

Tal Orot Meditation Video Series

Rabbi Meir Sendor

First Meditation: Hashkatakah – Quieting the Mind

The most basic meditation technique, the preface to all other meditation methods, and the proper halakhic preface to Tefillah, is quieting the mind. In the Mishnah *Berakhot* 5:1 this is called שהייה, waiting:

חסידיה הראשונים היו שוהים שעה אחת ומתפללים כדי שיכוננו את לבם למקום

The early righteous ones would wait for one hour and then pray, in order to direct their hearts to God.

The Rambam in his *Commentary on the Mishnah* explains:

וענין שוהין, ממתנינים, כלומר שהיו ממתנינים לפני התפלה שעה ובה מפסיקים השיחה והמחשבות ואז מתחילים להתפלל.

Regarding “שוהין – they would wait,” that is to say, they would wait before prayer for an hour, during which they would cease conversation and thoughts and then begin to pray.

In the Mishnah this is brought as a special practice of the pious, but in the Gemara (32b) this is stated as a requirement for everyone before Tefillah

This conscious waiting and cessation of thought facilitates the stabilization of attention, the widening of attention to access its full field and the ability to direct attention effectively. This practice is also called **Hashkatakah**, based on a brief and psychologically perceptive description of a meditation method of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, the Piazeczno Rebbe, zekher Tzaddik ve-Kadosh liVrakhah, recorded by one of the Rebbe’s students and found in an appendix to his sefer *Derekh HaMelekh* (pp. 406-7). It’s called *Hashkatakah*, quieting, with reference quieting the flow of verbal thinking, the internal narrative voice and verbal phrases that keep bubbling up in our minds.

There’s nothing wrong with verbal thinking in its place – it’s how we interpret our experience and keep ourselves oriented in existence. But verbal thinking, which uses concepts, breaks up our grasp of the world into small handfuls, concepts, to hold together, into ideas framed in words, and can get detached from our direct experience of reality, floating in its own verbal dimension. And

verbal thinking, following the serial sequence of words and phrases and sentences, tracks our minds in narrow, linear paths. Verbal thinking also rides subliminally on mood and emotion, and can keep us circling around those emotions. And the stream of verbal thinking also serves as a crutch to keep our minds busy and reflect ourselves to ourselves, reassuring ourselves of existence but also limiting ourselves and closing ourselves off somewhat solipsistically. Most verbal thinking, no matter what the theme, also has an aspect of ourselves whispering to ourselves “I am, I am, I am,” reassuring ourselves with mental noise over and over. And according to the Piazechno Rebbe, this self-reflecting stands between us and true spiritual awareness, which he says is prophetic awareness.

So, let's meditate to quiet, steady and open our minds. The aim of this meditation is to quiet the mind with basic attention through the senses. We'll see that though we are starting this meditation with sense and thought awareness, which seems self-reflective, it will move beyond self-reflecting to something much more open. We want to access comprehensive awareness, awareness of everything going on around us and in us all at once. This is the natural, underlying state of consciousness before we direct our attention to specific stimuli and sensations.

Let's sit in a chair with our back straight and self-supported, feet on the floor, hands on our knees, eyes closed for this meditation (to limit the complex field of vision). You can also sit in one of the Asian cross-legged positions if you're good at it. We want to be in a position with our back upright, that we can hold for at least 10 or 15 minutes without moving.

We want to be aware of everything that we are sensing, in us and around us. Aware of our **breathing**, Inhale... Exhale, and all the places where we feel the process of breathing, from the nose to the diaphragm and around the body. Aware of our **heartbeat**, in our chest, and our pulses around our body. Aware of the **tactile and somatic sensations** of sitting on the chair, or the floor, of our hands on our knees. Aware of ambient **sounds** around us. Aware of any **taste** on our tongue. Aware of any **fragrance** in the air. And even though our eyes are closed, be aware of the flickering lights that still register from our retina.

And we are also aware of any **thoughts** that arise, and they will arise. To quiet thinking, the Piazechno Rebbe recommends just being aware **that** we are thinking, by which he means the fact of thinking, rather than following the verbal themes of the thoughts. It's a kind of stepping back

from the thoughts, not to ignore them but to be aware of the fact of them, which dissolves the inter-linking of thoughts and helps verbal thinking to quiet down.

You can start by perceiving all these sensations in sequence one-by-one. But try to get even more quiet and open, to perceive them as they are actually happening, all happening together, all at the same time from moment to moment. This is the natural state of consciousness, background consciousness, which then gets directed by focused attention. To sense all these sensations all at once requires us to get very quiet, and setting this as our aim guides us to a very open and receptive state of awareness.

This meditation, quieting the mind for factual awareness, serves as the introduction to all meditation techniques. It's helpful to devote at least 10 or 15 minutes to each sitting – if you have 30 minutes even better. You can pace yourself by setting a gentle alarm. And it takes practice, like any skill, and as you practice you find can reach this awareness more quickly. A sign that you are beginning to master the method is that comprehensive awareness becomes effortless, and even exhilarating, and you feel a surge of increased wakefulness infusing your consciousness.

You can explore this experience in meditation as long as you like, its revelations are endless. As a conclusion to the basic meditation of Hashkatah the Piaszeczno Rebbe suggests saying, in your mind, a pasuk, a verse from Tana"kh. You can choose any verse, a positive verse, and say it in your mind slowly and gently. For instance, you can choose the Shema, or a verse such as Tehillim 62:2.

אך אל אלקים דומיה נפשי ממנו ישועתי:

I happen to like Tehillim 36:10:

כי עמך מקור חיים באורך נראה אור:

Sitting in meditation for a period of time is an exercise, and like physical exercise it is somewhat artificial – it's not our normal, spontaneous way of being. But with practice the awareness that we cultivate in meditation infuses our consciousness at all times, stabilizing, expanding and deepening our consciousness continually. It's a good preparation for Tefillah, certainly, and for everything we do, be-Ezrat Ha-Shem.

The Piaieczno Rebbe recommends that after sitting in Hashkatah we can also address a brief request to HaShem for help in our spiritual development, such as for Emunah. This request is said gently in the mind. The Rebbe then recommends ending with a niggun if possible. The one his student alludes to is to Tehillim 86:11

תהלים פרק פו

(יא) הורני יקוק דרכך אהלך באמתך יחד לבבי ליראה שמך:

“Teach me Your ways, HaShem, I will walk in Your truth; unify my heart to revere Your Name.”

This is the traditional niggun that has come down to us in his name, zekher Tzaddik veKadosh Livrakhah.