

YOGA FOR HSPS: PART III: BEYOND THE PHYSICAL

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The first two articles in this series discussed beginning and continuing the practice of hatha yoga, the physical postures and practices intended to develop health and well-being. This third article discusses other aspects of yoga that can potentially lead to significant changes in your life. HSPs may be particularly drawn to these other aspects, wanting to further increase their self-understanding, reduce their tendency to become distressed, and enhance the spiritual dimension of life.

The Inner Observer or Witness

One of the most powerful results of yoga practice is the awareness of a central part of our being that is calm and insightful and that observes the body and mind. This awareness usually emerges sequentially. As you repeatedly observe and release the tension in the body, you first recognize that there is a part of the inner self that is distinct from the body and physical tension. Then, as you cultivate periods of calm and peace, and view the events of life from these states, you recognize this inner observer as something separate from the arousal and distress of the mind as well. The inner observer views the agitation and distress from a detached, objective, understanding perspective, seeing them as physiological responses to situations. Experience with the inner observer may increase understanding in ways that reduce the tendency to become distressed.

As awareness of this calm, centered inner observer increases, you may begin to identify the inner observer as your true nature or true self. This true self may be experienced as being a different type of reality than the physiology of the body and mind. There may be a strong sense that this true self extends in time beyond the body. This, of course, is a spiritual experience. Note that this is an experience, not an intellectual exercise or spiritual faith; and it may emerge gradually and effortlessly from yoga practice and be incorporated into your life without much notice, and certainly without the fanfare of a sudden, dramatic spiritual transformation.

Developing the Witness

Yoga practices that help develop awareness of the inner observer include observing the body, breath, and mind during hatha yoga, particularly during tension releasing practices, and taking a minute between postures to observe the effects of the previous posture. One very effective practice is to conclude the deep relaxation at the end of a yoga session by spending a minute or two on each of the following: observe the body, the breath, the mind, the peace within. This sequence is standard in Integral Yoga classes developed by Swami Satchidananda.

Whether one is drawn to experience the inner observer because it is simply a comfortable state that neutralizes distress, or because it provides an important understanding of one's place in the world, or because it may be a doorway to spiritual insights, many people will want to pursue other practices besides hatha yoga that enhance this awareness. That leads to the subject of meditation.

Meditation

Meditation is a fundamental component of yoga. The basic meditation is simply to quiet the mind and experience one's consciousness in a state of stillness. As the mind quiets, awareness of the inner observer increases, and very peaceful or even blissful states of consciousness may occur.

Different techniques of meditation appeal to different people -- there are techniques that focus on images, sounds, feelings, or awareness of the body. Different techniques also may be best for different types of arousal. For example, after a day with a lot of talking, the verbal and auditory parts of the brain may be aroused and a sound technique may be best.

How Long to Meditate

Many yoga traditions recommend gradually developing a meditation practice, starting with ten to fifteen minutes twice a day. The duration is increased as you become comfortable with it. However, other traditions, particularly Buddhist traditions, take a more warrior approach and emphasize sitting motionless for long periods.

HSPs should approach the idea of long meditation sessions cautiously. Attractive as they may be for some of us, long meditation sessions can make us more sensitive and add to the difficulty of handling daily life. An externally focused non-HSP might find this inner work makes daily life smoother, but HSPs have to be careful about balancing the inner and outer life. How long to meditate depends on your stage of life. At some points we might use just short sessions to counteract the stresses of daily life, deferring long meditations to a later, more sheltered time of life.

Another reason to adjust the length of meditation sessions is that memories of disturbing experiences may emerge during meditation. The basic strategy is simply to observe the memory and let it and the emotions associated with it dissipate like a bubble rising from water. This is easily done and very therapeutic when you are in a calm, peaceful state, observing the memories from the vantage point of the inner observer. When the memories emerge in a way that is hard to handle, meditation is best

done in conjunction with professional therapy. And the length of meditation will need to balance the rate of emergence and rate of dissipation of these memories, combined with one's capacity to assimilate them outside of the session.

Information From the Unconsciousness

As the mind quiets, all kinds of other information may emerge from the unconscious besides emotional memories. The specifics will usually depend on what's happening in your life. For example, if it's a busy time for you, you may need to keep a paper and pencil on hand while meditating because what will emerge will be things you've forgotten to do. Whatever the information, observe it, record it if necessary, and then return to quieting the mind. If you have a session that involves a lot of thoughts and list making, it may seem to have little to do with personal growth. But what is emerging is what you need to deal with right now. If you are active in the world, don't compare your meditation experiences to the reported experiences of those leading sheltered lives in ashrams or monasteries.

Final Thoughts

I suspect that HSPs become more readily aware of the inner observer or true self than non-HSPs, and that may even be why HSPs are drawn to spirituality. We certainly have more opportunities to observe the physiology of the body when it goes off on arousal binges, and then to recognize that there is an inner part that is separate from these responses. Yoga can provide a way to get in touch with this calm center of our being.

Sources of information

Meditation Made Easy by Gerry Maguire Thompson (Sterling Publishing, 1999) is a small, short book that provides good descriptions of many meditation practices. And it does not present meditation in context of the specific values, philosophy and experiences of the author and then claim these are absolutely true for everyone.

The book *Creative Use of Emotion* by Swami Rama and Swami Ajaya (Himalayan International Institute, 1976) discusses the expanded awareness that occurs with yoga and does so in practical terms that relate to western psychology and lifestyle, without obtuse Indian jargon.

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