

The Practice of So'ham Yoga

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The breath

In yogic treatises we find it stated over and over that the breath is the essence of our existence. Prana means both life and breath in Hinduism and Buddhism. In fact, the word atman (Self) comes from the root-word *at*, which means “to breathe.” Other religions also use the same word for both spirit and breath: in Judaism, *ruach*; in Eastern Christianity (and ancient Greek religion), *pneuma*; in Western Christianity (and ancient Roman religion), *spiritus* (which comes from *spiro*, “I breathe”).

The ancient yogis discovered that the root impulse of inhalation makes the subtle sound of *So*, and the root impulse of exhalation makes the subtle sound of *Ham* (pronounced *Hum*). *So* means “that” and *Ham* means “I am.” In this way every living being is perpetually intoning So'ham (So'hum) at the core of their being, saying: THAT AM I—“That” being the spirit-Self which is a divine part of the Divine Infinite. For that reason So'ham is sometimes translated as “I am That” or “I am He.” Since all creation is the thought or ideation of God, meaning is inherent in everything, including the breath. So no matter how many ages we wander in forgetfulness of our divine Origin and Nature, we are always affirming “I am That” without ceasing. But we have lost that sacred thread of inmost knowledge and are now wandering without direction or discernment. By means of So'ham Yoga we consciously take hold of the thread and begin moving in the right direction.

Pronunciation and use

For a mantra to produce its effect it must be pronounced correctly. So'ham is pronounced like our English words *so* and *hum*. (The short *a* in Sanskrit is pronounced the *u* in “up” or “hunt,” so we say “hum” even though we write it as “ham.”)

It is most important to pronounce the *O* correctly. It should be pronounced like the long *o* in the Italian or common American manner—as in *home* and *lone*. In England, Canada, and parts of the American South, the long *o* is sometimes pronounced as a diphthong, like two vowels jammed together: either like “*ay-oh*” or “*eh-oh*.” This is not the correct manner of pronouncing the *O*, which should be a single, pure

vowel sound.

The same is true of the *U* in ham (hum). As already pointed out, it is pronounced like the *u* in “up” or “hunt”—not like the *u* in “truth” or “push,” as in done in parts of Great Britain.

A mantra is more effective if it is mentally intoned—that is, mentally “sung” on a single note. (The pitch does not matter—whatever is spontaneous and natural.) This makes the repetition stronger and of deeper effect, because intoning unifies the mind and naturally concentrates it.

The way to receive the benefit of a mantra is japa, the continual repetition-intonation of the mantra. In this way the invoker is constantly imbued with the power and consciousness inherent in the mantra. So whenever we intone So’ham, we align and link our consciousness with its origin—both within our spirit and Spirit.

The Practice of So’ham Yoga Meditation

1) Sit upright, comfortable and relaxed, with your hands on your knees or thighs or resting, one on the other, in your lap.

2) Turn your eyes slightly downward and close them gently. This removes visual distractions and reduces your brain-wave activity by about seventy-five percent, thus helping to calm the mind.

3) Breathe naturally. Your breathing should always be easeful and natural, not deliberate or artificial. Your mouth should be closed so that all breathing is done through the nose. This also aids in quieting the mind. Though your mouth is closed, the jaw muscles should be relaxed so the upper and lower teeth are not clenched or touching one another, but parted.

4) Now begin *mentally* intoning So’ham in time with your breathing. (Remember: So’ham is pronounced like our English words *so* and *hum*.) Intone *Sooooo*, prolonging a single intonation throughout each inhalation, and *Huuuumm*, prolonging a single intonation throughout each exhalation, “singing” the syllables on a single note. Let your relaxed attention sink into and get absorbed in the mental sound of your inner intonings of So’ham. Fit the intonations to the breath—not the breath to the intonations. If the breath is short, then the intonation should be short. If the breath is long, then the intonation should be long. It does not matter if the inhalations and exhalations are not of

equal length. Whatever is natural and spontaneous is what is right. Your intonation of *Soooooo* should begin when your inhalation begins, and *Huuuummm* should begin when your exhalation begins. In this way your intonations should be virtually continuous, that is: *SooooooHuuuummmSooooooHuuuummmSooooooHuuuummmSooooooHuuuummm*.

Do not torture yourself about this—basically continuous is good enough.

5) For the rest of your meditation time keep on intoning So’ham in time with your breath, calmly attentive to the mental sound.

6) In So’ham Yoga we do not deliberately concentrate on any particular point of the body such as the “third eye,” as we want the subtle energies of So’ham to be free to manifest themselves as is best at the moment. However, as you meditate, you may become aware of one or more areas of your brain or body at different times. This is all right when they come and go spontaneously, but keep centered on your intonations of So’ham in time with your breath.

7) In time your inner mental intonations of So’ham may change to a more mellow or softer form, even to an inner whispering, but the syllables are always fully present and effective. Your intonations may even become silent, like a soundless “mouthing” of So’ham or just the idea of So’ham, yet you will still be intoning So’ham in your intention. And of this be sure: *So’ham never ceases*. Never. You may find that your intonations of So’ham move back and forth from more objective to more subtle and back to more objective. Just intone in the manner that is natural at the moment.

8) You will find that after a while your breath also becomes more subtle and refined, and slows down. Sometimes your breath can become so light that it almost seems as though you are hardly breathing at all.

9) Thoughts, impressions, memories, inner sensations, and suchlike may also arise during meditation. Be calmly aware of all these things in a detached and objective manner, but keep your attention centered on your intonations of So’ham in time with your breath. Do not let your attention become centered on or caught up in any inner or outer phenomena.

Meditation produces peace, awareness and quiet joy in your mind as well as soothing radiations of energy in the physical and subtle bodies. Be calmly aware of all these things in a detached and objective manner—they are part of the transforming work of meditation—and are perfectly

all right but keep your attention on So'ham. Even though something feels very right or good when it occurs, it should not be forced or hung on to.

10) If you find yourself getting restless, distracted, "fuzzy," anxious or tense in any degree, just take a deep breath and let it out fully, feeling that you are releasing and breathing out all tensions, and continue as before.

11) Remember: So'ham Yoga meditation consists of mentally intoning So'ham in time with your breath and keeping your awareness centered on the mental sound. At all times remain relaxed and easeful, without strain.

12) At the end of your meditation time, keep on intoning So'ham in time with your breath as you go about your various activities, listening to the inner mantric sound, just as in meditation. One of the cardinal virtues of So'ham Sadhana is its capacity to be practiced throughout the day. The *Yoga Rasyanam* in verse 303 says that So'ham "should be continuously repeated while walking, sitting, or even sleeping.... This leads to ultimate success."

Can it be that simple and easy? Yes, because it goes directly to the root of our bondage which is a single—and therefore simple—thing: loss of awareness.

We recommend a complete book on the subject of So'ham Yoga that is posted on this website: *So'ham Yoga: The Yoga of the Self*.