studying scriptures becomes our only form of practice. It is as if the scriptures act as a hidden maze whose walls are composed of glittering jewels. We are so seduced by the beauty of the stones that we fail to realize that we are slowly being drawn into a never-ending labyrinth that will prove hard to emerge from. The scriptures fill us with so much awe and give us so much comfort that we remain content to bask in their glory, all the while failing to appreciate that the scriptures can never grant us the Self-awareness we are striving for. *The scriptures are dead*, proclaims a famous old saying. Sri Ramana made the same point when responding to a seeker who complained that after much scriptural study, no Self-knowledge had arisen. He stated:

*Ātmā jñāna* (Self-knowledge) will come to you only if it is there in the *śāstras* (scriptures). If you see the *śāstras*,

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*śāstra jñāna* (knowledge of the scriptures) will come. If you see the Self, Self-knowledge will shine.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the only fruit we will receive from studying the scriptures is scriptural knowledge, while attending to the Self results in Self-knowledge. It is a point worth remembering, especially given the Western mind's tendency to value intellectual knowledge above all else. If, for example, we spend our lives mesmerized by the exact constitution of the 36 *tattvas* (principles of consciousness), or by trying to master the entire *Tantrāloka* (Abhinavagupta's magnum opus), we may learn much and experience a great deal of joy and satisfaction, but in the end we will grow old and die with the same degree of limited body-mind identification as when we first stumbled upon the scriptures.

Although great pundits dot the banks of India's holy rivers and roam the halls of prestigious universities, have they, in the end, attained anything more than a vast storehouse of intellectual knowledge? The contributions of yogic scholars are great, no doubt, and we should honor them with the enormous respect they deserve; but we should never lose sight of the fact that mere study will not effect a change in our consciousness. On this point, Sri Ramana stated:

Just as one who needs to sweep up and throw away rubbish [would derive] no benefit by analyzing it, so one who needs to know oneself [will derive] no benefit by calculating that the *tattvas*, which are concealing oneself, are this many, and analyzing their qualities, instead of collectively rejecting all of them. It is necessary to consider the world [which is believed to be an expansion or manifestation of such *tattvas*] like a dream.<sup>11</sup>

10. Sri Ramana quoted in David Godman, *Living by the Words of Bhagavan* (Palakottu: Sri Annamalai Swami Ashram Trust, 1995).

11. Sri Ramana, *Nāṇ Yār?*, trans. Michael James, verse 17.

This is not to suggest, however, that scriptural study is entirely unnecessary. A solid intellectual foundation is essential to be able to meditate deeply. If we do not understand basic principles, or if we do not know how to manage the various phenomena that arise during meditation, we will not be able to make much progress. Moreover, the scriptures allow us to enter into a world rich in meaning and revelation. Many of our burning questions about God, creation, and the soul are finally answered; but questions inevitably lead to more questions, and before we know it we are drawn even more deeply into the scriptures. Accordingly, the caution here is that while we should certainly study the traditions we are attracted to, we must never forget that the only way to make real, tangible progress in our *sādhana* is to fiercely devote ourselves to our meditation practice.

After all, the primary purpose of tradition is to provide a metaphysical framework that allows us to orient our practice, but if the theory is not actionable, it is of little use. All philosophical systems present models of reality that of course do not capture Reality as it is. The difference is akin to studying the map of Paris in great detail as opposed to taking an actual stroll in Paris. Knowing this, we should understand that no matter how correct or precise our tradition is, mental concepts will never come close to capturing pure Awareness in its actual state. For this reason there is no purpose in arguing, for example, whether Vedanta's assertion that Brahman is entirely passive and that *māyā* is an inexplicable illusion is correct or whether Shaivism's opposing view that *māyā* is a direct expression of the Lord's *svātantrya* Shakti, or power of freedom, is a better understanding of the truth.

We can spend a lifetime arguing these points, but to what end? All we will attain is pride of learning and an intellectual certainty that contributes little to our actual experience of Self-awareness. In fact, we can grow so proud of our tradition that we start to belittle other paths. Instead, why not learn from the example of great beings? Swami Lakshmanjoo

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comes to mind: for even though he was the foremost living master of Kashmir Shaivism, he took pains to travel almost 2000 miles to Tiruvannamalai to sit at the feet of Sri Ramana (whose teachings mostly follow Vedantic tenets). He later said: “I felt those golden days were indeed divine.”<sup>12</sup>

In the end, the metaphysical nuances of our traditions are only of secondary importance, and the proof lies in the ample evidence of fully realized yogins who hail from seemingly opposing traditions (Buddhism and Shaivism are prime examples). In truth, a time will come when we will have to transcend all concepts and assertions. What matters instead is how much energy we put into our practice; so long as our philosophical framework gives us the comfort and confidence to sit quietly and point our mind inward, then our chosen path has fulfilled its foundational purpose.

### **Further Observations Regarding Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism**

Whether we align ourselves with Kashmir Shaivism or Vedanta carries important implications for our meditation practice. Kashmir Shaivism favors an inclusive view, whereby nothing is outright rejected as an obstacle to attaining Self-awareness. Advanced yogins are supposed to be able to use all cognitions and experiences as access points into pure Awareness. When the mind has become sufficiently one-pointed, the yogin acquires the ability to penetrate the center of any experience, gaining access to the pure Consciousness that is its substrate. For example, instead of being carried away by a sudden rush of anger (which normally reinforces our sense of being a separate individual), the yogin isolates the very first stirrings of anger, experiencing it as a vibration of energy that leads

12. Betina Baumer and Sarla Kumar, eds., *Samvidullasah: Manifestation of Divine Consciousness: Swami Lakshmanjoo, Saint-Scholar of Kashmir Saivism: A Centenary Tribute* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2011).

directly into pure Awareness. Likewise, if the yogin brings intense awareness into the very initial stirrings of lust, joy, sorrow, or any other emotion, he will be able to plunge into Self-awareness.

In theory, all cognitions, feelings, and activities can be used by a yogin in a likewise manner to gain access to Consciousness. The *Vijñāna Bhairava* is a classic Tantric scripture that sets out 112 centering techniques to access the Self. Everything from the breath, thoughts, emotions, visualizations, to physical sensations and sensory inputs can be harnessed as possible access points into pure Consciousness. Entry is gained through various methods that include penetrating the juncture between two points or objects (such as the space between two thoughts or between the ingoing and outgoing breaths) or entering into the void by a sudden act of awareness (such as staring at an expanse of blue sky).<sup>13</sup> In other words, by digesting all cognitions into Consciousness, the Tantric yogin is supposed to be able to rise above the need to renounce anything and can in fact leverage all the joys and pains of the world as launching pads into pure Awareness.

Such an all-embracing attitude, which lies at the heart of tantra, is on the one hand very attractive while, on the other, also prone to serious drawbacks. The teaching that there is no need for a seeker to shun the senses, but simply shift into the understanding that everything is Shiva (pure Consciousness), is theoretically correct but extremely difficult to apply in practice. This is because the required shift is not an intellectual one but one of an existential nature which can only come about after a prolonged and sustained meditation practice. Otherwise, we will only be pretending that everything before us is Shiva while giving ourselves free license to indulge our

13. Swami Lakshmanjoo, *Vijñāna Bhairava: The Practice of Centering Awareness*, trans. Bettina Baumer (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2002). See as examples *dhāraṇās* 61, 62, and 84.

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senses in the name of attaining spiritual awareness. If we do this, we will only be deceiving ourselves.

It is important to understand that if we practice the *dhāraṇās* (contemplations) offered in the *Vijñāna Bhairava*, we will most likely be unable to achieve the desired result because the *Vijñāna Bhairava* is not meant for neophyte yogins, but for highly advanced meditators who are practicing to stabilize their opened-eyed *samādhi*, having already mastered closed-eyed *samādhi*.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the *Vijñāna Bhairava* is a manual for yogins who stand at the very edge of enlightenment.

Simply repeating to ourselves that “everything is Shiva” or that “I am Shiva” will not bring about any results, except for a little purification of consciousness. Such thoughts are only transformative if they are invested with the power of Awareness, which manifests only after we have been able to successfully make contact with the Self. And the latter only comes about after diving deeply into the practice of meditation.

In this light, one of the pitfalls of the surging popularity of Kashmir Shaivism is the false sense of security that the all-embracing philosophy might create. Shaivism is not a shortcut to the steady exertion of right effort required of a yogin. The *Shiva Sūtras* proclaim *prayatnaḥ sādhaḥ*, meaning: sustained effort brings about attainment in God Consciousness.<sup>15</sup> In truth, we will never experience everything as our own Self until we are first able to utterly still our mind, and stilling our mind entails an initial turning *away* from the senses. To teach aspirants that they should begin by seeing everything as Shiva, when they have no actual experience of pure Consciousness, is akin to telling an aspiring physician

14. The concept of open-eyed *samādhi* versus closed-eyed *samādhi* is fully explained in chapter eight.

15. *Shiva Sūtras* 2:2.

to start practicing medicine without first secluding himself in medical school. Even worse is to teach people that they can regain their Shiva consciousness through contact with the senses. Instead, it is much wiser to turn within and focus on our innate Awareness to the exclusion of all external objectivity. Only after tangible contact has been made with our own deeper Awareness can we go about our day practicing the gaze that everything outside is actually within us, or that everything outside is nothing but pure Consciousness.

The Shaivite Masters were themselves fully aware of the proper order of practice. In *The Doctrine of Vibration*, the great scholar Mark Dyczkowski writes, “Kshemaraja stresses that the Doctrine of Vibration teaches that liberation can only be achieved by first withdrawing all sense activity in introverted contemplation (*nimīlanā samādhi*) to then experience the ‘Great Expansion’ (*mahāvīkāsha*) of consciousness while recognizing this to be a spontaneous process within it.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the apprehension that the external world is nothing but one’s own supreme consciousness is only established after closed-eyed, introverted meditative absorption is achieved.

Accordingly, any yogin who has experienced the light of Consciousness knows that one’s energies have to be gathered and guarded, the senses restrained, and the mind quieted in meditative absorption before the natural bliss and peace of the Self are able to manifest. As with everything, there are proper and improper ways to control the senses and impulses, some being quite harmful and others beneficial, and for this reason a proper understanding of the mechanics of yoga is essential.

Vedanta, for its part, carries its own drawbacks, especially in how the teaching is transmitted during *satsang* (spiritual

16. Mark S. G. Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

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teachings given in a group setting). Unlike Shaivism, Vedanta's methodology can be compared to peeling away the layers of an onion until nothing but pure Consciousness stands revealed. Everything contained within the sphere of objectivity is rejected as not being the Self, from material objects up to our own body, breath, and mind, enabling our true identity as Brahman to shine forth. In this way, Vedanta seeks to separate the Consciousness that has become indistinguishably entwined with creation in the same way that the mythical swan is able to separate water from milk.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of its philosophy, Vedanta views anything that is not pure subjectivity as the product of *avidyā* (nescience). This *māyā*, or spiritual ignorance, is neither entirely real nor unreal. It is an indefinable superimposition on pure Consciousness that can only be removed through a sudden flash of insight. In its practical sense, *māyā* can be reduced to two primary functions: to obscure pure Consciousness and to outwardly emit all the forms of duality. (Michael James uses the analogy of a movie theater: the darkening of the room, which is the veiling of the Self, is necessary to be able to view the screen, and the images projected onto the screen stand for the manifestation of the universe.)<sup>18</sup>

Like a detailed landscape that instantly appears in a dream, there is no point of origin for the appearance of *māyā*; it simply exists without beginning, in the same way that a mountain, which would normally take thousands of years to form, suddenly towers over our dream landscape. And since the only way to escape a dream is by waking up, the only way to

17. The *Rigveda* mentions a mythical *hāṃsa* or swan that is able to separate *soma* (nectar) from water when both are mixed together, which stands for the ability to separate pure Consciousness from the material creation, or the pure from the impure. Later texts insert milk instead of *soma*.

18. Michael James, *Happiness and the Art of Being: An Introduction to the Philosophy and Practice of the Spiritual Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana*, 4th ed. (Kindle Edition: Michael D. A. James, 2012).

transcend *māyā* is by awakening out of it through the dawn of pure knowledge.

Vedanta is attractive because it is a logical, internally consistent philosophy that is both beautiful and elegant. It is intellectual wordplay at its finest, and we are constantly reminded to seek and separate the eternal from the transient. The following exchange would be common in any Advaita Vedanta *satsang*:

“I can’t seem to stop thinking,” says the seeker.

“Who is it that wants to stop thinking?” asks the teacher.

“Me,” replies the seeker.

“Who is the ‘me’ who is asking the question? Is it the body or the mind?”

“It is the mind,” says the seeker.

“But who is aware of the mind? Find out who is behind the thinker. Trace the feeling of being an individual ‘I’ back to its source, and you will discover that only pure Consciousness is found,” urges the teacher.

Like a beating drum, Vedanta constantly reminds us that we are not the body or the mind, and the teaching method is designed to shock the mind into silence, allowing pure Consciousness to shine forth. That said, the pedagogical device of negating everything to the extreme can only take aspirants so far.

Shunning all spiritual experience as immaterial because the very person having experiences is to be viewed as unreal, or silencing the questioning mind because the mind itself is to be viewed as a false projection does little (beyond the initial burst of intellectual insight) aside from leaving the yogin with nowhere to turn. Even the finest intellectual appreciation of Vedantic maxims will not alter our present state of awareness. Repeating *neti, neti* (“not this, not this”), which is a classic method of tracing the mind back to pure Consciousness, does not directly lead to Self-awareness. We can attend a thousand Vedanta workshops, but we will not exit the room in a higher state of consciousness. We might receive a

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lot of “food for thought,” but how will we cross the chasm of conceptual knowledge into the realm of actual thoughtless Self-awareness?

The only exception to the above is when the teaching flows directly from the lips of a truly realized Master such as Sri Bhagawan Nityananda, Sri Ramana Maharshi, or Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, to name a few. When the true Guru speaks, the force and power of their awareness—the force of their grace—can shatter the ego and reveal the Self. But unless we are extremely fortunate, the Advaita teachers we are likely to encounter on the yoga circuit are *learned*, as opposed to *realized*, and their words lack the true Guru’s transformative power of grace. Such teachers are, to paraphrase Sri Ramana, nothing but “sound machines” repeating concepts they have studied but not experienced.<sup>19</sup> They are, as the saying goes, like wooden ladles that dish out soup without knowing the taste of it.

If negating the independent existence of the body, mind, and personality does not lead to the dissolution of individual identity, there are still a number of powerful practices that enlightened Masters have revealed as proven methods to attain the Self. Sri Ramana, for example, did not stop with the uttering of Vedantic maxims. He taught a clear and powerful technique that is greatly misunderstood, but when applied properly, can slice through the ego like a knife through butter. (See the section “Working with the Mind” in chapter four for clarification on Sri Ramana’s method of *ātma-vicāra* [Self-enquiry].)

In reality, there are many things we can do in our efforts to transcend our limited individuality. Even within traditions that emphasize total surrender to the Guru or to the Kundalini Shakti, there is still a great deal of technique involved. Without skillful means, we can close our eyes and

19. Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Uḷḷadu Nārpadu Anubandham*, trans. Michael James, verse 35.

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wait a hundred years, but all we will witness is the darkness behind our eyelids. So while the negation aspect of Vedantic discourse is very helpful, understanding it intellectually is only a first step. There is in fact a practical method to attain the Self which we must put into action as soon as we have established a solid conceptual foundation.

This is only the start of the book, which is filled with insights and teachings that will enable you to develop a deep meditation practice. If you enjoyed this sample chapter, please consider purchasing the complete book (for around the price of a fancy latte) by clicking any of the links below:

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