

Session 4. Hum Sah: The Power of Conscious Breathing

There is an old story about a meditation teacher who was giving a talk to some people about the power of repeating special words. The talk went on for some time. The teacher said that repeating special words helps quiet our minds so that we can experience peacefulness. He said that repeating these words helps to break old habits of repeating the same negative thoughts over and over again. Finally, a man in the back of the room stood up and yelled, “I don’t think you know what you’re talking about! How could just repeating a few words make such a big change for anyone?” The room fell silent. Everyone wanted to see how the teacher would respond. The teacher looked at him and asked, “Why don’t you sit down and shut up?”

The man was shocked. He turned red in the face. He trembled with rage. He tried to talk, but all he could do was stutter. Finally, he said, “How could you possibly talk to me like that? I thought you were supposed to be a meditation teacher and here you are abusing me!” The teacher looked at him kindly and calmly responded, “You see, I said only eight words to you and look what a big difference it made!”

This story explains the value of using special words. The words that we say to ourselves have a big effect on how we feel and what we do. So many people repeat negative things to themselves all day, like “I’m not good enough” or even “They are no good,” so it is no surprise if such thoughts start to make a person feel bad.

Repeating special words is a way of keeping our attention on the present moment by helping us follow our breathing, rather than getting caught up in our thoughts and feelings. Many traumatized people experience that their thoughts and feelings are out of control. Repeating special words like *Hum Sah* can help people to maintain their awareness of their breath and the present moment, in order to experience thoughts and feelings as they come up, without needing to avoid or focus on them. *Hum Sah* are words that represent the sound that our breath makes as we inhale and exhale. Repeating “Hum Sah” helps us pay more attention to the present moment because it helps us anchor our attention on breathing, even while having lots of other experiences. It doesn’t mean that the practitioner will never have a negative thought again. Negative thoughts are a part of life, but they don’t need to run our lives!

The Hum Sah practice is a way to use the power of conscious breathing in a more powerful way. Conscious breathing simply means being aware of your breathing. By repeating these special words, *Hum Sah*, with the breath, we can begin to let go of our negative thinking habits and enjoy feelings of relaxation and peacefulness.

Here’s how you do the Hum Sah practice. Watch your breathing. Notice each time you inhale and exhale. Silently repeat “Hum” every time you inhale and “Sah” every time you exhale. The practice audio track gives more instructions for the Hum Sah practice. As you repeat “Hum Sah,” you may notice that there is a slight pause in your breath after you inhale but before you exhale. Notice that still point as you repeat “Hum Sah.” You may also notice a slight pause after you exhale but before you inhale. Notice that still point as you repeat “Hum Sah.”

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Session 4 (continued)

FAQs for Session 4

What does Hum Sah mean?

“Hum Sah” is meant to represent the sound of your inhalation and exhalation. If you listen carefully, you may notice that when you inhale, it sounds like “Hum,” and when you exhale, it sounds like “Sah.” The practice of noticing the sound of the breath and repeating words to represent that sound is a traditional practice, dating back hundreds of years in the classical yoga tradition. The words *Hum Sah* have meanings in many different languages, but none of those meanings are used in this program.

What if I can't hear my breathing?

It is not necessary to hear your breathing during Hum Sah. You can simply repeat the sounds in synchrony with the natural pace of your breath.

Can I repeat “Hum Sah” at any time during the day, or should I only use it during Sitting Practice?

Yes, you can repeat “Hum Sah” with your breath as much as you can during the day. If you have repeated “Hum Sah” a lot during Sitting Practice, it will be natural to do this practice at any time during your day, such as while you’re driving, doing chores, or standing in line at a store. You may find that it helps you relax and focus during the day. It may also help you get control of habitual patterns of thinking and feeling. If you are about to go into a stressful situation, practice Hum Sah for a short while and see what effect it has on your thoughts and emotions.

My mind wanders while I'm doing the practice. Does this mean I'm doing it wrong?

One of the first big milestones in your development as a meditator is to notice what your mind is doing. If you have noticed that your mind is wandering away, that is a great sign that things are going well. When your mind drifts off, gently bring it back to the practice. It doesn't matter how many times it wanders off, just as long as you bring it back. Each time you bring your attention back, your practice is getting stronger.

Can I make up my own special words to use, or should I stick with Hum Sah?

The words we repeat to ourselves can be powerful, so it's a good idea to be careful about what you say to yourself. The practice of Hum Sah is a simple way of listening to the breath or the repetition of the sounds that many people find relaxing.

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Session 4 (continued)

Sometimes I use other relaxation or meditation recordings. Is it OK to keep using those while I'm involved with this program?

You will probably get the best results if you focus on one thing at a time. After all, you probably wouldn't try to learn to play the guitar from two teachers at once. Learning to meditate is just like learning other skills and requires some commitment and discipline.

Session 4 Practice

Tasks for the Next Week

If you have not yet settled on a regular time and place to practice, you can continue to try different strategies for developing a daily meditation practice.

Practice in Daily Life

Watch your breathing throughout the day. Notice each time you inhale and exhale. You can repeat "Hum Sah" throughout the day with each breath. Silently repeat "Hum" every time you inhale and "Sah" every time you exhale. Notice how it feels to repeat "Hum Sah" throughout your day.

When Hum Sah is used as a form of practice in daily life, it is still a breath-focused practice and not just a process of mentally repeating the words. You may wish to do this practice while driving, waiting in line, or doing other activities. You can also notice what your experience of using the practice is. Does it help you notice your thoughts, feelings, and level of stress at each moment?

Sitting Practice

Make sure you have a comfortable, quiet, and private place and time to practice this week. You can alternate Track 2, "Complete Breath," with Track 3, "Hum Sah," at least 6 days this week. You can listen to "Complete Breath" on one day and then "Hum Sah" on the next.

Daily Practice Log

Write down the number of minutes you have spent each day on each practice. You probably will not do all the listed practices every week. You can review your logs this week to see how your practice has changed over the past few weeks.

● Session 4 Journal ●

Look over your journals for Sessions 1, 2, and 3. What times to meditate have worked best for you? Have you settled into a routine for practice?

Are there still things you want to work on in terms of setting up a time and place to meditate? List the steps you will take to further develop your daily practice.

Step 1: _____

Step 2: _____

Step 3: _____

What questions have come up for you about these practices?

Debriefing the Practice: How did the Hum Sah practice go this week? Did repeating “Hum Sah” during meditation make it easier to meditate? Were you able to repeat “Hum Sah” during the day? If so, did you notice any change in yourself or the way things worked out for you this week?

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