

Antar Mouna

Sannyasi Atmatattwananda (UK)

When the mind is silent and peaceful it becomes very powerful. It can become a receptor of bliss and wisdom enabling life to become a spontaneous flow and expression of joy and harmony. However...this inner silence cannot arise while there is a continual stream of disturbing thoughts and emotions. All this inner noise of thoughts and emotions has to be removed before one can truly experience the soundless sound of inner silence.

— Swami Satyananda Saraswati

Peace, bliss, harmony. Who is able to experience these states? So many people these days are struggling with their own minds. Influenced by their conditionings, and overwhelmed by the pressures of day to day living in today's increasingly stressful society, they are full of mental tensions, which manifest as anxiety, nervousness, guilt, lack of self-confidence, loneliness, fear, obsessions and phobias. Some turn to drugs and alcohol as a temporary means of escape and solace. Others enlist the costly help of psychiatrists or psychotherapists to try and cope. All are looking for some form of change, a little relief from the inner conflicts and turmoil, wanting to feel at ease with themselves, or even to experience, if not bliss, just a modicum of peace and contentment.

Those who are fortunate enough to come across Satyananda Yoga can encounter and learn an excellent systematic meditation practice, known as antar mouna, that will enable them to release these oppressive mental tensions and to become their own psychotherapists in the process.

Antar means inner, mouna means silence. Antar mouna is a technique of attaining pratyahara (withdrawal of the mind from the sense objects), the fifth stage of raja yoga, and in its fullest form can lead to dharana and dhyana. Antar mouna is also a fundamental part of the Buddhist practice known as vipassana, used in a modified way.

Purging the mind

Generally we tend to allow 'good' thoughts to arise to conscious perception; we accept and enjoy pleasant thoughts. When an unpleasant, painful or 'bad' memory or thought arises, we tend to quickly push it back down into the subconscious layers of the mind. This is suppression and we all do it. Everyone has mental suppressions. Often we are conditioned to do it from childhood. But suppression is definitely not the answer.

Every single suppressed thought that remains unexpressed causes a block in the free flow of the mind. The thoughts and experiences stay submerged in the subconscious realms of the mind in seed form, causing pain, unhappiness and frustration in life. These subtle impressions are known as samskaras. Without even realizing it, we build up a vast accumulation of suppressed thoughts which cause a lot of tension and disturbances in the mind and personality without obvious cause.

To find lasting happiness or peace of mind, these mental impressions have to be rooted out. It can be compared to gardening. We remove the unwanted weeds from the mind. If we just break the top off, although there is temporary relief, the weed will return. However, when we dig down deep and pull out the root of the weed, it loses its hold and can be removed completely. If left to fester in the mind, these negative mental impressions poison the psyche and lead to irritability, aggression, anger, non-specific

depression, a tendency to worry, being fearful without reason, and permanent tiredness. This affects all our interactions in life and reduces our ability to be efficient, creative and dynamic at every level of our lives.

Antar mouna enables us to exhaust these unwanted thoughts; it provides a means to purge the mind. Once these mental tensions start to be released, we can experience corresponding surges of energy and inspiration and life starts to take on a new dimension. In the same way that we clean our rooms and the physical body every day we also need to develop the habit of cleaning the mind each day in order to prevent the accumulation of more dross or rubbish. Therefore, it is very necessary to repeat this process on a consistent and regular basis.

The practice of antar mouna is divided into six stages: For most people, the first three stages provide plenty to work with, and in order to obtain the full benefits, a considerable amount of time should be spent practising and perfecting them before attempting to move into the more advanced stages, which will only be touched upon in brief here.

Stage 1: Awareness of external sensory perceptions

Stage 1 of antar mouna is concerned with the sensory perceptions of external stimuli. The awareness is consciously directed to focus on the sense of taste, then to witness any smells nearby, to observe the sensations of touch, body against floor, clothes or air against skin, then to move the awareness to all the different available sounds within the vicinity, without analyzing or naming them, simply witnessing the quality of the sounds. We are told this is a pratyahara technique, so externalizing our awareness may seem like a paradox at first. Why do we do this? Because if we try to internalize our awareness directly, what happens? Instantly the monkey mind jumps outside and becomes distracted by the outside sounds, or smells and the sense of touch etc. So first, there has to be a full extension of awareness to all the sensory inputs. We have to know what they are and how they affect us, or how we react to them. Three factors are involved: (i) the external object of perception (smell, taste, sound, sight and touch); (ii) the external organs of perception (the jnanendriyas: skin, nose, ears, eyes and tongue), and (iii) the internal perceiver – the witness awareness – which knows it is observing; “I know I am listening to the outside sounds and I know that I know” is the form this awareness can take.

A by product of stage 1 is that it raises the awareness of all the sensory perceptions, allowing the sense of hearing to become like a radar for example, picking up the most subtle sounds as well the obvious gross ones, enabling us to become more aware in daily life of our surroundings. However, the actual purpose of this stage is to reduce the influence of the outside impressions on our perception. It is a case of familiarity breeding contempt. The conscious and intentional perception of the outside world automatically leads to disinterest. The mind becomes bored having checked out all the possible distractions and thus ceases to be either interested or disturbed by its environment. We develop the capacity to remain centred, detached, completely undisturbed and unaffected by anything going on around us. Therefore, stage 1 induces the first level of pratyahara, i.e. dissociation of the senses from the outside world, which prepares us to go inside for the second stage.

Stage 2: Awareness of the spontaneous thought process

In stage 2 of antar mouna we leave the outside world and turn inside to work with the mind. We sit in a relaxed manner and start to observe the mind 'screen' in front of the

closed eyes. The aim is to view and exhaust the samskaras, the negative thoughts, experiences, phobias, old memories, emotions and fears, i.e. the useless debris, which arise from inside the subconscious mind. Regular practice of this stage cleans the mind of old dross and prevents the accumulation of more rubbish.

Stage 2 has three requirements: The first is to allow the mind total freedom to think anything it wants, without any restriction. Letting all thoughts bubble up spontaneously to the surface, being aware of any corresponding emotions or feelings, especially fear, panic, greed, lust, guilt, hatred or anger. There should be no control, judgement or criticism of any thoughts – they may be about work, home, food, sex, friends, enemies, likes, dislikes; trivial or lofty, sublimely beautiful or violently murderous. Some may be connected, others will be random. Sometimes there may be a torrent of thoughts, at other times there may be just a trickle. No matter, what is important is the second requirement which is that we maintain absolutely vigilant awareness of the spontaneous thought process. Aiming constantly to develop our capacity to witness, just as though we were watching a TV or a video screen, like an uninvolved observer or spectator watching a stream of images, thoughts and events with detachment.

During the practice of stage 2, we will start to observe the different tendencies of the mind. Seeing how we suppress. When we do, we can be certain that the thought or impression will come up again with even greater force at a later time (this can be likened to pushing a rubber toy under water). Witnessing how we hold onto other thoughts, discovering how easily we can lose ourselves within our own mental process, observing that perhaps we have some repetitive thought patterns. The mind can be extremely tricky. It loves a good painful movie, for example, and may tend to replay a particular traumatic 'video' over and over, knowing it will get a good emotional reaction each time. By observing the play of the mind with the attitude of a witness, these thoughts start to lose their emotional force and even the most painful experiences can gradually be eradicated.

After some time with this stage, by giving the mind this freedom to spontaneously express, the torrent of babble starts to thin out a bit. The mind starts to become a little quieter. This should not however be confused with either silence, or sleep which often occurs, especially with beginners. A tendency to sleep when practising antar mouna is a classic form of the mind suppressing something it doesn't want to confront. It is as if the mind recognizes that something different is happening, that you are taking control by asking the question: "What am I thinking now?" and all of a sudden the mind goes quiet. There are no thoughts at all! Do not be fooled into thinking this is enlightenment, rather it is just another form of subtle suppression. Just wait patiently for a short while, imagine you are looking at an empty road and soon enough the mental chatter will continue again!

The third requirement is courage, openness and honesty, for deep, hidden and suppressed parts of our personality will be revealed to us with antar mouna. This may be some beautiful, loving part of ourselves that has been dormant, or perhaps some ugly dark side that has equally been hidden. We learn to understand the nature of our mind and its multifarious activities, to befriend it and to become aware of and observe our emotional reactions to the different thoughts. This process enables us to accept ourselves fully, not as we'd like to be, but as we really are.

Stage 3: Creation and disposal of thoughts

In stage 3 of antar mouna we consciously create and dispose of thoughts at will. It is the opposite to stage two. Here spontaneous thoughts are not allowed. Rather a particular theme or thought is chosen at will, then reflected upon for a while, generating as many connected thoughts as possible related only to that theme. Looking at the issue from all angles, pondering on it, if another person is involved, considering things from their point of view and so on. After a few minutes, this theme or thought is then thrown quickly out of the mind, like a film director giving the order to 'Cut' when a scene is finished, and another theme is chosen. This can be repeated several times, choosing a different issue each time. The practitioner is requested to choose confronting, difficult, negative issues and themes, rather than inconsequential thoughts which will tend to be a waste of time.

In stage 3 it is really possible to work at a psychotherapeutic level. Although stage 2 helps to release mental tensions by allowing them to erupt without inhibition, many of these subconscious thoughts are deeply embedded in normally inaccessible regions of the mind, firmly fixed and rooted through habitual suppression, and therefore do not necessarily arise spontaneously.

In stage 3 the posed thoughts stir up a train of associated thoughts. These consciously created thoughts incite and attract deeper thoughts and memories. The analogy is that of fishing. The mind is baited with a thought. The bait is put into the water (the subconscious mind) and attracts other fish (deeply embedded sub and unconscious thoughts or impressions) which are caught, brought up and then released. This releases psychoneural knots and blocks. As these memories and thoughts are confronted, they lose their force and emotional weight, which leads to greater understanding of oneself, clarity and powerful inner healing.

Stages 4, 5 and 6

Stages 4, 5 and 6 are at a much more advanced level, and it will be a waste of time to attempt them if the first three stages have not been practised extensively first. Stage 4, awareness and disposal of spontaneous thoughts, is a refinement of previous stages. By this time much negativity and many disturbing thoughts will have been cleared. The mind is calmer by this stage. The thoughts will be of a different quality, arising from a deeper or more subtle space. A new dimension of one's being can be indicated or revealed here, the psychic level. One should not become attached to what arises. Detachment is required in order not to become distracted. When one is heading inwards, into uncharted territory, the witness must be strong. Gradually the mind becomes more refined and lucid.

In stage 5, the aim is to create a state of thoughtlessness. No thoughts, the mind has to become blank whilst alertness or awareness is still maintained. It is like a mental vacuum, but it is not sleep. It is shunya. This stage leads to actual antar mouna and should arise almost spontaneously as a result of having practised and perfected the previous stages. Suppression takes place here sometimes, but the thoughts have become almost insignificant. When stage 5 is easy, then one is instructed to move on to stage 6, otherwise the mind can become lost in laya, unconsciousness or sleep.

Stage 6 is awareness of the psychic symbol. Here constant awareness of the chosen psychic symbol is required, in order not to be side-tracked by other psychic scenery. At this stage one can slide towards the state of dharana and even dhyana.

Benefits of antar mouna

Antar mouna is a powerful psychiatric tool with which we learn to understand and befriend the mind, its tendencies and reactions that arise due to thoughts. It enables us to train the mind, to focus the monkey mind on one point which many of us have trouble with. Most importantly, we can learn to develop and strengthen the drashta or the witness, the observer of all that happens. This allows deep-rooted tensions, long forgotten painful memories, fears, hatreds and phobias to arise in a relatively controlled manner and to be eradicated. The practice provides a basis for clearing all the mental dross and rubbish – it is a form of mental shankhprakashana.

Antar mouna is designed specifically to eradicate mental noise and to induce a state of peace, tranquillity, one-pointedness and calmness in the mind. We can even consider antar mouna as a tool to move from darkness or a contracted state of awareness into the light of an expanding awareness. We can transform our negativity in this way. From that stage of ignorance or negativity we can eventually come to a meditative point, a neutral position of no action, no engagement, just being. This leads to automatically to steadiness and calmness of mind, in contrast to our usual oscillating state of mind, or vikshipta.

Practice in daily life

Antar mouna should not be considered as a passive sitting practice only. Stages 1 and 2 are active practices that one can aim to incorporate into every situation in daily life. Antar mouna is one of the most helpful tools around to learn about yourself, your hidden sides, your mind and to see how you are reacting to life's situations, in a clear and honest manner.

Practise stage 1 when you next enter a crowded, noisy room or railway station, as you eat your food, when you shower, as you are getting dressed. Practise stage 2 daily, often, in any situation by repeatedly reflecting on the question "What am I thinking now? What is happening in my mental or emotional sphere?" Becoming aware of what is taking place, without identifying with it. Remind yourself, "I am not these thoughts, I am not these emotions, I am the observer". In this way the witnessing process starts to become an automatic occurrence which shows you who you are, what you are doing here, where you are going, how to fulfil your potential and develop true peace of mind.

Reference

Swami Satyananda Saraswati, A Systematic Course in the Ancient Tantric Teachings of Yoga and Kriya. Bihar School of Yoga, Munger, Bihar, 1981.