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The Practice of *Japa*

Japa, the practice of saying repetitive, positive ideas in short sentences or even a single word, is present in all of the world's wisdom systems. It is practiced under some name by aspirants of all these wisdom systems. The positive word or phrase is spoken either out loud; softly, just loud enough for the practitioner to hear it or it may be spoken purely within the practitioner's mind. *Japa* is a powerful tool to aid in developing concentration and in learning to consciously direct the content of our thoughts. This practice is designed to:

1. Teach the mind to focus powerfully (to the exclusion of other thoughts) on a single harmless thought; and
2. To calm the cognitive-emotive energy of either real and present negative, fearful, hurtful and angry thoughts, past memories of negative, fearful, hurtful and angry thoughts or future projections of negative fearful, hurtful and angry thoughts that could result in the acting-out of harmful behaviors.

Japa can be performed while sitting in a meditative posture, standing, walking, running, swimming; while alone or as part of a formal practice in a group setting; or

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while performing any activity. You can do whatever you like in this respect.

An additional aspect of the practice of *Japa* is to also practice correct breathing while reciting your chosen word, sentence or phrase. Any type of gentle, deep, diaphragmatic breathing – a gentle inhalation through the nostrils that fills your entire abdomen down to a point approximately three inches below your belly button and gently exhales through your nostrils by pushing out from the point below your belly button so that the upper lobes of your lungs empty last – will aid in the benefits from this practice.

Whenever you want to strengthen your practice of *Japa*, visualize the word, sentence or phrase in your mind's eye. You can even strengthen your practice further by spelling the word or words you are repeating in your mind's eye. This aspect of the practice will be especially helpful in creating a one-pointed focus in your mind when you are experiencing a high level of perceived stress.

There are many forms that *Japa* can take:

1. The Hindu-Buddhist form uses *mantras*. A *mantra* is a phrase reflecting the spiritual beliefs of these wisdom systems. The root “*man*” in the word *mantra* comes from the first syllable of the Hindi word meaning “to

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think and “*tra*” comes from “*trai*” meaning “to protect” and “to free.” Therefore, the word *mantra* means to think in a specific fashion

in order to create protection and freedom in the mind. There are numerous *mantras* to choose from. For example, Om Mani Padmi Hum, Om Namo Sivaya or Om Mano Narayanaya.

2. Many other wisdom systems use prayer. Prayer is a form of spiritual practice that attempts to create a willing connection to some greater power in the universe through the deliberate use of words, incantations, songs, formal creedal statements, thanksgiving, praise or a simple spontaneous utterance. Prayer may be practiced spontaneously by anyone at any moment. There are prayers written by the spiritual visionaries of our planet representing all of our life affirming wisdom systems. Many prayers have been used for thousands of years. Other prayers have been composed by current spiritual leaders from divergent wisdom systems, cultures and heritages that reflect a love for life and a respect for the divine spiritual mysteries. Examples of prayers include: The Lord’s Prayer (Jesus), The Prayer for the World (Rabbi Harold Kushner), The Prayer For World Peace (Dr. Jane Goodall), Bah’I

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Prayers (Abdu'l-Baha).

3. Words, phrases and sayings from positive secular humanism. Secular humanism is the belief that human values of morality and ethical behavior can be taught and promoted without specific

reference to any spiritual or religious doctrines. Examples of sentences reflecting secular humanism would be the Rule of Harmlessness – “Harmlessness to self, others and the environment in thought, word and deed.” Or “May all beings cease their suffering.”

Any and or all of these types of *Japa* may be used singularly or in combination in order to gain the benefits of this type of mind focusing, stress de-escalating practice. Experiment with the ones that appeal to you and seek out others in order to vary your practice. Repeating the word, sentence or phrase generates the consciousness of the thing in your mind. The mind responds to and is strengthened in its ability to maintain a positive focus through variety.

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