

SWAN SADHANA by Swami Yogaratna Saraswati

Along with the normal practices of yoga, there is another aspect that needs to be developed side by side. This can happen through a meditative process called SWAN, which helps us to understand our own nature, to accept ourselves as we are, and to work from that point. SWAN is an acronym for Strength, Weakness, Ambition and Need.

The SWAN meditation technique involves observing and witnessing one's own strengths, weaknesses, ambitions and needs in an objective way and going to their source. In the words of Swami Niranjanananda, "SWAN meditation (hamsa dhyana) aims at developing awareness of our state of being by taking us through a process of observation and awareness of the deeper ahamkara (ego) aspects of life. The true nature of ego is living with absolute awareness of actions and reactions. It is the realization of the positive aspects of ego which is the purpose and aim of SWAN meditation."

Strengths are those qualities, skills, talents and characteristics which support and help us to evolve. They are those aspects of the personality that can be applied positively and constructively in life, those positive attributes of our character that have been acquired through our karmas, and which are stamped on the natal chart, for example, courage, faith, etc.

Weaknesses are the deficiencies in our personality, the attributes of our character that hinder our progress or growth, for example, apathy, anger and procrastination. Most of the time we are influenced by and try to hide our weaknesses, but by overly focusing on them we let them overshadow our strengths. When listing your SWAN aspects, do not let your weaknesses outnumber your strengths. This will make you more positive.

Ambitions are what we want to do in life. They are the driving force behind our actions; we cannot achieve anything without ambition. The strength of the survival instinct gives rise to ambitions. We all try to be what we are not. Ambition can be based on fear, desire, power or a natural love of life. When practising SWAN sadhana, do not let your ambitions overshadow or outnumber your needs.

Needs are what everybody has. The body needs food and water, clothing and shelter. There are mental needs, the desire for satisfaction, some purpose in life, while the need for inner harmony and balance with nature comprise our spiritual needs. Needs can be separated into physical, mental, emotional, personal, social and spiritual (as can other aspects of SWAN).

Retreat sadhana

SWAN sadhana can be done as a meditation technique, a written exercise, a retreat program and as a daily practice. SWAN can be the main purpose of an intensive retreat. Sessions can be interspersed with hatha yoga, kirtan or chanting, and karma yoga. Meditations such as yoga nidra and antar mouna can focus on SWAN. You can start either with a written exercise or a SWAN meditation. A weekend retreat could include three to five written sessions and the same number of SWAN meditations.

In the written exercise use one sheet of paper per aspect of SWAN and add pages as needed. For example, you might start writing down all your strengths, then on a different page all your weaknesses and so on. In the second session, examine your strengths and answer questions about them. You might want to add a page to that section and so on.

After you have written down all the strengths, weaknesses, ambitions and needs you can think of, start asking yourself questions about each SWAN principle. This may take place in another session, or on another day if you are practising it in a yoga class or over a period of time. Below is a selection of pertinent questions. You can use all or some of them and also make up your own. Write down the answers to your questions under each principle. Further activities may be generated as a result of answering the questions, which can be done in another session.

A. Strengths

1. How do I know I have this strength?
2. Which strengths are part of my genetic makeup, are hereditary and can be used as a good foundation for my personality?
3. Which strengths are real and which are wishful thinking?
4. Which strengths do I want to develop?
5. Which strengths can I use to overcome my weaknesses?
6. Which strengths can support and embrace my ambitions?

B. Weaknesses

1. Which weaknesses can I turn into strengths or use in a positive way? For example, stubbornness can be seen as persistence or tenacity and channelled into positive work.

2. Which strengths can I use to overcome a specific weakness?
3. Can I accept that my weaknesses are okay, that everyone has weaknesses?

C. Ambitions

1. Differentiate between desires and ambitions.
2. Differentiate between ambitions and needs.
3. Which ambitions are practical and achievable? Eliminate the ones that are unrealistic, they may be a waste of time and energy.
4. Look at your ambitions. Are they appropriate for you?
5. Look at the roots of your ambitions. Where do they originate?
6. Which ambitions are really intense? Keep them.
7. Which ambitions are expectations of family or society?
8. Can I recognize the ambitions that are part of my karma?
9. Do the ambitions change according to age, circumstances, etc?

When we become familiar with our ambitions, we begin to have an understanding of our dharma. This is necessary in order to perceive the role we are assigned or play in life.

D. Needs

1. Differentiate between needs and wants. Eliminate whatever you can, to simplify your life.
2. Differentiate between needs and ambitions. Put the needs that are really ambitions into the ambitions section.
3. What are my real needs, and what are concepts that are expectations of other people such as family and society?

4. How can I provide for specific needs so that they do not dominate my life?

There are some needs which we must hang onto in order to nurture ourselves. As we work on them they become less, but do not throw them out forcibly; they will leave you when their time is up. Just recognize your needs and then the work will happen by itself.

Further work

This can be done as the second last session of a retreat or course and be your homework for the next month.

- Write your strengths as 'pillars of strength' for your personality 'temple'. Display them somewhere to remind you that these are your positive points that will develop and encourage you in life. You will gain in strength and support each time you look at them consciously.
- Choose one weakness that you want to eliminate over the next month. Focus your awareness on that weakness for a month, using your strengths, your awareness and sankalpa to overcome that weakness. After a month, do your SWAN again and write down the results, then choose another weakness to eliminate, or if the first one needs more work, continue on that one.
- Which negative ambitions (if any) can be changed into positive ones? For example, "I will never" can become "I will always." List your ambitions according to priority or chronologically. When do you want to achieve them? What first steps are you going to make to achieve them? Do you need to alter your sankalpa accordingly?
- Over the next month be aware of your SWAN principle and see what comes up as needs and which needs you can successfully drop or put into ambitions, and adjust your needs list accordingly.

Short daily sadhana

SWAN can be continued as a short daily sadhana, for ten to fifteen minutes at the end of each day. Look at what your strengths were for that day. List them. Where did you mess up? What were your weaknesses, ambitions and needs? List them. The review of the day happens automatically as you look at your SWAN for each day. You might start with a long list of twenty qualities under each section and find that after about two weeks they come down to three or four.

As a short daily sadhana, SWAN is best done for two to three months. Do not look at

your list from the previous day; make a new one every day. Each day take a new page and a new SWAN. At the end of each month count all your personality characteristics and see what you really are. You may find ten or twenty different strengths for that month, some of which you have had only once, others you have had three or four times. Distil and regroup them and come down to three or four.

After two to three months of daily practice, stop doing SWAN. Observe what happens; observe your awareness of yourself. Breaks in between are essential as a mental rest because SWAN is very confronting. After a break of two to four weeks, start a second round of SWAN. It can start with just the distilled SWAN – the five or so different strengths from the previous month. You may find surprises.

Some qualities that featured strongly in one session may not appear in the next, or what appeared as a strength may come up as a weakness, need or ambition, because different situations show up different aspects of our personality. It all depends on your awareness, how you look at things, as to whether a quality comes up in one aspect or another. After some time you know that what you need is there; you just have to tap into it. It all becomes very positive. After you have been doing SWAN seriously for a while, someone may ask you what your SWAN is and you realize you can only say what it is for that day, that moment. The SWAN changes according to the slant or state of awareness, according to your mood. So you begin to realize that your moods and attitudes change according to the way you see things. This begins to give you some control over them. It is a liberation.

Personality integration

Your self-image then changes too. You realize that any quality is a momentary thing, and you can learn to disidentify with the aspects of your personality. You realize everything changes and is really impermanent. It becomes very exciting and inspiring to watch what is happening. Transformation occurs. It is not instant samadhi, but practising SWAN sadhana definitely has the capacity to transform one. If you want to change and to know yourself, then do it!

In conclusion, Swami Niranjanananda says, “Ultimately, through the practices of SWAN meditation, a stage of integration is reached wherein the different levels of the personality, instinctive, emotional, mental and psychic, are able to function and coordinate harmoniously. The fragmented aspects of the human personality which hinder and limit creative potential are gradually unified and reinforced, creating more positive channels of expression. In this way, the practice unfolds a new vision of oneself and of one's life, an experience of internal unity and self-acceptance which is not affected by external changes and influences.”