

Susan Schneider teaches meditation and Jewish mysticism in Jerusalem. She is the founder of a correspondence school called *A Still Small Voice* which instructs its students in the practice of Torah and *mitzvot* as a spiritual path. In this essay she presents Torah study as a method of Jewish Meditation often ignored by contemporary teachers. She explores both how to study meditatively and how meditation can strengthen study.

Textual Study As Meditation

Sarah Yehudit (Susie) Schneider

- The service of meditation is the spiritual and intellectual quest to know, comprehend, and feel an idea or truth of Torah to the fullest extent possible. By pursuing a matter to its depth, one draws his inherited and instinctive knowledge of God into a more revealed and conscious state. The purpose of meditation is to train a person to perceive reality more correctly. (Rabbi Yitzchok Ginsburgh , a contemporary teacher of Kabbalah)
- Meditation is a continuous flow of thought upon a particular object or point of focus. (Patanjali, a medieval yoga philosopher).

Any regular meditation practice, whether of Eastern, Western, Jewish or personal design, frees the mind from its bondage to surface layers and directs it to experience the infinite depth that is always available in each moment.

Every meditation has a point of focus. It could be a mantra such as a name of God or the Sh'ma, or another meaningful affirmation. It could be an object outside oneself such as a geometric image, a scribal design or even a candle. It could be one's breath or the stillness that lies within each moment. It could even be an intellectual question about the nature of reality or the significance of some ritual law or how to apply Torah principles to a life problem.

When first learning to meditate, it is easier to choose a simple and concise object of focus—a single and static word or an image or a point of the body. The idea is to fix one's attention on it for a set length of time. When the mind wanders, it is gently but firmly returned to the object of its meditation. As one grows skilled in this practice, it becomes possible to choose more complex and non-static subjects. In this sense, textual study is a more advanced meditation. To do it properly, one must already know how to bring oneself into a meditative alpha state with ease. (Alpha state is a brain wave pattern and a psychological state that characterizes deep relaxation and associates with meditation.)

The *Lights* of Study are the *Lights* of Sinai

The purpose of meditation is to expand and strengthen consciousness. Its goal is often called “enlightenment.” The word is to be taken literally. As the mind stretches it is able to hold more “light”. In Jewish writings, “light” and “consciousness” are equivalent terms.

Textual study as meditation enables the mind to access the intense revelation of light and consciousness that happened at Sinai. The Cosmic Mind reveals its truths and secrets in many ways to many people, both individually and collectively. The circumstances and magnitude of the Torah’s transmission to the Jewish people are unique in history. This tremendous revelation was received through a group samadhi (a Sanskrit word which indicates the direct experience of God, also called “realization”, and, sometimes “prophesy”). Six hundred thousand family units (estimated at two million people) simultaneously experienced the revelation of the Torah. The entire nation of Israel “saw” the Presence of God, and perceived Divinity’s Truth at the same time:

And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightening, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and the sound of a shofar exceedingly loud; so that all the people in the Camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the foot of the mountain. And Mount Sinai smoked in every part, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly And then the voice of the shofar sounded louder and louder; Moses spoke and God answered him by a voice...And God spoke these words saying, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods beside me...And all the people perceived the thunderings, and the lightening, And the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it they were shaken, and stood afar off. (Exodus 19: 6-20:15)

The light accessed through textual study is this pure light of Sinai, undiluted and unattenuated. It is a thick sweet, blissful light that rejoices the soul, awakens the heart and strengthens the bones. The text of the Torah itself as well as all of the writings that it has spawned have this power to link its readers back to the fire of Sinai

Textual study as meditation emphasizes the following effects:

- It is extremely potent in developing and rectifying intuition.
- One attains a deep and internalized understanding of the nature and structure of reality for “the Torah is the mind of God.”
- One achieves deep and passionate cleaving to God that Kabbalah calls the union of “kisses” that unites “breath to Breath.”
- It is not only a meditation but also a *mitzvah* and so enjoys the benefits of both; each rectifying a different level of soul. (The term *mitzvah* refers to the 613 actions specified by the Torah as obligatory or forbidden. With six notable exceptions, a *mitzvah* always requires some physical activity for its fulfillment.)

***Mitzvah* and Meditation as Complementary Modes of Service**

When first comparing meditation and *mitzvah*, it seems that meditation would penetrate more deeply into the unconscious while the effects of *mitzvot* (as gross physical actions) would stop at the superficial layers of being. Action appears as a surface oriented practice when compared to meditation's more inner and subtle stirrings of soul. Yet, in terms of *tikun*, the opposite is true: *Mitzvah* actually penetrates more deeply into the unconscious than meditation.

The primary benefit of meditation is that it expands and enhances consciousness by strengthening focus and concentration. When people are easily distracted they do not penetrate into the depths of things and consequently their conduct lacks mindful intent. Such individuals are driven by their unconscious because they do not examine its impulses and question its intentions. Only by mindful discrimination between life-enhancing and life-undermining urges does the lower nature loose its ruling grip. Meditation practice corrects and expands people's perception of reality and encourages them to change according to their broadening awareness of truth.

Though meditation extends the boundaries of conscious awareness to include more and more of what had previously been unconscious, its primary field of influence remains the conscious realms of heart and mind. The unconscious, to the extent that it remains unconscious, can only be rectified by right action.

The unconscious, or *nefesh*, is called the animal soul, for it performs the vital functions of the body: It keeps the blood circulating, the cells dividing, the lungs expanding, the stomach churning. It is also responsible for such elementary emotions as the fight-or-flight response, sexual arousal, territoriality and familial loyalties. In other words, it directs all the functions we have in common with our fellow creatures in the animal kingdom.

The animal soul has an animal world view. It is concerned with creature comforts and physical security, and will sacrifice anything to satisfy those needs. The Divine soul, on the other hand, wants only to serve God, and is equally adamant in its pursuit. It, too, will gladly forego anything, even life itself, to draw close to its Creator.

Meditation calms, but does not transmute the animal level of self. This is accomplished by action, by forcing the animal soul to actively serve the Divine. One employs the same technique to train the animal soul as one would use to train an actual animal. Through forced repetition of appropriate behavior, the trainer impresses a habit of right action on the animal. Similarly the *mitzvot* habituate our animal souls to behave in spiritually productive ways. When a person performs a religious obligation, the body (however reluctantly) invests energy into the *mitzvah's* higher purpose and is physically transformed by the experience.

The 613 *mitzvot* reveal the science of right action for the human kingdom. Each *mitzvah* defines a physical act which must be performed by the animal soul and repeated time and again. In this way the body gets programmed to act in accordance with spiritual law as defined by Torah.

"Greased pathways" is the term that scientists use to describe the neurological affects of *mitzvah* practice. Every time a person performs a particular deed, they "grease" that neural pathway making it more likely that the same deed will happen again. Now, at a crossroads

where several options exist, the alternative already tried is more likely to happen again. And even more so the next time. That option has been “greased.” The image is graphic. Imagine a number of children’s slides branching out from a common center. If one is “greased” and the others not, it will quickly become the preferred option.

Every *mitzvah* “greases” a neural pathway and effects a physiological transformation in the one who performed it. In the course of a lifetime of *mitzvah* practice, a complete network of neural connections get wired into the body.

Judaism teaches that we come into incarnation primarily to rectify our animal natures. The Divine soul is already perfect and immune to the contaminating effects of wrong living, so the priority of life is to refine our animal souls by training them to serve God and obey spiritual law. The primary tool for this work is *mitzvah* practice. Through *it* the “wild beast” acquires healthy instincts. Its animal nature is neither denied nor abrogated, it is simply cleaned of short-sighted and self-defeating habit patterns.

Textual study, because it combines both *mitzvah* and meditation, is a uniquely powerful tool of transformation. Its requirement of focused concentration on the text in an alternation of still-mind and active-mind is a potent meditation technique. Its practice of voicing the words aloud and dialoging with a study partner engage the body’s vocal organs thereby greasing neural pathways and engraving habits of right speech.

Guidelines For Making Torah Study A Meditation Practice

- You must approach your Torah learning with a deep and sincere desire to be transformed by God’s will and its Truth. Ideally this intention should be articulated as an actual prayer before study.
- You must find (or create) a place within you that is burning to understand what the text is teaching because you understand that your “life” depends upon it, that it holds a key to your quality of life. The measure of your drive-to-know will be the measure of your willingness to work, for our sages teach, “the reward (i.e. benefit of a spiritual practice) is only proportionate to the labor.”
- The means *are* the ends. Release all expectations of covering a certain amount of text or of getting to the end of the chapter within a certain time frame. Each sentence (sometimes each word) has its own treasure. Even if it is just restating a previous idea you must seek to experience it now, in this moment, as a new revelation. You should get excited by the concept each time you hear it. You should feel stretched and delighted anew by its depth. After each sentence ask, “What do I know now that I didn’t know before?” Stay in the present. All meditation is training to access the depth of each moment.
- After each new idea recap the logical development of the piece. Go back to the beginning and follow it through adding this next piece of information on to the end. The recap becomes a mantra that triggers new associations.
- You must be rigorously precise in your translation. Look up all unfamiliar words, as well as all Biblical, Talmudic, and *Midrashic* citations. Your understanding of the text’s most

basic level of sense becomes the vessel that draws the creative insight. If this stage is sloppy and superficial, it will not pull a clean light.

- Go through each piece at least three times discovering new layers of implications with each round.
- It is good to have a concise and unobstructive "mantra" to touch at periodic moments in your learning and that can quickly bring you back into an alpha state when you lose your focus. On the first page of Mishna Brura (a code of Jewish law) is a highly recommended Jewish meditation that is perfect for this practice. Watch you breathing, it should stay slow and deep.
- Note any places where resistance and anxiety appear. Breathe into them. Affirm your commitment to truth:

I seek truth from the depth of my being. I do not want to be limited by my own narrow-minded conception of what it should look like. I will open myself to these teachings with one condition: Whatever is true should enter my life and take root. Whatever is false should pass through and leave no impression. I trust that it will be so. I embrace truth and deflect falsehood (A Still Small Voice, Prayer and Destiny, Lesson 1).