Introspection

Module for improving self-observation · Yoga Loznica · 18 June 2021

The self-observation module: eight classes of stretching and complete yoga breathing, with contemplation and meditation. Attention is directed to sensations in the body and mind, without judging ourselves.



> **Note.** Introspection is not putting ourselves on trial, but patient and benevolent observation. Every insight brings a little discomfort, and the support of those close to us and of professionals helps.

Introspection is self-observation: noticing our own thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. It is the only road to what cannot be known in any other way: dreams, plans, memories and the way we experience something. Research shows that it is a skill that is learned: we often do not know the real reasons for our behaviour [1], and the very act of observing changes the experience we observe [2], so we observe patiently and without judging.

With training and careful questioning, inner experience can be described more precisely than spontaneously [3]. Experiences and reactions are given only to us, and that is precisely the point of introspection; it is important not to mix them up with conclusions about why they arose.

Yoga as training in attention

Stretching, complete yoga breathing, contemplation (reflecting on a phenomenon) and meditation train the directing of attention and body awareness. Research on mindfulness names regulation of attention, body awareness, regulation of emotion and a change of perspective on oneself as the components of this process [4][5]. That is why someone devoted to practice gradually acquires a way of thinking that lets them see psychological processes with a certain distance. When we direct attention to the body and the breath, the **nervous system** moves to a calmer state, and the **endocrine system**, which keeps the others in step, receives fewer stress signals; that is why insight is easier to bear.

Ethics as a foundation

Most styles of yoga also include moral principles. The first stage of the complete practice consists of the general ethical commandments: non-violence, truthfulness, abstaining from taking what belongs to others, moderation and non-attachment to possessions [6]. Practice is not reserved for monks and ascetics: “One who fulfils their social duties and inwardly remains free is a true yogi” [6]. Conscientiously fulfilling our obligations is, then, itself a practice.

In classical yoga the commandments are known as *yama*: *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (abstaining from taking what belongs to others), *brahmacharya* (moderation) and *aparigraha* (non-attachment to possessions). At their root lie greed, craving and attachment. We all have them, more pronounced in some and barely noticeable in others, and they bring us dissatisfaction and ignorance. Constant introspection helps us find the right measure, not only personally but socially.

Four qualities

The module follows four qualities from a classic spiritual handbook [7]:

- **good judgement**: distinguishing the important from the unimportant and the true from the false;
- **control of desires**: ambition without denying ourselves and without attachment to the result, with gratitude;
- **good conduct**: calm thoughts, patience, joy, composure and trust in ourselves;
- **love**: the will and decision to help and not to hurt.

> ***We can be sure of ourselves and our decisions if we judge well, control our desires, conduct ourselves well and carry love within us.***

Good judgement

According to Krishnamurti [7], it does not matter which faith or nation we belong to: we are all here to do good. We are often at odds between will and real needs, so when we want something it is worth asking whether it is truly our wish. We do not have to identify only with the body, the feelings or the thoughts: the body sometimes asks for rest, the feelings ask for excitement and change, and the mind wants to be separate. Meditation is a good exercise because we see where the mind wanders, and with that, what deserves our attention.

We must distinguish the true from the false. The more honest we are in thought, word and deed, the more easily we see the truth, but we are exposed to untrue claims, superstition and half-truths that out of context can do harm. Gossip is a typical example of a half-truth, and even when what we say is true, it is often better to be silent. We learn not so that others will consider us wise, but so that we can help. We stand firm when it comes to what is good, give way in what is unimportant, and give others the freedom we ask for ourselves.

Control of desires

Many find it hard to be without desires because they identify them with the personality, but we will not disappear if we let them go. Healthy ambition is fine; what is wrong is to deny present circumstances in the hope that tomorrow will be better. The other extreme is renunciation for the sake of a reward: it is only a new desire, exhausting and demanding constant willpower.

Every desire binds, including the wish to see how much we have helped or to have someone be grateful to us. Help is worth something even when we do not see it and when gratitude is absent. Gratitude itself is, however, a useful encouragement: in an experiment in which participants regularly noted the things they were grateful for, they rated their lives more favourably than the control group [8], and a doctoral dissertation from Serbia linked gratitude with subjective well-being, while linking selfishness and narcissism with weaker gratitude [9]. We are grateful when we accept people with their faults and virtues, circumstances with peace and new experiences, when we give and forgive.

Personal vanity consumes energy. We should not strive for “psychic powers” or constantly be the centre of attention. It is better to speak less, especially when we are not sure of the truth of what we want to say, and idle chatter and gossip are superfluous. We do not meddle in other people’s business and we grant others the right we ask for ourselves: to think, speak and act freely, as long as it does not bother others. If someone is making a mistake to their own harm, we can tell them what we think, at a suitable moment and in a suitable way, and sometimes even that is not good.

Good conduct

Good conduct is a lifelong challenge and concerns managing thoughts and deeds, patience, joy, composure and trust.

Mastery of thoughts is the condition for control of desires. The aim is for thoughts to stay calm and for us to be bold and composed in the face of everyday worries; dealing with trifles takes the most energy. Let us devote ourselves to what we are doing in the present moment, because that is how we shape the future. It is not good to give in to dejected thoughts: let us look for a way to free ourselves of the mood (conversation, movement, and if it lasts, the help of a professional). We direct our thoughts to what we admire and to those who need help, and we turn good thoughts into good deeds. Until we have carried out our own obligations well enough, we do not take on new ones, and those we do take on we carry out fully.

We are patient with everyone, and most of all with the people we want to understand and help. Remembering our own childhood helps us to empathise with children. We try to bear our fate calmly and joyfully: we can understand suffering as a lesson, but we should not seek it out or put up with what we can change. We pass joy on to our loved ones, which is not possible if we give in to dejection.

We give every task full attention, as if it were our best work; composure means that nothing disturbs us, neither pain nor pleasure. We believe in ourselves, in our choices, decisions and goals, because without trust in ourselves nobody can help us. The picture of ourselves is nevertheless always partly coloured by prejudice, so it is good to check it from time to time, both with others and through introspection.

Love

According to Krishnamurti [7], love is the most important quality and, when strong enough, leads us to all the others. It is both will and a firm decision, and not only a longing for union with the essence. It does not serve to avoid pain and suffering, but to accept, experience and understand them. That is why we try not to hurt any living being and to use every opportunity to help. The author names the three greatest threats to love [7]:

Gossip begins with an evil thought. In everyone there is both good and evil, and the more we think about something, the stronger it becomes. That is why we should not speak ill of others, nor listen when others do.

Cruelty. To deliberately inflict pain on another living being is the greatest evil, and a crime does not stop being a crime even when we justify it with perfect arguments. A thoughtless word can hurt as much as a malicious one, so it is good to think of the consequences of our deeds.

Superstition is the belief that things happen to us regardless of what we are and what we do, so that we rigidly hold that something is good or bad and that our fate depends on unknown forces. Faith is something else: everyone believes in what they wish, and everyone is able to try to be better.

Devoted people do not live only for themselves. To be able to help others we need wisdom, the will that directs that wisdom, and the love that inspires the will.

About the module

The module is organised as an eight-class course. Each class sets off a process of introspection with classic stretching exercises and complete yoga breathing, and attention is directed to sensations related to physical and mental processes. A smaller part of the class is devoted to contemplation and meditation.

Photograph

Photograph: Yoga Loznica.

Sources

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