

What is the
meaning of life?

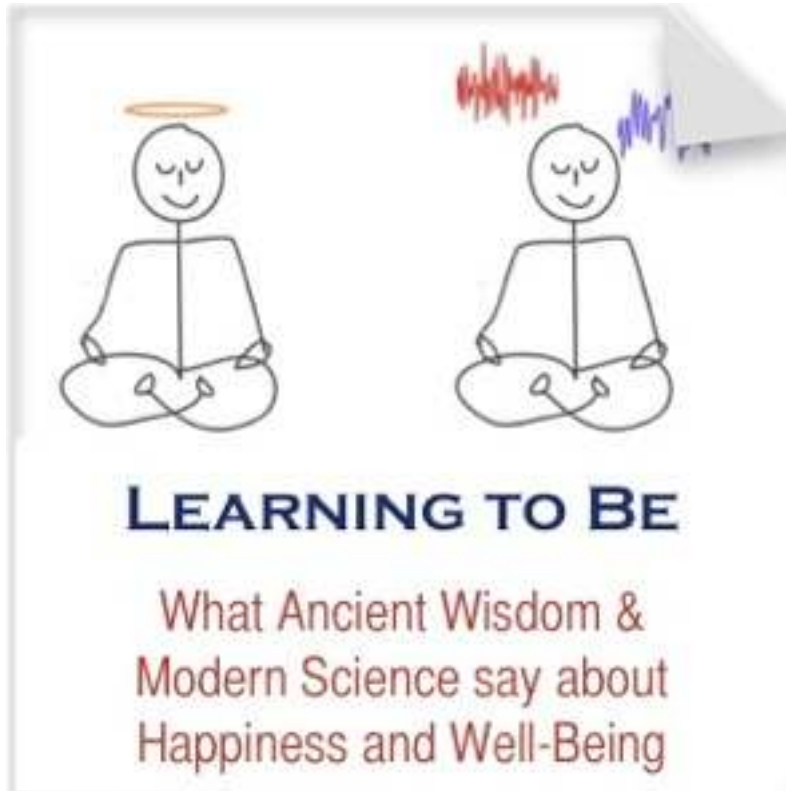


Ask Google!

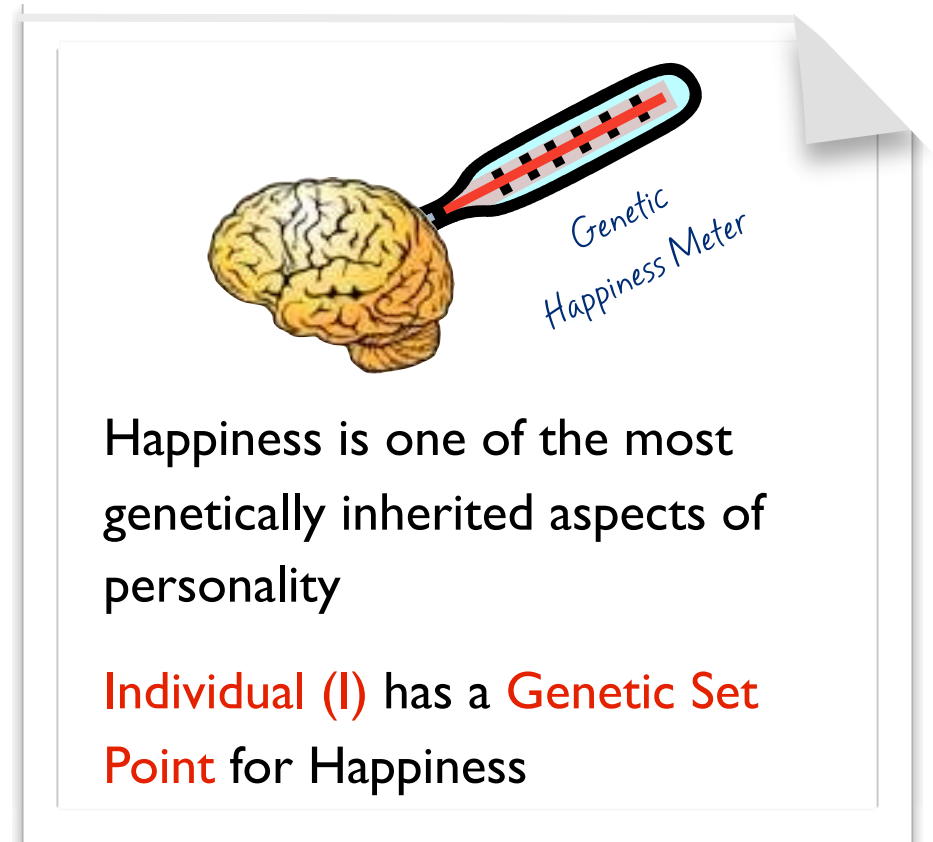


WHAT ANCIENT WISDOM AND MODERN SCIENCE SAY ABOUT **MEDITATION**

In an earlier module ↘



We noted that ↘



We also learnt ↴

Social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, suggests that wherever your happiness **set-point** may be, you can **raise** it through...



i) Meditation,
and/or



ii) Cognitive Therapy,
and/or...

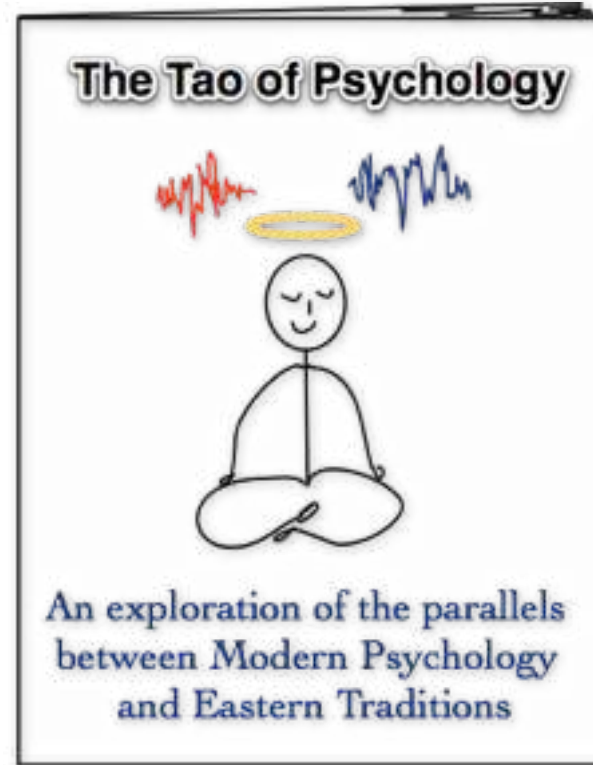


iii) Prozac



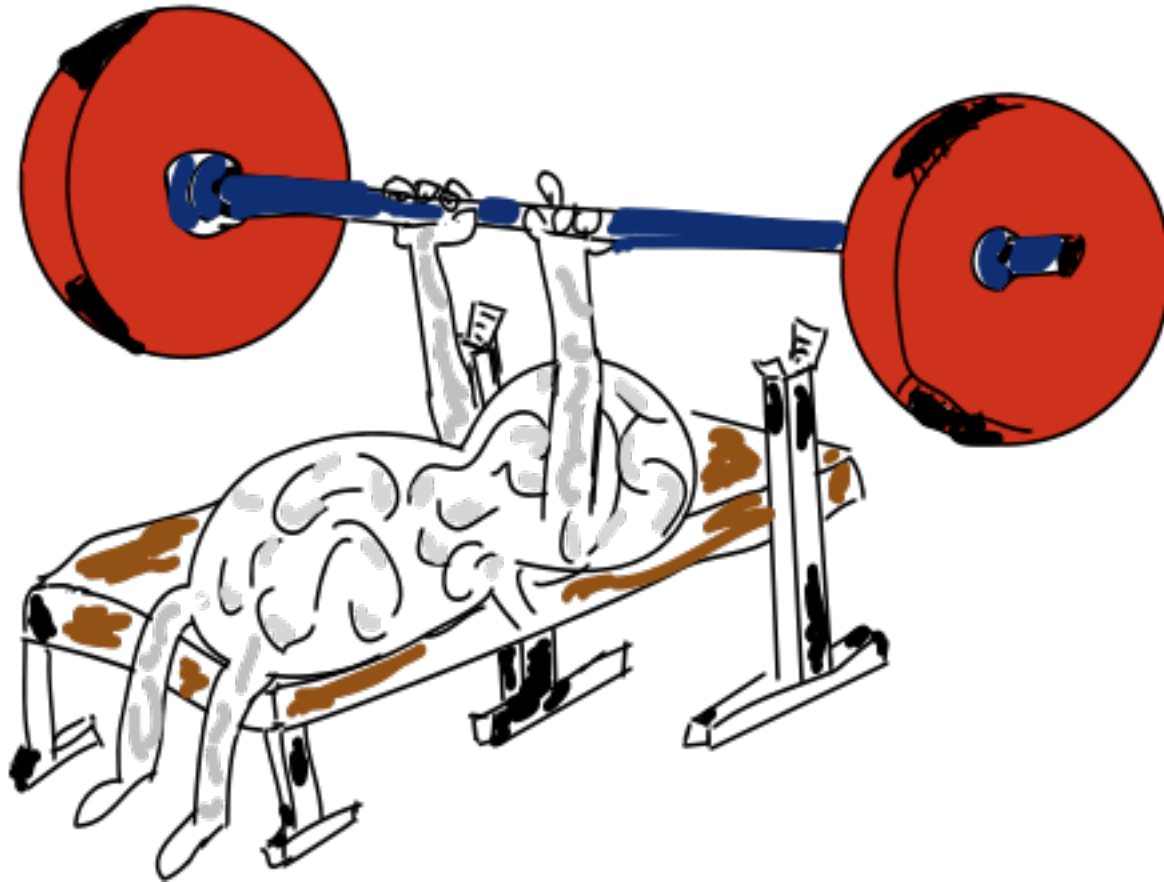
i) Meditation,
and/or

**IN THIS MODULE WE TAKE A DEEP DIVE
INTO THE ANCIENT ART OF MEDITATION**



Neuroscientist Richard Davidson and his team have done extensive research on Meditation or what they call - **Contemplative NeuroScience***
i.e. how ancient practice of meditation makes use of neuro-plasticity to change our cognition and emotions

**Based on Davidson's talk at Google titled, 'Transform your Mind, Change your Brain'*



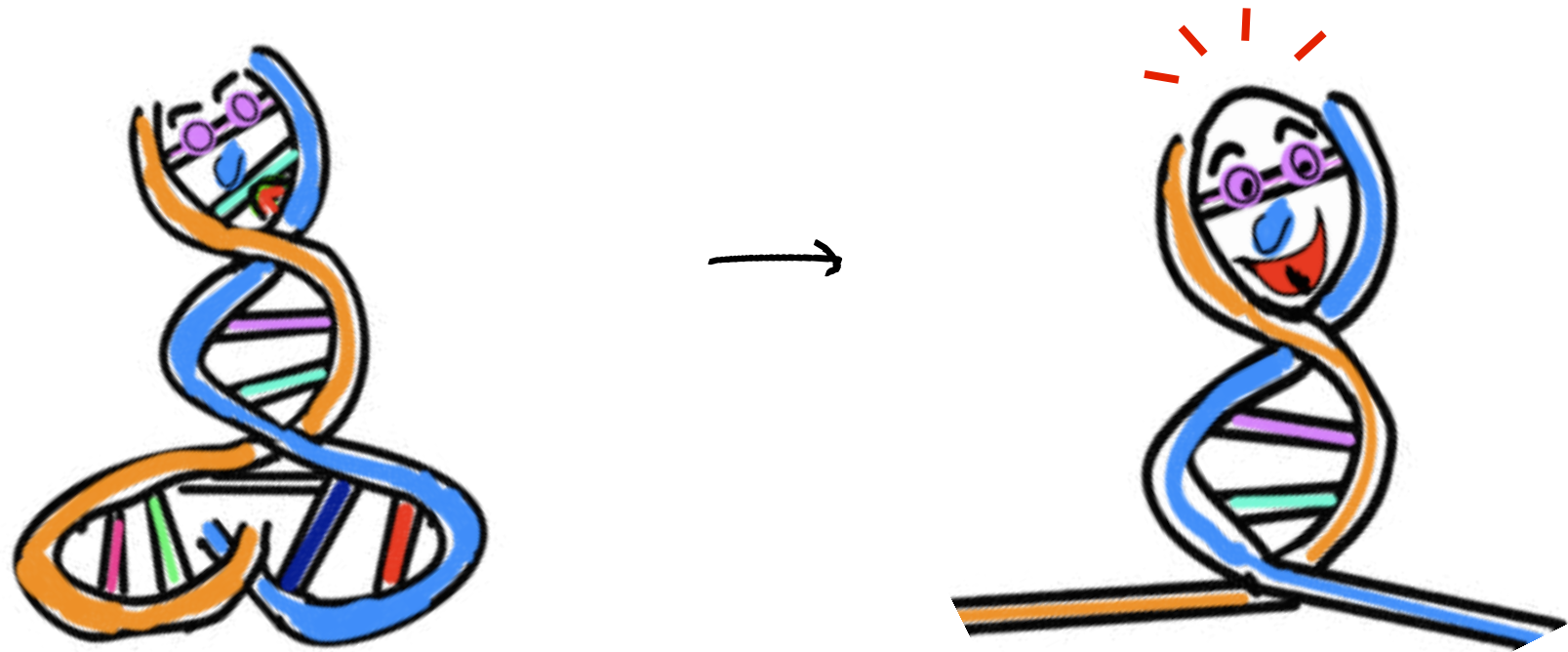
Neuro-plasticity refers to the ability of the human brain to change as a result of experience (brain is the organ that changes most with experience)

Research now shows that new connections between neurons are formed and removed in all areas of the brain throughout life



Earlier View of our Genetic Makeup

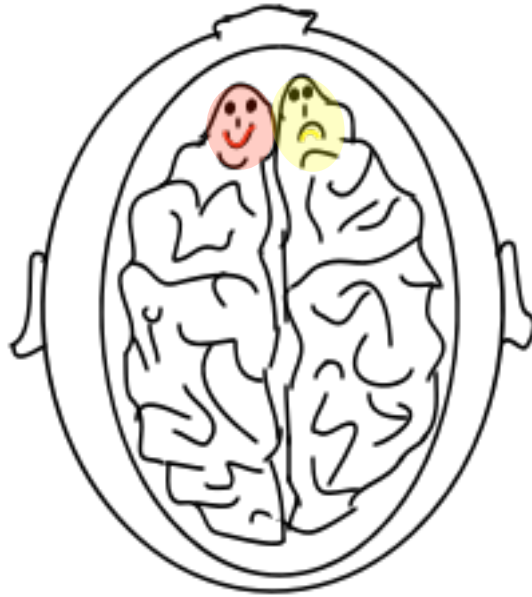
Genetic makeup is **unalterable** and our genes influence our behaviour in a **deterministic** way



Modern **Epigenetic View**

Genes are regulated by the environments in which those genes reside - genes expressed in our brains are tremendously **influenced by our mental environment**

We can adopt neurally-inspired **behavioural interventions** to **change our brain** (our genetic happiness set-point)



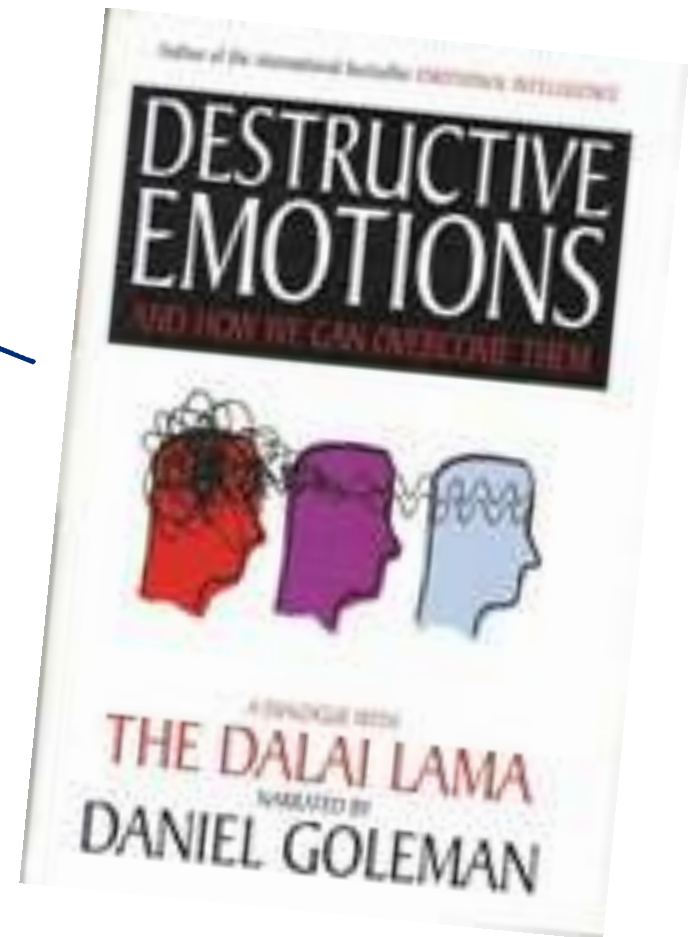
Davidson's research has shown that electrical activity, known as **gamma**, in the left pre-frontal area in the brain, is the locus for **positive emotions** (happiness, enthusiasm, joy, high energy and alertness)

High levels of activity on the other side of the brain, the right pre-frontal area, correlate with **distressing emotions** (sadness, anxiety, worry)

On these left and right areas of the brain, **Daniel Goleman** writes in his book 'Destructive Emotions' -

“We each have a characteristic ratio of right-to-left activation in the prefrontal areas that offers a **barometer of the moods** we are likely to feel day to day.

That ratio amounts to an emotional set-point, the mean around which our daily moods swing. Each of us has the capacity to shift our moods, at least a bit, and thus change this ratio... though usually such changes from the baseline set-point are modest.”





Which retreat
today?

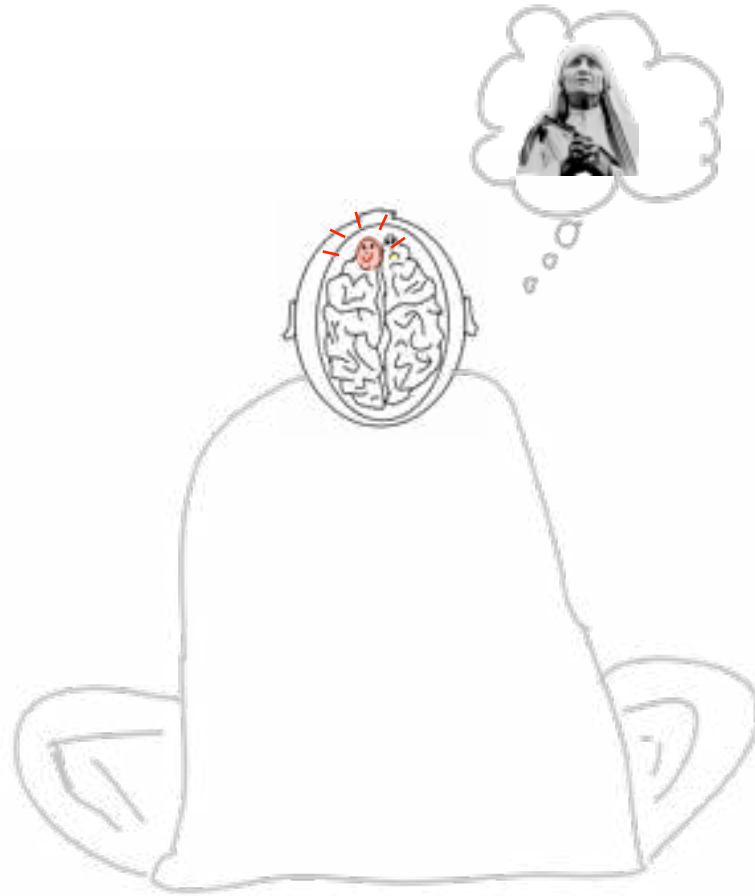


Davidson and his team have done extensive **fMRI scans** of Buddhist monks, while they were meditating, and noted the changes in their brain functioning

According to Davidson there is no more effective way to produce localised and specific changes in the brain than behavioural or mental interventions

Voluntary cultivation of compassion is one such mental intervention (also called compassion meditation)





The meditators in Davidson's study, who were generating a state of **compassion** during meditation, showed a remarkable **leftward shift in the prefrontal cortex** (the area for positive emotions)



What this implies is that the sheer act of **concern for other's well-being**, creates a greater state of **well-being within oneself**



But does compassion meditation, creating a greater state of well-being within oneself, work **only for seasoned meditators**

(those in Davidson's study had done 10,000 to 30,000 hours of meditation at the time of fMRI tests)



Davidson's team has also done a study on whether **short-term compassion training** affects the brain



Meditation-naïve individuals were given a **two-week training** on compassion meditation (they did 30 minutes meditation everyday for two weeks, under guidance by an expert, over the internet)

Another group underwent two-weeks, thirty minutes a day cognitive therapy



fMRI scans were done before and after the two week period for both groups and they also played some economic decision making games at the end of the two weeks to test their pro-social behaviour



People in the compassion meditation group behaved more **altruistically**
Systematic changes were produced in their brain in just two weeks

- **prefrontal cortex** showed enhanced activation
- **amygdala** (part of brain that detects threats) showed decreased activation

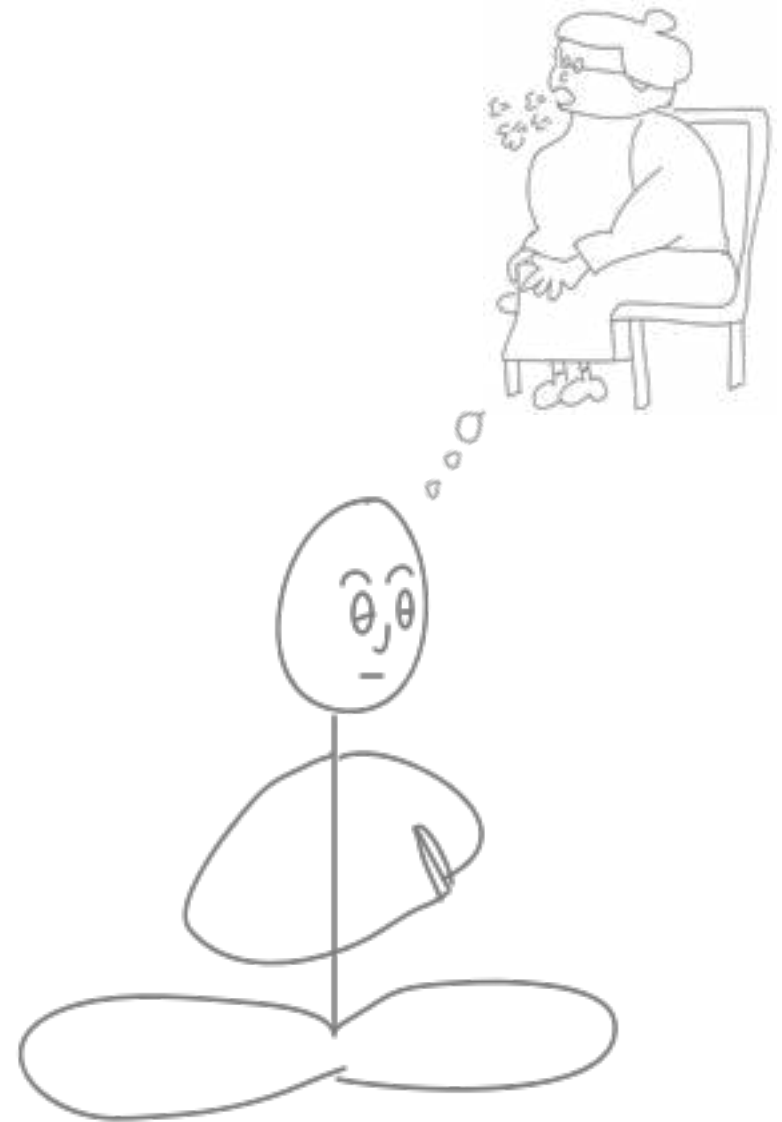


Davidson suggests that unlike advertisements that ask you not to try this at home, **compassion meditation** is something you should try at home, but don't expect miracles, instead keep at it

ELEMENTS OF COMPASSION TRAINING

Visualize an episode when following people were suffering (e.g. illness) and then wish freedom from that suffering for them,

1. A **loved one** (partner, child, parent)
2. **Yourself**
3. A **stranger** (bus driver, janitor... whom you see everyday but don't know well)
4. A **difficult person**
5. All sentient (conscious) **beings**



May you experience
joy and ease...



- While visualizing, silently **repeat a phrase** like - 'May you be free from suffering. May you experience joy and ease'
- **Feel the compassion** emotionally, don't simply repeat the phrases mindlessly
- Also notice your own visceral sensations (**inner feelings**)

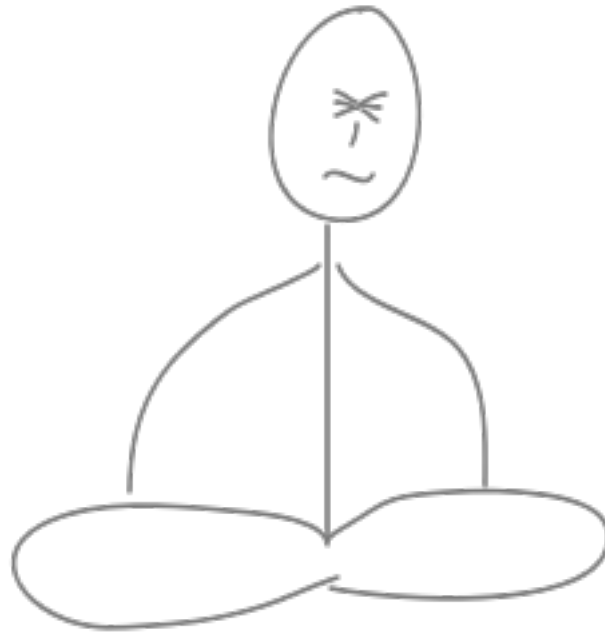
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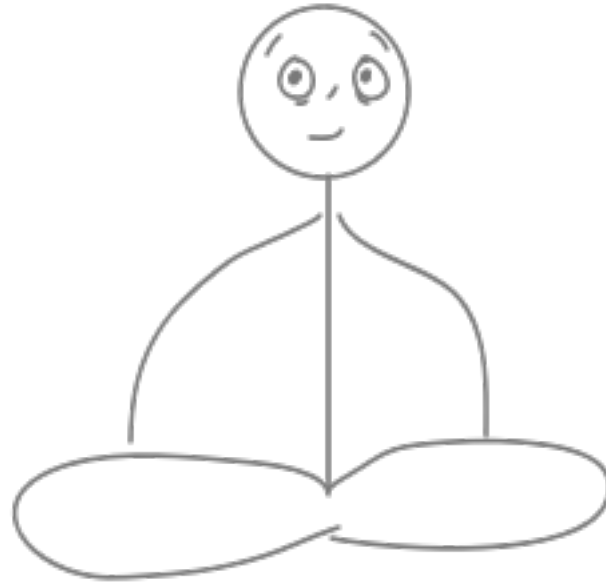


If compassion meditation does not appeal to you
there are **other forms of meditation** you can try...



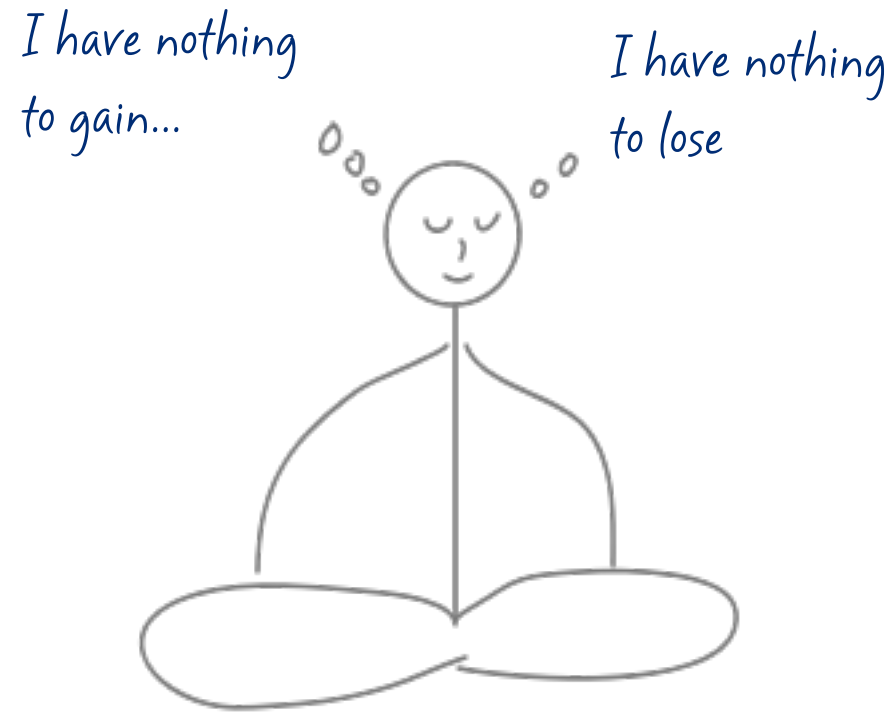
Focused Attention (cultivating concentration)

Pick a spot, focus your gaze and hold it there, bringing the focus back whenever the mind wanders off



Open Monitoring

- Thought-free wakefulness where the mind is open, vast and aware, with no intentional mental activity
- The mind is not focused on anything, yet it is totally present
- Thoughts may start to arise but don't chain into longer thoughts - they simply fade away



Positive Affect Training

- Compassion meditation
- Loving-kindness meditation,
- Fearlessness meditation (focus on the thought, 'I have nothing to gain, I have nothing to lose')



Cognitively-based Compassion Training

- Developed by the faculty at Emory University, USA
- Also beneficial to young children
 - Helps children understand inter-dependence among all things on planet Earth

**IMPORTANT THING IS TO UNDERSTAND
THE **FUNDAMENTAL IDEA** BEHIND
MEDITATION**



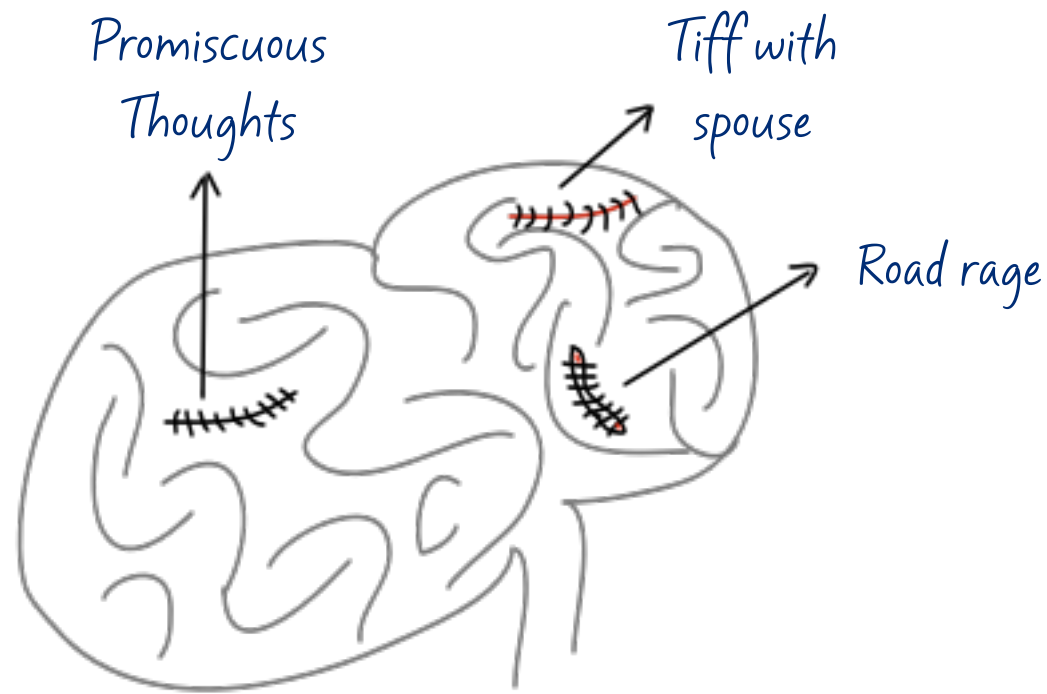
The Tibetan word for Meditation is 'gom' which more precisely means 'familiarisation'

- Objective of mediation should be to familiarize yourself with your mind



The Sanskrit word for meditation is 'dhyana' or 'manan', which more precisely translates to introspection

- Meditation is **systematic introspection of nature of self**
- Meditation is a technique to reach **higher state of consciousness**



According to Indian philosophical thought, your thinking and actions **leave impressions** (called vasana or sanskara) on your **sub-conscious** that can have positive or negative psychological effects



Meditation leads to tranquility of thought, makes you **aware** of the deeper discords and give you insight into possible harmony within you



The objective of meditation is to hold the mind steady from its otherwise incessant active state and **delve into the sub-conscious**

S Radhakrishnan (scholar and President of India from 1961-67), states the purpose of meditation as:

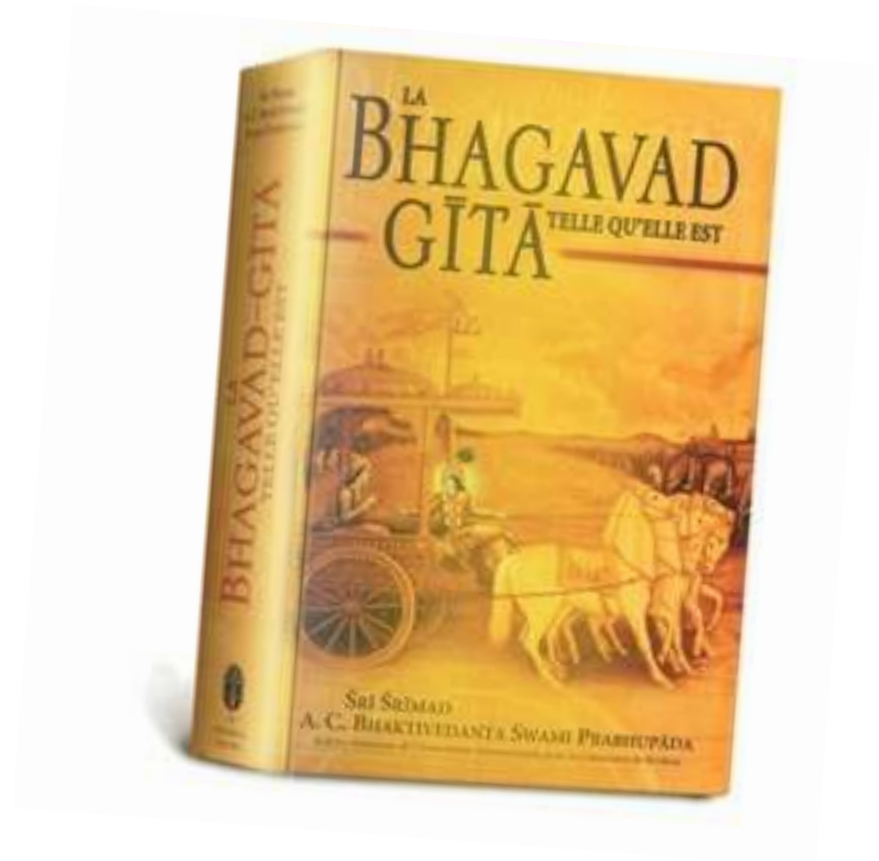
“Yoga (of meditation) attempts to explore the inner world of consciousness and helps to **integrate the conscious and the sub-conscious.**”

- In his translation of the Indian scripture 'Bhagawadgita'



S Radhakrishnan

Chapter 6 of the Indian scripture, **Bhagawad-Gita**, details the ‘**Yoga of Dhyana**’ (or the yoga of meditation) thus...



Chapter 6, Verse (shloka) 10 reads:

yogi yunjita satatam atmanam rahasi sthitah

ekaki yata-cittatma nirasir aparigraha

satatam: means constantly and highlights that meditation needs to be practiced regularly

rahasi: means in solitude

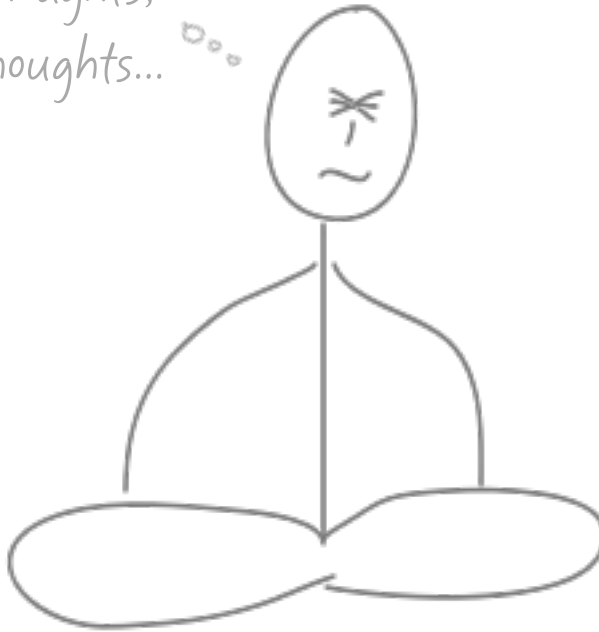
ekaki: means alone

yatacittatma: means self-controlled, neither excited nor anxious

nirasi: means free from desires

aparigraha: free from longing for possessions

No thoughts,
no thoughts,
no thoughts...



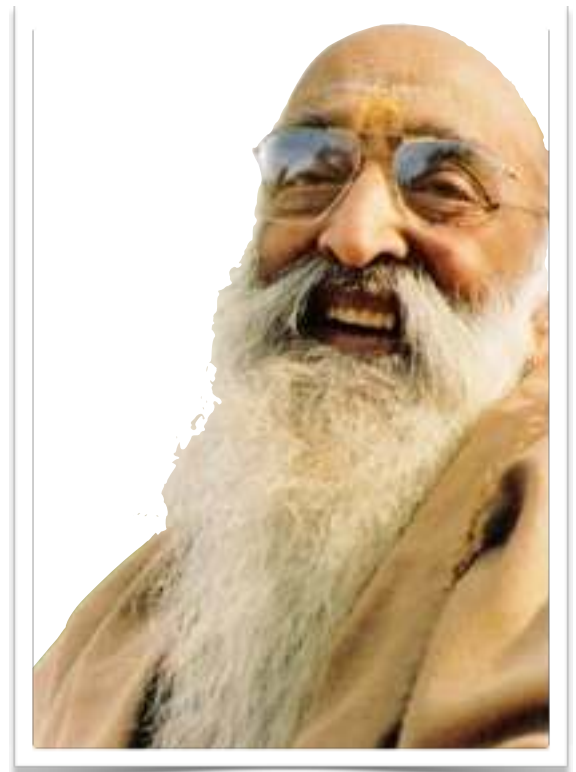
Let the yogi (meditator) try constantly to keep the **mind steady**, **introspecting** on self, remaining in solitude, alone, self-controlled, **free from desires** and free from (longing for) possessions

In the context of **aparigraha**, Swami Chinmayananda, makes a distinction between desires and longing for desires...

*“Desires in themselves are not unhealthy, nor can they actually bring about any sorrow unto us. But the **disproportionate amount of our clinging to our desires** is the cancer of the mind that brings about all the mortal agonies into life.*

A desire in itself cannot and does not bring about storms in the mind, as our longing after those very same desires does.”

- in his commentary on Gita



Swami Chinmayananda

Other passages in Chapter 6 of the Bhagawadgita give details on how to meditate

- Not eat too much or too little, not sleep too much or too little (**moderation**)
- Sit in a clean place, with a firm seat
- Hold the body, head and neck, erect and still (**posture**)
- Make the mind one-pointed (on an object, or on the self)
- **Control the thoughts and senses** (bringing the focus back on the self or object of concentration when the mind wanders)



One can imagine meditation as being similar to when we are **totally engaged** in a task -

our concentration is fully on the task, there is **no other chatter in the mind** and the mind stops behaving like a time-machine for thoughts



In meditation, the task is **introspection on nature of self**

What is the **nature of self** you are to introspect on?



According to **SAMKHYA PHILOSOPHY**, which is one of the six schools of ancient Indian philosophy, universe has two facets -



Prakriti (nature, matter, phenomena), which can be animate or inanimate

Prakriti is the first cause of everything in the universe except the Purusa

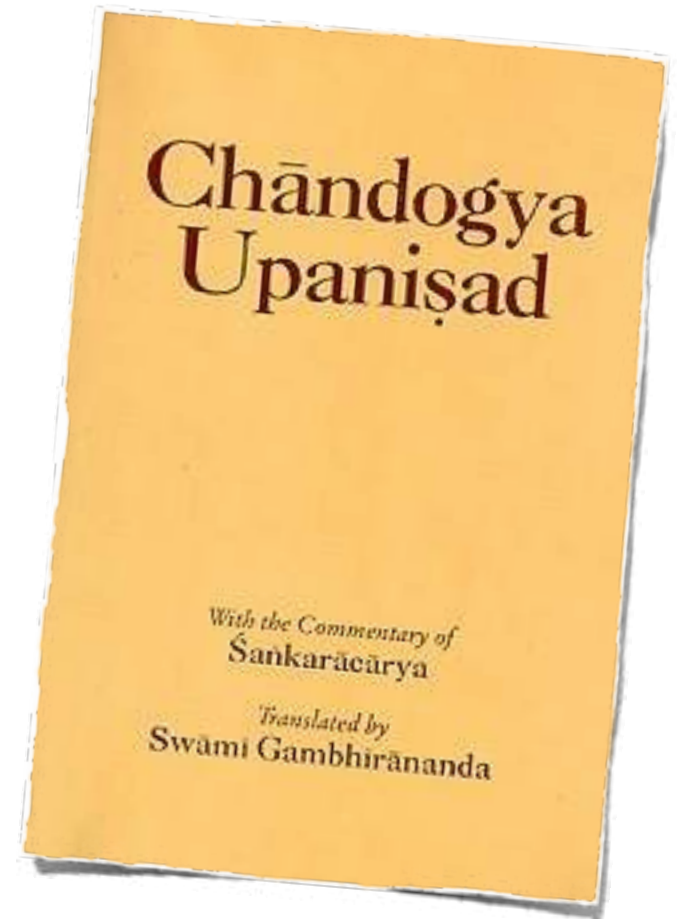
Purusa (pure consciousness), is independent and above any experience

Purusa separates out into countless individual units of consciousness (Jivas) and fuses into the animate branch of Prakriti

Chandogya Upanishad tells this story to explain the concept of 'Purusa'...

There once lived a boy, Svetaketu.
He became proud of his knowledge of Vedas.

Observing his arrogance his father asked him, "Have you learned that knowledge whereby what is not heard is heard, what is not thought is thought, and what is not known is known?"



Svetaketu was perplexed. “What is that knowledge?” he asked.

His father replied, “Bring me a fruit from that Banyan tree.”

‘Here it is, father.’

‘Break it.’

‘It is broken, Sir.’

‘What do you see in it?’

‘Very small seeds, Sir.’

‘Break one of them, my son.’

‘It is broken, Sir.’

‘What do you see in it?’

‘Nothing at all, Sir.’

‘My son, from the very essence in the seed which you cannot see, comes in truth this vast Banyan tree.’

‘Believe me, my son, an invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That is reality. That is Self (Atman). **Thou Art That.**’

Thou Art That or **Tat Tvam Asi**, is one of the mahavakyas (grand pronouncements) of the Upanishads

The import of this phrase is that Self - in its original, pure, primordial state - is wholly or partially identifiable or identical with the Ultimate Reality (Brahman or supreme consciousness)

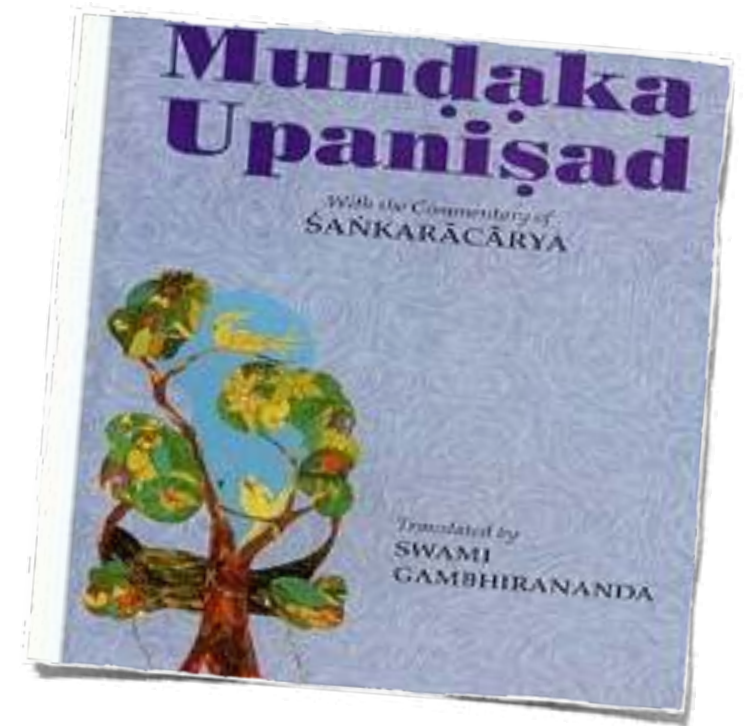
The Upanishads have four **Mahavakyas** (grand pronouncements) that uphold the ultimate unity of the Individual (Self or Atman) with Pure Consciousness (Brahman):

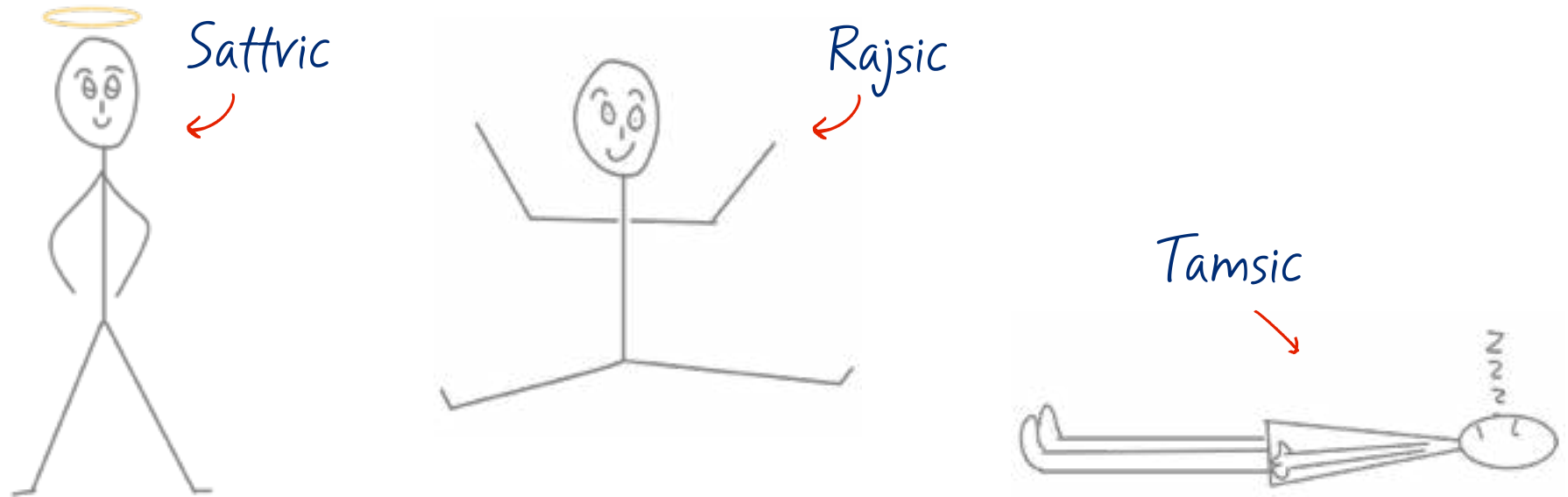
- **Prajnanam Brahman** - Consciousness is Brahman
(Aitareya Upanishad)
- **Ayam Atma Brahman** - This Self is Brahman
(Mandukya Upanishad)
- **Aham Brahmasmi** - I am Brahman
(Brhadaranyaka Upanishad)
- **Tat Tvam Asi** - Thou art That
(Chandogya Upanishad)

Mundaka Upanishad tells this story to explain the difference between 'Purusa' and 'Prakriti'...

“Two birds, inseparable companions, cling to the self-same tree. Of these, one eats the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree, and the other looks on in silence.”

The bird that tastes the sweet and bitter fruits is the individual self (or animate part of Prakriti), and the bird that simply observes is the immortal Self (or Purusa)





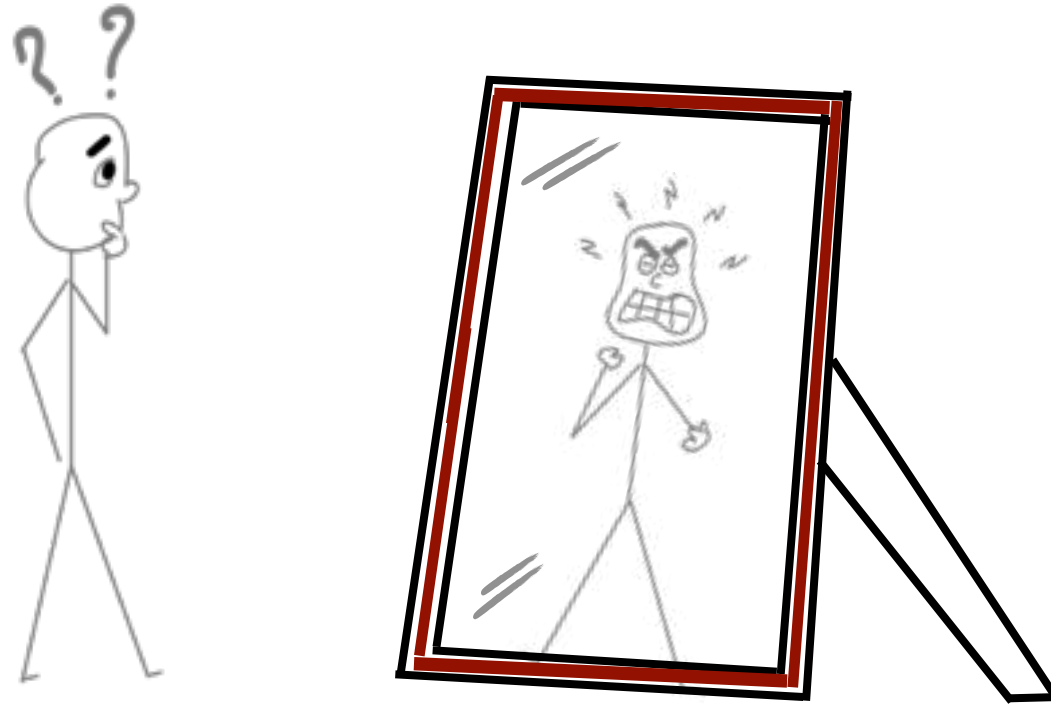
Prakriti has three special characteristics (**Gunas**)

- **Sattva** (goodness, joy, equanimity)
- **Rajas** (activity, excitation, passion)
- **Tamas** (coarseness, dullness, sloth)



Presence of gunas (mental attitudes) in different proportions create experiences

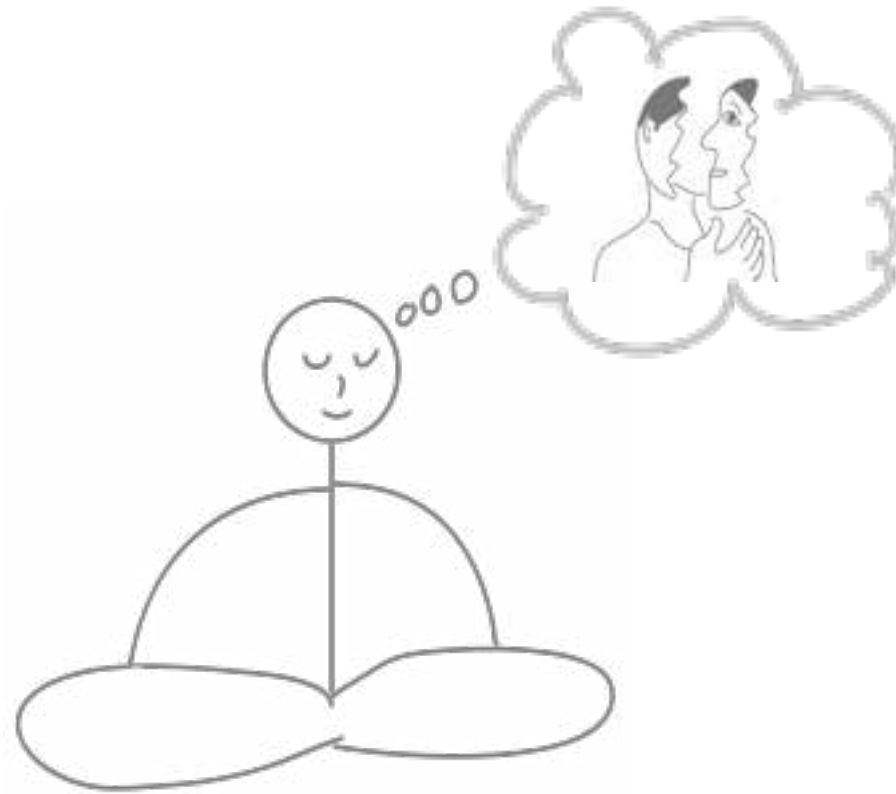
Ahankara (ego-sense) or the sense of 'I' in living being is also one outcome of these mental attitudes shaping Prakriti



Samkhya philosophy considers each sentient being to be Purusa (universal consciousness)

But when **Purusa, lacking discriminatory knowledge, confuses itself with the physical body** (which is a manifestation of Prakriti), suffering ensues

This confusion is because of **ignorance** (avidya) of the difference between Purusa and Prakriti



Meditation on the 'nature of self' thus means introspecting and realizing the difference between 'Prakriti' and 'Purusa', or between your **lower-self and higher-self**

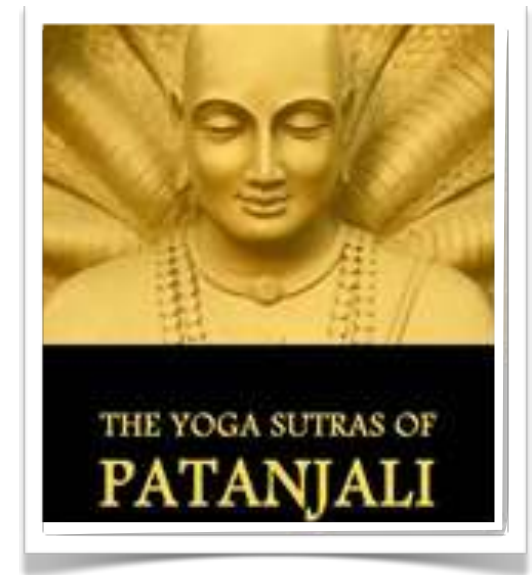


Objectives of Meditation

- In the initial stages of meditation the objective is to hold the thoughts steady and allow **insight into the sub-conscious**
- In later stages of meditation the objective is to feel **oneness with the universal consciousness**

Patanjali has written a comprehensive treatise, **Yoga Sutras**, on the Yoga of Meditation, which are based on the background of Samkhya philosophy

Samkhya holds that knowledge is the means of liberation but Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, while relying on the metaphysics of Samkhya (the concept of Purusa and Prakriti), propounds active striving and mental discipline



ASHTANGA YOGA

- Patanjali's Yoga System has 8 steps



First 5 Steps are called **Bahiranga Sadhana**
or external aspects

Step-1: **Yama** (abstention)

Step-2: **Niyama** (routine)

Step-3: **Asana** (posture)

Step-4: **Pranayama** (breath control)

Step-5: **Pratyahara** (withdrawal)

this stage is bridge to the next

Last three steps are called **Antaranga Sadhna** or internal aspects

Step-6: **Dharana** (concentration)

Step-7: **Dhyana** (meditation)

Step-8: **Samadhi** (liberation)

Step-I: Yama

- **Ahimsa**: non-violence in thought, word and deed
- **Satya**: truth in word and thought
- **Asteya**: non-covetousness (not even desire for something your own)
- **Brahmcharya**: celibacy/monogamy (even in thought)
- **Aparigraha**: non-possesiveness

Step-2: Niyama

- **Shaucha**: cleanliness of body and mind
- **Santosh**: satisfaction with what one has
- **Tapas**: austerity and mental control
- **Svadhyaya**: introspective study
- **Ishvara-pranidhana**: surrender to god, or worship

Step-3: Asana

- Posture during yoga of meditation
- Place of meditation
- According to Patanjali a good asana for meditation is, “to be seated in a position that is firm, but relaxed” for extended periods

Step-4: Pranayama

- **Prana** - life force or vital energy, particularly breath
- **Ayama** - to extend, draw out, restrain or control
- Refers to the three-step **breathing process**

Step-5: Pratyahara

- **Withdrawal of the senses** (weaning the mind away from sensory inputs)
- **Internalizing consciousness**
 - by concentrating on the point between the eyebrows (Ajna Chakra or the third eye)
 - by concentrating only on one sense, like hearing

Step-6: Dharana

- Holding steady
- Deep concentration on one object
 - But the object of meditation, the meditator, and the act of meditation itself remain separate
 - The meditator is conscious of the act of meditating and of his or her own self, which is concentrating on the object

Step-7: Dhyana

- Meditator becomes one with the object of meditation
- Consciousness of the act of meditation disappears, and only the consciousness of being/existing and the object of concentration exist (in the mind)

Step-8: Samadhi

- A non-dualistic state of consciousness in which the consciousness of the experiencing subject becomes one with the experienced object

“When the mind has been trained to remain fixed on a certain internal or external location, there comes to it the power of flowing in an unbroken current, as it were, towards that point. This state is called **dhyana**.

When one has so intensified the power of dhyana as to be able to reject the external part of perception and remain meditating only on the internal part, the meaning, that state is called **Samadhi**.”



Swami Vivekananda

The key phrase (sutra) of Patanjali's Yoga Sastra is

CHITTA VRIDDHI NIRODHAH

Swami Vivekananda translates the sutra as

"Yoga is restraining the mind-stuff (Chitta) from taking various forms (Vrittis)"

Outcomes of following Patanjali's Yoga Practice



Samayama

The process of psychological absorption in the object of meditation is called 'Samayama'

In Samayama, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi get collectively integrated



Kaivalya

The ultimate objective of Dhyana Yoga (yoga of meditation) is to achieve a mental state of 'Kaivalya' (liberation, realization of transcendental self) -

- **pure consciousness** settles in its own pure nature
- in other words, the Purusa behind the Prakriti is realized

Whatever form of meditation you follow, do **remember...**

“As a single step will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.”



Henry David Thoreau

Davidson is of the opinion that **by 2050**

- **Mental exercise** will be practiced in the same way physical exercise is today
- We will have a **science of virtuous qualities**
- We will develop a **secular approach** to provide methods and practices from **contemplative traditions** to better **regulate emotions and attention** and cultivate qualities like **kindness and compassion** (as skills that can be trained)
- Increase **awareness of our interdependence** upon others and upon the planet

If Meditation is not your cup of tea, BhagvadGita also details the **Path of Action** (Karma Marga) and **Path of Devotion** (Bhakti Marg), for enhancing well-being

More on these in another module!

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