

WHAT IS AWARENESS? by Swami Yogaratna Saraswati

Here are some examples:

- a) Take your awareness to your nose tip. Before this instruction, you were not at all aware that you even have a nose. With this instruction all your attention is focused or concentrated on one point and nothing else. In Sanskrit we call this 'ekagratha', one pointed awareness. It can be to something inside the body or outside, the person speaking, to what you're reading, or whatever activity is going on.
- b) Take your awareness to the sounds around us. Now you become aware of many sounds, including the speaker's voice. This is expansion of awareness to include as much as possible.
- c) Become aware of how you're sitting, of what you're thinking. Now it's as if you come out of your own self or body and from an objective point of view, you see how you're sitting as if you are watching someone else. You can even observe your own thoughts as if you are watching someone else thinking. This is witness awareness or 'sakshi bhava in sanskrit..

So, the aim of yoga is to develop awareness.

We can do this through the body with asanas and hatha yoga, through the breath with pranayamas, through the mind with meditations and raja yoga, through our attitude in our daily lives through karma yoga which is described in the Bhagavad Gita, through our dealings with self and society in the yamas and niyamas of Patanjali.

YOGA NIDRA

Two of the best ways of developing awareness is through the practices of YOGA NIDRA and ANTAR MOUNA. These are both meditations from the ancient Tantras. They were first made known by Paramahansa Satyananda and they have now spread throughout the world in these and different forms and by different names.

The PRACTICE of Yoga Nidra (YN) is takes into account the restless nature of the mind, and develops the awareness, step by step taking it from the outer world, through the body and breath, to the deepest part of our inner world.

ANTAR MOUNA

Another excellent practice for developing the awareness of both inner and outer worlds is Antar Mouna (AM). AM literally means 'inner silence' because through this practice

you can learn to go beyond, the endless chattering of the mind, and find the deep inner peace and silence behind it.

AM is a meditation from the Tantras. It is also used in other systems for example vipassana. Some of the principles of AM are used in modern psychiatry. It is one of the most direct methods of tackling the problems of the mind, for self analysis and self knowledge.

Every meditation has a focus of concentration. This makes the mind one pointed and still. It can be a mantra (sacred sound), an image or picture, a flame, a sound, the breath, etc. In AM the point of concentration is the thoughts. Usually in meditation, we try to avoid thinking, to stop the thinking process. In this meditation we use the thoughts themselves as the focus of attention. Eventually you can do this practice in every waking moment and become a witness of your thoughts.

This is a sitting meditation and involves a process of pratyahara or withdrawing the senses from the outer world to the inner world like we do in the YN practice.

It is a simple practice and the beginning stages are easy and the effects immediate. By doing this practice you can experience peace and calm instantly and it is a good practice to do at any time of the day as often as you can. The simple version, (as we did at the beginning of the session), is to sit comfortably with eyes, closed, consciously relax the body, and focus on the stillness of the physical body. By doing this, we immediately disengage the mind from thinking and engage it on resting on the stillness of the body, so instead of the habitual worrying, it will, even for a few seconds, be still and calm and this will bring relaxation and energy so that there is refreshment. In this way, this technique is very useful for stress relief. But the complete practice goes much deeper, to learning to witness the thoughts.

AM is very systematic. Firstly it increases one's resistance to external disturbances. Then it allows subconscious thoughts and pent-up emotions to slowly bubble up to conscious perception. One directly confronts the contents of the subconscious mind: long forgotten memories, fears, hatreds and so forth come to the surface and are exhausted. Gradually the mind is harmonized and one-pointed.

Om Tat Sat