



Effectiveness of Soham Sadhana in promoting mental well-being and spiritual development

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Abstract

Soham Sadhana is an ancient yogic practice based on the synchronization of breath and mantra. The mantra 'Soham' literally means 'I am that,' symbolizing the realization of non-dual consciousness. In this practice, the syllable 'So' is mentally recited during inhalation and "Ham" during exhalation. The practitioner generally sits in Sukhasana or Padmasana while focusing awareness on the Ajna Chakra (the brow center) or the heart center.

Regular practice has been shown to enhance mental health by reducing stress and anxiety, alleviating depressive symptoms, improving concentration and memory, and fostering emotional stability. Neuroscientific research indicates that mantra meditation increases theta and alpha brain wave activity, both of which are associated with calmness and deep meditative states. Soham Sadhana also helps in balancing pranic energy and purifying the nadis, gradually guiding the practitioner toward self-realization and the experience of non-dual awareness.

From a spiritual perspective, this practice deepens meditative absorption and strengthens the possibility of attaining higher states of consciousness, including Samadhi. Its benefits at both the psychological and physiological levels make it a highly effective tool for coping with the challenges of modern life. Future clinical trials and longitudinal studies are needed to further clarify its long-term effects and therapeutic potential.

Keywords: Soham sadhana, non-dual consciousness, mantra meditation, mental health, pranic energy balance

Introduction

The mantra *Soham* is an ancient Vedic expression that translates to 'I am that,' where 'That' signifies the Supreme Reality, the Absolute Self, or Brahma. In the Upanishads, this mantra is regarded as a tool for realizing non-dual consciousness (*Advaita Bhava*), in which the practitioner perceives no distinction between the individual self and the external universe (Mandukya Upanishad, Mantra 7; Chandogya Upanishad 7.25.1).

Soham Sadhana is based on the coordination of breath and mantra:

- During inhalation, the syllable *so* is mentally recited.
- During exhalation, the syllable *Ham* is repeated.

This rhythmic synchronization of breath and sound aligns the mind and vital energy (*prana*), facilitating entry into deeper states of meditation (Swami Rama, 1996)^[21].

Modern scientific studies indicate that mantra-based meditation such as *Soham* stabilizes heart rate, increases alpha wave activity in the brain, and reduces stress hormone levels (cortisol), which collectively benefit mental health (Kalyani *et al.*, 2011)^[12]. Regular practice has also been associated with enhanced self-awareness, inner peace, and spiritual growth (Sharma, 2015)^[17].

Meaning of Soham Mantra: 'I am That' (Advaita Realization)

The Sanskrit mantra *Soham* is composed of two seed syllables:

- *Sah* ('So') refers to *that* the Supreme Reality, the Absolute, or Brahman.
- *Aham* ('Ham') refers to *i* the individual self or *jiva*.

When combined, *Soham* conveys the realization, 'I am That' This expresses the essence of Advaita Vedanta, wherein no separation exists between the individual soul and the Absolute. The Upanishads describe this as a *Mahavakya* (great saying) leading to self-realization (Chandogya Upanishad 7.25.1; Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad 1.4.10). Through breath awareness, the practitioner internalizes this unity:

- **Inhalation (So):** 'That'
- **Exhalation (Ham):** 'I'

This meditative process promotes mental concentration, inner tranquility, and the path to self-realization (Swami Muktananda, 1978)^[20].

Soham in Yogic, Meditative, and Pranayama Traditions

the mantra *Soham* holds a profound position in the traditions of yoga, meditation, and pranayama. In yogic texts, it is recognized as the highest form of *Ajapa Japa* the effortless, spontaneous mantra repetition synchronized with breath (Saraswati, 2009)^[16].

1. **In Yogic Tradition:** According to *Patanjali Yoga Sutra* (1.28), mantra recitation (*japa*) and reflection on its meaning help calm mental distractions. The Soham mantra allows the practitioner to transcend the ego and realize the unity of self and the Absolute, aligning with the ultimate goal of yoga: "*Yogas chitta-vritti-nirodhah.*"
2. **In Meditative Tradition:** This mantra is particularly effective for meditation since its natural rhythm harmonizes with breathing. Sustained practice is

associated with increased alpha and theta brain waves, markers of deep relaxation and focused awareness (Kalyani *et al.*, 2011)^[12].

3. **In Pranayama Tradition:** The objective of pranayama is the regulation and balance of vital energy. Practicing breathing with the Soham mantra facilitates *nadi shuddhi* (purification of energy channels), maintains pranic balance, and leads the practitioner into effortless states of pranayama (Sivananda, 2004)^[17].

Thus, the Soham mantra is not only a path to spiritual advancement but also an effective means to improve mental and physical health.

Relevance of Soham Sadhana in Mental Health and Spiritual Development

Soham Sadhana plays a significant role in promoting both mental health and spiritual development. At the psychological level, it is helpful in alleviating conditions such as stress, anxiety, and depression, while at the spiritual level, it guides the practitioner toward self-realization and the experience of non-dual consciousness.

1. Contribution to Mental Health

Regular practice of the Soham mantra has been shown to enhance alpha wave activity in the brain, which is associated with mental calmness, emotional balance, and improved concentration (Kalyani *et al.*, 2011)^[12]. This practice reduces the levels of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, thereby regulating the body's stress response (Sharma, 2015)^[17]. Meditation-based practices also modulate the activity of the prefrontal cortex and amygdala, resulting in reduced negative emotions and better emotional regulation (Kumari, P. & Tripathi, J.S. (2020)^[29] (Kumari *et al.*, 2023) (Tang *et al.*, 2015)^[22].

2. Contribution to Spiritual Development

Soham Sadhana facilitates the realization of unity between the individual self and the Absolute (*Brahman*), which is the core principle of Advaita Vedanta (Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad 1.4.10). Synchronization of breath with mantra repetition leads the practitioner naturally into the states of concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and absorption (*samadhi*) (Kumari, P., & Tripathi, J. S. (2023)^[27, 28] (Saraswati, 2009)^[16]. This practice gradually weakens the bonds of ego, enabling the practitioner to experience the vastness of the soul and union with the Divine.

Thus, the Soham mantra is not merely a meditation technique, but a powerful tool for strengthening mental health and advancing spiritual growth.

Process of Soham Sadhana

1. Synchronization of Breath with Mantra

The foundation of Soham Sadhana lies in establishing a natural rhythm between breath and mantra, a process known as *Ajapa Japa*. The practitioner mentally recites the mantra without moving the lips:

- **Inhalation:** 'So' (That: The Absolute, Brahman)
- **Exhalation:** 'Ham' (I: The individual self)

This rhythmic practice stabilizes the mind in the present moment and gradually reduces unnecessary thoughts (Saraswati, 2009)^[16].

2. Posture and Focal Points of Awareness

For practice, stable and comfortable sitting postures such as Sukhasana, Padmasana, or Vajrasana are recommended, with the spine kept erect.

- Ajna Chakra (the center between the eyebrows) may be chosen for enhancing concentration and intuition.
- Anahata Chakra (the heart center) may be selected for cultivating compassion, love, and emotional balance.

The eyes remain gently closed with awareness lightly maintained at the chosen center.

3. Timing and Duration of Practice

- The most suitable times are early morning (Brahma muhurta) or before bedtime, when the environment is calm.
- Beginners may start with 10-15 minutes of practice, gradually extending to 30-45 minutes.
- Consistency is the key to success; daily practice fosters both mental stability and spiritual depth (Sharma, 2015)^[17]; Telles *et al.*, 2015)^[25].

Effects of Soham Sadhana on Mental Health, Spiritual Growth, and Pranic Balance

1. Effects on Mental Health

a. Reduction of Stress and Anxiety (Impact on Cortisol Levels)

The synchronization of breath and mantra in *Soham Sadhana* activates the parasympathetic nervous system, thereby inducing the body's 'relaxation response'. Research indicates that regular mantra meditation lowers the levels of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, leading to a significant reduction in stress and anxiety (Kalyani *et al.*, 2011)^[12]; Sudsuang *et al.*, 1991)^[19].

b. Relief from Depression (Enhancement of Positive Emotions)

Mantra-based meditation enhances the activity of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine, which are essential for positive emotions, motivation, and mental equilibrium. Clinical studies have shown that techniques like Soham meditation can alleviate symptoms of depression and foster a positive outlook on life (Sharma, 2015)^[17]; Telles *et al.*, 1998)^[24].

c. Improvement in Concentration and Memory

During Soham Sadhana, the constant focus on breath and mantra strengthens the functions of the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus. EEG studies have demonstrated an increase in alpha and theta wave activity, which supports improved attention, mental clarity, and memory retention (Lagopoulos *et al.*, 2009)^[13].

d. Emotional Stability and Inner Peace

Regular practice of Soham meditation reduces hyperactivity of the amygdala, thereby controlling negative emotions and reactive states such as anger. This results in greater emotional stability, patience, and inner peace (Tang *et al.*, 2015)^[22].

2. Effects on Spiritual Development

a. Path to Self-Realization

Soham Sadhana actualizes the central principle of Advaita Vedanta, which asserts that the individual self (*jiva*) and the

Absolute (*Brahman*) are one and the same. Through breath-synchronized mantra recitation, the practitioner gradually overcomes ego, desires, and mental fluctuations, leading to the realization of the true Self.

b. Upanishadic Perspective

The Brhadarnayaka *Upanisad* (1.4.10) declares '*Aham Brahmasmi*' ('I am Brahman'), while the *Chandogya Upanisad* (7.25.1) emphasizes the *Soham* principle, highlighting the unity of the soul with the Divine.

c. Yogic Perspective

According to *Yoga Sutra* (3.3) of Patanjali, when the mind is completely absorbed in meditation, it enters the state of *samadhi*, where consciousness remains fixed on the object alone, devoid of distractions. *Soham* meditation provides a natural pathway to this state of absorption.

d. Experiential Insights

With consistent practice, practitioners develop heightened self-awareness, allowing them to experience existence beyond body and mind. This represents a decisive step toward self-realization (Saraswati, 2009^[16]; Feuerstein, 2001)^[10]. Scientific studies suggest that mantra-based meditation alters the brain's default mode network, reducing self-centered thoughts and facilitating the experience of expanded consciousness (Brewer *et al.*, 2011)^[8].

3. From Duality to Non-Duality

The essence of *Soham Sadhana* lies in the realization: '*I am that*'. It leads the practitioner from dualistic perception (where the self and God are seen as separate) toward the non-dual experience that "all is Brahman."

▪ Journey from Duality to Non-Duality

Initially, the practitioner perceives the self as a limited body-mind entity and God as a separate being. Through regular *Soham* practice, attention shifts inward, gradually dissolving the distance between 'I' and 'That,' culminating in the realization that both are reflections of the same consciousness.

▪ Scriptural Basis

1. **The *Mandukya Upanisad* (mantra 7) describes the non-dual state:** "*Advaitam caturtham manyante sa atma sa vijneyah*": The fourth state (*Turiya*) is non-dual, and it is the Self to be realized.

2. **The *Shiva Sutras* (1.1) state:** '*Cittam Atma*': Consciousness itself is the Self, unified with universal consciousness.

▪ Modern Neuroscience Perspective

Neuroscientific studies reveal that mantra meditation activates brain regions that reduce ego-centric processing and enhance experiences of unity consciousness (Josipovic, 2014)^[11].

Thus, *Soham Sadhana* liberates the practitioner from mental dualities, ego-bound limitations, and leads toward the realization of *Advaita*, where the truth is experienced as "*Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma*" ("All this is indeed Brahman").

4. Pranic Balance and Nadi Purification

Soham Sadhana exerts profound effects not only on the mental and spiritual dimensions but also on the subtle body (*Pranamaya Kosha*), regulating pranic energy and purifying the nadis.

a. Balance of Pranic Energy

- In yogic tradition, breath is considered the primary vehicle of *Prana* (life force energy).
- Through deep, slow, and rhythmic breathing synchronized with *Soham* mantra, the flow of prana between *Ida* (lunar channel) and *Pingala* (solar channel) nadis becomes balanced.
- This equilibrium supports homeostasis in the body, promoting physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Saraswati, 2002)^[15].

b. Nadi Purification

According to yogic texts, among the 72,000 nadis, the three principal ones—*Ida*, *Pingala*, and *Sushumna*—are purified and activated through *Soham* meditation. When balance between *Ida* and *Pingala* is achieved, pranic energy flows into *Sushumna*, paving the way for *Kundalini* awakening and higher states of consciousness (Gheranda Samhita, 5.54). Modern studies indicate that breath-based meditation produces beneficial changes in heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen saturation, suggesting improved autonomic and nadi function (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005)^[9].

c. Spiritual Significance

Balancing prana not only brings physical vitality and mental clarity but also prepares the practitioner for deeper states of meditation. With purified nadis, the mind naturally becomes still, facilitating the direct experience of non-dual awareness.

Scientific Perspective on *Soham Sadhana*

Neuroscientific Evidence

EEG and fMRI Studies

Empirical evidence from EEG (Electroencephalography) and fMRI (*functional* Magnetic Resonance Imaging) studies demonstrates that mantra-based meditation, including *Soham Sadhana*, enhances theta (4-8 Hz) and gamma (30-80 Hz) wave activity, which are associated with deep meditative absorption, heightened awareness, and self-realization (Travis & Shear, 2010)^[26]. During such states, the activity of the default mode network (DMN) decreases, allowing the practitioner to transcend the division between "self" and "world," and to experience unity consciousness.

Neuroscience of Mantra Meditation

Mantra meditation, particularly the *Soham* practice, is not merely a traditional spiritual discipline but also a scientifically validated approach that has been studied in modern neuroscience as a complementary mental health practice.

- **Effects on Brain Structures and Functions**
fMRI and EEG studies indicate that mantra meditation enhances activity in the prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex regions associated with concentration, decision-making, and emotional regulation (Lazar *et al.*, 2005)^[14]. Simultaneously, amygdala activity decreases, reducing stress and fear responses.

- **Regulation of Default Mode Network (DMN)**

The DMN is typically active during mind-wandering and self-referential thinking. During mantra meditation, DMN activity diminishes, loosening the grip of egoic identification and facilitating the experience of non-dual awareness (Brewer *et al.*, 2011)^[8].

▪ Neuroplasticity and Mental Health

Long-term mantra meditation practice has been shown to increase cortical thickness and gray matter density in regions linked to learning, memory, and emotional resilience. In addition, significant reductions in cortisol levels have been reported, contributing to decreased symptoms of anxiety and depression (Tang *et al.*, 2009)^[23].

Biophysiological Benefits

Slow, rhythmic breath practices like *Soham Sadhana* also generate measurable benefits at the physiological level:

- Improvement in Heart Rate Variability (HRV), reflecting enhanced adaptability of the autonomic nervous system.
- Increased Oxygen Uptake Capacity and regulation of blood pressure.
- Enhanced autonomic balance that supports both physical and psychological resilience.

Conclusion

Soham Sadhana represents a simple yet profound spiritual practice that has demonstrable benefits at both the psychological and spiritual levels. Consistent practice reduces stress, anxiety, and depression, while enhancing concentration, memory, and emotional stability. Spiritually, it guides practitioners toward self-realization, deepens meditative absorption, and fosters the experience of Advaita (non-dual awareness).

From a scientific standpoint, although current research provides encouraging insights into its neurocognitive and physiological mechanisms, studies remain limited. Future research should include large-scale clinical trials to establish its efficacy in the treatment of conditions such as depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and anxiety disorders. Integrating biometric and neuroimaging methods may help clarify its subtle effects on the brain and nervous system.

Ultimately, *Soham Sadhana* should be understood not only as an ancient contemplative practice but also as a scientifically relevant mind-body intervention that harmonizes body, mind, and consciousness leading to a more balanced, peaceful, and holistic life.

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