

YOGA AND JUDAISM CENTER



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JEWISH YOGA MEDITATION

I do not pretend to be an expert on Jewish meditation. I have been a practitioner of yoga meditation for many years. I have read some books on Jewish meditation and I have heard knowledgeable people speak on the subject. I have conducted some experimentation, based upon this background and experience. Although the proponents of Jewish meditation try to distinguish it from other forms, I see more similarities than differences. Through revelation and experimentation, I have discovered some powerful techniques that appear to have definite positive effects without any deleterious side effects. As in certain types of yoga meditation, these are practices that can be started without specific initiation from an external teacher. I do not know if there are other more advanced practices in Jewish meditation requiring the kind of initiation by a teacher described in the yoga tradition, although I suspect there are. Despite all of the continuing literature and exposure on Jewish mysticism, it still remains rather vague and shrouded in secrecy, particularly concerning the specifics of practices.

As in the yoga practices, one of these techniques involves coordination with the breath, and the other does not, instead involving rapid repetition of a phrase, called a “mantra” in yoga practice. I am not contending that these practices are only beneficial to Jewish people. As Judaism is the grandparent religion lying at the foundation of the other Western traditions that followed, I believe that these practices may have benefit for anyone, particularly in the Western world. Try them out and see for yourself!

GENERAL PROCEDURES APPLICABLE TO ALL OF THE PRACTICES

It is preferable to do them with the eyes closed, but you can try it with the eyes opened also, and see the difference. The body should be in an upright seated position with the head, neck and trunk aligned. Breathing should be only through the nostrils, with the lips gently sealed. Breathing should be at a comfortable and natural pace, allowing the bodily intelligence and needs to set the rhythm, and it should be done diaphragmatically (abdomen gently expanding during inhalation, and gently contracting during exhalation). There should be no extended pauses between inhalation and exhalation, just a natural continuous flow with that split second of suspension as it transitions from inhalation to exhalation, like the waves of the ocean coming onto the beach, turning, receding out, then turning and coming in again. There should also be a sense with the inhalation that your body is like an empty glass being filled with the breath, first pouring down to the bottom and filling it up as it goes. Likewise, with exhalation, the glass is emptied first from the top (being pushed up and out from the bottom), with the last bit of exhalation coming from the bottom. There should also be a sense of a circuit of energy flowing into the body and up the spine during inhalation, and flowing out and down the front

of the body during exhalation, creating a circuit running up the spine and out through the nose and down the front of the body, then up the spine again, and so on.

Recommended time: 20 to 30 minutes, twice a day, on an empty stomach (best first thing in the morning, and either late afternoon before supper, or before bed-time).

THE BREATH COORDINATED PRACTICE

Background

In yoga, there is a traditional breath coordinated practice utilizing the “universal mantra” of “so-ham”. I have discovered a similar Jewish practice employing the mysterious Tetragrammaton, YHVH, in conjunction with the likewise mysterious word “Elohim”. Some discussion about these words is helpful to better understand and convey the power inherent in this practice. They are the two words most used in the Torah to refer to God. There are others as well, such as Adonoi, but these two are probably used the most. Sometimes one or the other is used, and sometimes they are used in conjunction. “Elohim” is the first word used in the Torah to refer to God, and is generally considered to encompass the Divine aspects of Judgement/ Severity/ Restriction/ Containment. Elohim was the Creator in Genesis because creation involved taking pure, unharnessed force and energy, and giving it form. YHVH follows later as a principle of flexibility/temperance/mercy, so that the forms initiated by Elohim would not become too rigid or static. Without Elohim, we and the manifest world would never come into being; without YHVH, we and this manifest world would never survive for long. These two words and their accompanying principles also are reflected in the Kabala's Tree Of Life/Jacob's Ladder, with YHVH/Mercy the right pillar, Elohim/Severity the left pillar, and their interaction the middle pillar, the middle way. Their interaction creates the rungs/paths along the middle way which allow ascent up the ladder. There are many other significant meanings and applications concerning these two words and their letters, but this will suffice for our purposes for now. The whole idea behind meditation is to employ it so that you will discover other layers and meanings.

YHVH is an English alphabetical transliteration of the Biblical Hebrew consonants with the same corresponding sounds, Yod (usually pronounced more like “Yud”), Heh (pronounced “Hay”), Vav, Heh. The Biblical Hebrew text of the Torah does not contain vowels, which were developed sometime later as little symbols above and below the consonants, utilized in other written documents. So even the written Torah, along with the purely oral Torah, was partly oral: the consonants served as mnemonic devices to remind one of the sound of the words with the vowels. The particular mystery behind YHVH, unlike other Biblical words, even Elohim, is that the correct pronunciation either is not known, or it is a mystery to be revealed only to high level initiates or priests. The vowels are not included in the texts that otherwise depict vowels for all other words. One common conception is that the correct pronunciation and intonation of this word is so powerful that mere unprepared mortals could not survive its power. An additional/alternative conception is that it is too pure and holy to be intoned by mere unprepared mortals, and doing so would inevitably lead to God's name being

taken in vain. Thus its common description as the “ineffable” name. My intuitive insight is that its meaning, usage and value is so simple and subtle that unless one is properly prepared through preliminary study and practice, its real worth and value will not be grasped, appreciated and put to proper good use. I believe that this was one of the bases for much of the secrecy surrounding mystical practices in many traditions. Yes, perhaps they would be abused and could be dangerous in the wrong hands, but also, their profundity and simplicity would not be properly understood, valued or put to good and proper use unless the student was adequately trained and prepared. YHVH, by the way, is the source of references to the Jewish God “Yahweh” or “Yahveh” and “Jehovah”.

One interpretation I discovered, which I have incorporated into this meditation practice, is that there are no secret vowels or correct pronunciation for the word YHVH, because the word, properly employed, is used in coordination with the breath. The sounds of the consonants are intoned in coordination with the breath, and the sounds of the vowels are the sound of the breath itself. Basically, the sound of this word is the sound of the breath, which is the same conception as with the “So-ham” mantra in the yoga tradition.

Layer One Practice

(Note: for the basic revelation related to this practice, I am deeply indebted to Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, and Rabbi Phyllis Berman).

The first layer of practice in this meditation is done as follows. Each Heh is silently intoned within in coordination with the inhalation and the exhalation. The Yod is silently intoned at the moment transitioning from exhalation to inhalation, and the Vav is silently intoned at the moment transitioning from inhalation to exhalation. Thus, right before the beginning of the inbreath is Yod transitioning to Heh for the duration of the inbreath, then Vav is intoned just as the inbreath has completed and is turning to the outbreath, sliding into the second Heh for the duration of the outbreath. I have found it most comfortable to intone the sound of the full name of each letter instead of just the beginning sound, in other words “Yod” instead of “Yeh”, “Vav” instead of “Veh”, “Hay” instead of “Huh”. I hope you get what I mean. I would suggest you experiment with this to see what feels right to you. Maybe just the pure sound of the letter, and not the sound of its name, feels better for you.

Layer Two Practice

If the first layer gets a little boring after a while and is not sufficient to quiet and preoccupy “the monkey mind”, there are second and third layers which should help to quiet and focus the chatter. For the reasons stated above under “Background”, these layers incorporate the word “Elohim” into the practice. This is not a mere clever, inventive concoction, but is based upon scriptural support. At a key juncture in the development of Abram, at Genesis 15:2, he intones the first appearance in the Torah of the word “Adonoi”, used in conjunction with YHVH/Elohim, but in a most unusual manner, as explained by the notes in the Stone Edition.

First of all, it is unusual to use Adonai in conjunction with YHVH or Elohim, and secondly, although YHVH and Elohim are often used in conjunction, with one word following the other (usually YHVH goes first), in this rare, fascinating, and, I believe, extremely significant instance (I believe the only time in the Torah), the notes claim that the consonants of YHVH are used in the main text alone, not followed by the consonants for the word Elohim, but it is to be coordinated with the vowels for Elohim and pronounced as Elohim. It came to me that a viable alternative is that both words are meant to be pronounced simultaneously, reflecting/resonating the true interaction of these two words and their accompanying principles/energies, merging into a third word, if you will, representative of the dynamically balanced energy of the middle pillar itself. As traditional proponents of Jewish meditation have pointed out, Abram/Abraham, considered to be the first Jew, is also considered to be the master, if not the originator, of meditation and related mystical powers. Here at this juncture in the Torah, Abram first addresses God, utilizing/intoning these holy names. This would most likely be accomplished through a meditative process.

The layer two practice incorporates this notion of simultaneously intoning both words. After the layer one practice is established, in addition to the intonations of the layer one practice, simultaneously add the intonation of the sound, “El” on inhalation and “ohim” (pronounced “oheem”) on exhalation. This can be done, and it is interesting to note the added focus required of the mind to maintain it, and how the mind shifts foreground and background between the two sets of sounds. In other words, you are silently intoning within “El” at the same time as Yod-Heh, and “Ohim” at the same time as Vav-Heh.

Layer Three Practice

After the layer two practice is established, in addition to those two simultaneous sets of intonations, add yet a third layer: intone the entire word, “Elohim” with inhalation alone and again with exhalation alone. Practicing at this level will definitely keep the monkey mind well occupied, and you just might find that the monkey mind gets so tired from this hard work, that it falls asleep in exhaustion, thus opening the door to what is referred to in yoga meditation as “the unstruck sound”, the inner paradoxical sound current of silence. Thus the path to a deeper level of meditation.

I hope this description is clear enough to convey the technique so that it can be practiced. In summation, when practicing all three levels at once, with inhalation and exhalation, three sounds are intoned simultaneously (remember, at layer one, Yod is very brief and slides into Heh, and Vav is likewise very brief and slides into the second Heh): Inhalation/Yod-Heh/El/Elohim; Exhalation/Vav-Heh/Ohim/Elohim. You can also experiment with trying each layer separately.

THE REPETITIVE PHRASE PRACTICE

Background

In yoga and other meditative traditions, there is a common practice of repeating particular phrases/mantras in a fast repetitive fashion not coordinated with the breath. Some of these mantras have a “rounding” effect, in that the ending sound of the phrase is the same as or similar to the beginning sound, so that they blend into each other, aiding in a sense of a seamless continuity in the practice. An example of this is the common eastern phrase, “Om Mani Padme Hum”, in which the ending “Hum” blends into the beginning “Om”. I have discovered such phrasing in one version of the most central of all Jewish prayers, the “Shema”. I am not a big fan of transliteration, but for the sake of those readers not familiar with Hebrew and Jewish prayers, I will give it a shot. I would encourage you to review your pronunciation with someone familiar with Hebrew and this prayer:

Shema Yisrael Adonoi Elohanu Adonoi Echad
Echad Elohanu Gadol Adonanu Kadosh Shemo

The general meaning of the single words, without a lot of layered explication:

The first sentence:

Shema: Hear (not just surface hearing, but deep inner hearing)

Yisrael: Israel (there are many layers of meaning to this word/concept)

Adonoi: Chapter 7 of my book *Yoga and Judaism* contains a discussion of the meaning and significance of this word in its own right, and how it is also used as a substitute pronunciation in prayers where the unpronounceable Tetragrammaton, YHVH, is designated. In the Shema prayer, YHVH is designated, but is pronounced “Adonoi”. It is usually translated as “Lord”.

Elohanu: A possessive derivative of Elohim. What is interesting about Elohim is that it is the plural form, where Elohanu is the singular form. Elohim is the creator in Genesis.

Adonoi: YHVH is again designated here. See above.

Echad: One. This prayer is conveying the central message of Judaism that there is one God, one unifying, underlying source for all manifest and unmanifest existence.

So the first sentence, literally translated: Hear Israel Lord Our Creator Lord One

The second sentence:

Echad: One. This prayer is conveying the central message of Judaism that there is one God, one unifying, underlying source for all manifest and unmanifest existence.

Elohanu: A possessive derivative of Elohim. What is interesting about Elohim is that it is the plural form, where Elohanu is the singular form. Elohim is the creator in Genesis.

Gadol: Big, Vast, Great

Adonanu: A possessive derivative of Adonoi, here used as a word in its own right, and not as a substitute pronunciation for YHVH. It was first used by Abram in addressing God, as distinguished from Elohim and YHVH, which are God's own self references.

Kadosh: Holy

Shemo: Name

The second sentence, literally translated: One Our Creator Great Our Lord Holy Name

Shema Yisrael Adonoi Elohanu Adonoi Echad
Echad Elohanu Gadol Adonanu Kadosh Shemo

Hear Israel Lord Our Creator Lord One
One Our Creator Great Our Lord Holy Name

A common prayer book translation, rendering it grammatically correct:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.
One is our God, great is our Lord, holy is His name.

Again, there are many layers of meaning to everything, but I'll repeat here the most wondrous mystical meaning I have discovered, from God is a Verb, Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism, by Rabbi David A. Cooper:

“The mystery of saying the Shema prayer is that it draws a beam of light from a hidden supernal world and divides it into seventy lights, representing the seventy nations of creation. Those lights become luminous branches of the Tree of Life. When the seventy branches are illuminated, this tree and all other trees in the Garden of Eden emit sweet odors and perfumes, preparing all the polarities to unite into the Divine Oneness. In Kabbalah, the urge for this union, bringing the upper and lower together, is the driving force of the process of creation, the process of our lives.” P 51.

“*Israel* is a code word for that essence in life that longs to be with its Creator. The word “*Israel*” is composed of two words: *Yashar* and *El*. *Yashar* means “to go straight,” and *El* is one of the names of God. The aspect within every being which yearns to go straight to God is called *Israel*. Each person knows the part of themselves that desires to be with God. This is the mystical meaning of the nation of Israel; it is not a geographical location, for it extends throughout the universe.” P 319, fn 70

(The traditional explanation: Israel: “He who has struggled with the divine and with men, and has prevailed”. This is the name and its meaning given to Jacob by the angel with whom he wrestled all night. He would not let the angel go until the angel blessed him, and the blessing was to bestow upon Jacob the name “Israel”. It has come to signify the inner struggle we all have, trying to balance our sometimes discordant impulses, particularly in our attempts to reconcile our animal impulses with our Divine impulse).

The Practice

Now for the practice: These phrases are to be said in rapid silent repetition, with the “Echad” at the end of the first phrase blurring into the “Echad” at the beginning of the second phrase, so that there is only one “Echad”. Likewise, the “Shemo” at the end of the second phrase should blend with the “Shema” at the beginning of the first phrase, so that there is only one “Shemo/Shema”. I have been using one traditional yoga mala of 108 repetitions followed by silent sitting. In Judaism, the number 18, signifying the numerical value of the word “Chai”, which means “life” is an important number, often used by itself or in multiples, and as you see, 108 is a multiple of 6 times 18. You might want to experiment with different multiples of 18. I have found this to be a very powerful, grounding and centering practice, again leading to a deeper level of inner silence.

As with the other meditation practice, it should be done sitting upright comfortably with the head, neck and trunk aligned, employing diaphragmatic breathing with the mouth closed (abdomen gently expanding on inhalation, and contracting on exhalation), on an empty stomach, for 20 to 30 minutes at a time, twice a day (first thing in the morning, and either late afternoon before supper, or late evening before retiring). Again, eyes closed is preferable to tap into deeper inner realms, but it may be worthwhile experimenting with eyes open.

In yoga, the process of rapid repetition of a mantra like this is called “japa”, which can then become what is called “ajapa japa”, where it takes on its own momentum and just goes by itself, and you’re just listening to it. If it becomes an imperceptible drone, so be it. It may be meant to become an imperceptible drone, as are a lot of mantras when they get to a deeper level, approaching the source of all sound. That is the idea behind all meditation that utilizes intonation of a phrase. The conception is that those sounds actually already exist within you. On an outer level, you are intoning those sounds to make the connection. Once the connection is made to this inner level of sound that already exists, intonation can cease, and listening can begin. If you can get to the point where you’re just listening, you just listen. You can get to a point where the listening phase comes fairly quickly and easily. There is also a process akin to shifting layers; you go to different layers and hear different things at the different layers, analogous to changing the station on a radio. It is just a subtle shifting. You can fine tune inside and go to different layers and hear different sounds. Sometimes the sounds come and are asking for your attention. If a sound comes and is asking for your attention, it would probably be advisable to listen to it. If anything else comes asking for your attention that is a pleasant, joyful kind of experience, whatever inner sense it may involve, pay attention to it. There are inner spiritual sensations of sight, sound, touch, taste and smell that parallel our outer five senses. If it is not pleasant, ignore it, or note it for what it is, and then let it go. I think the pleasant ones are there for us to enjoy and to help us develop, so we shouldn’t be afraid or threatened by them if we can open up to them. If there is something very emotionally charged, negative, unpleasant, that’s what you want to note and then let go and find “your happy place”. The pleasant experiences involve finding our internal “happy places”. These

are very potent happy places and not just our imaginings of laying on the beach or something like that. There is something inside that is asking for your attention.

One repetition of the Shema is traditionally said by Jews upon retiring at night and upon rising in the morning, as there is language in the Torah that has been seen as a dictate to this effect. My suggestion is to experiment with these two practices as AM and PM practices, using them in the same session, or perhaps using one in the AM and the other in the PM, and see what feels right for you. The rapid repetition practice may be better in the AM, as it seems more invigorating, for a start to the day, and the Breath-coordinated practice better in the PM, as it seems more sedative, as a wind-down to the day.

FINAL NOTES

“And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the door posts of thy house, and upon thy gates.” Deuteronomy 6:4-9, incorporated as the second paragraph to the full Shema prayer.

For those familiar with Eastern teachings, this is strikingly similar to the Eastern practice of always remembering God and always repeating His Name. Either of the above practices can be taken with you during the day and utilized during spare moments to refresh yourself and reconnect. While standing on a line or waiting at a red light in a car or in gridlock, try either practice (with eyes open, as necessary, or eyes closed, if possible). You might find it very helpful, invigorating, and refreshing.