
PRAYER 7: MEDITATION

“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee; because his trust is in thee”. Isaiah 26v3 (KJV).

“For many people, there comes a time in their spiritual journey when they find themselves longing for more silence. They find a small pool of silence in the midst of a busy day and they jump in fully clothed... Silence is so rare, and yet for many people today it’s like a deep thirst.” John Pritchard in *How to Pray* (SPCK).

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

Meditation is not for everyone: even for those who enjoy it, it is an acquired art! At times, meditation ‘comes’ easily at times it seems unfruitful and hard work. It gets easier (so they say) if you persist for a while each day, then stop for a few days and return to it. It is also wise to start briefly (say 10min) and then gradually lengthen (to say 20min). I find the time of day I meditate is important, as I’m prone to nodding off to sleep easily! Or, you may find it a smooth and glorious experience; and soon have a black belt in meditating!

Meditation is about collecting your attention, centring yourself and focusing your whole being, the better to appreciate God’s being, and the better to gain spiritual insight (i) into Scripture, issues, themes, people etc. and (ii) into yourself and our ever-present God, the Holy Trinity. That may sound like a load of technical jargon you cannot relate to; that is why meditation is most often mentored in practice, rather than taught in the abstract.

It is an ancient practice in the Judeo-Christian tradition (see Psalm 1v1-2; Joshua 1v8; Psalm 119 v15) and one which is seen as delivering God’s blessing.

THE PRACTICALITIES:

John Pritchard, in *‘How to Pray’*, recommends a three stage approach to silent meditation:

- “CENTRING. Light a candle and watch its flickering flame. Still the body, relax the shoulders, and let the tension seep away from wherever it is located in you... Don’t rush this process. Body and spirit are intimately related and we need to have the body alert but relaxed... We don’t need to take up difficult physical postures for meditation, but we need to be at home with our body. Then, try imagining that you are going slowly down in a lift, descending to a deeper level of your being. Be still.
- “FOCUSING. Then, take whatever short biblical verse, phrase or word you find helpful as a focus of your meditation, e.g. *‘The Lord is my strength and my song, and has become my salvation’*, or shorter phrases like *‘Come Holy Spirit’*.
- “WAITING. Then wait, repeating the phrase slowly and lovingly whenever you need to return your focus to God. It doesn’t matter how often you wander off mentally. Simply return. And listen to your heart [i.e. your inmost being], where God will be. Perhaps you might end your time of meditation by saying the Lord’s prayer to unite you with the whole family of God.”

There are many other practical approaches, all of which have the common elements of Centring, Focusing and Waiting (though they may use different words).

THE VALUE:

It seems to me that the value of meditation is summed up in Psalm 131 v 1-2 (NIV):

My heart is not proud, Lord; my eyes are not haughty.

I do not concern myself with great matters, or things too wonderful for me.

But I have calmed and quieted myself.

I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content.

1. BREATHING:

Personally, I find concentrating on my breathing is an important part of Centring my attention on my whole being. It stops me remaining in a superficial, purely mental state. I control my breathing to a four count: four seconds to fill my lungs, four seconds to hold my breath in, four seconds to slowly exhale and four seconds to remain exhaled: everyone is different, so you may find a different rhythm works better for you. Most importantly, I move my focus of consciousness down deeper within me as I breathe out each time. (This is like Pritchard's descending elevator).

If my mind is particularly dominant and uncontrollable, I **silently** repeat the *Jesus Prayer* (beloved of Eastern Christianity) in time with my breath control, above. Thus, the Jesus Prayer becomes: '*Jesus Christ*' (breathing in for 4s) '*Son of God*' (holding breath in for 4s) '*Have mercy on me*' (breathing out for 4s) '*a sinner*' (4s remaining exhaled). For me, the calming effects are very beneficial. When I am stilled and deeply ready for meditation, I let my meditation theme take over.

2. EXERCISES:

BE STILL AND KNOW... (FROM PRITCHARD)

"In a time of meditation, take the phrase from Psalm 46, '*Be still and know that I am God*'. Repeat it slowly and prayerfully and be still. Then drop off the last word so that you say simply 'Be still and know that I am'. Taste all the goodness in that phrase. Enjoy the silence and simplicity of that moment. Take time. Then drop off the last word again: '*Be still and know*'. Repeat the process. Then reduce the phrase to '*Be still*'. Repeat. Don't be hurried. Finally reduce the phrase to its core: '*Be...*'"

THE POTTER (FROM JOYCE HUGGETT [IN 'OPEN TO GOD'].)

"Openness to God involves placing ourselves in his hands and begging him to reshape and re-mould us. Jeremiah taught us this. God once sent him to the house of a potter to watch the craftsman at work. The pot he was shaping became marred in his hands. But the potter refused to panic. He simply began again: '*So the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him*' (Jer. 18v4). Then God spoke reassuringly: '*Like clay in the hand of a potter, so are you in my hand*' (Jer. 18v6)."

Read Jeremiah 18 v1-6 slowly and meditatively, asking God to make you as soft, malleable clay in his safe hands.

"When we meditate, whether we realise it or not, we are placing ourselves into the hands of the living God. And when we pray, God is at work, ridding us of the dirt which makes it impossible for him to reshape us."

FROM ST TERESA OF AVILA

Settle down, relax and remember the Presence of God with you (i.e. begin your meditation).

Then, simply let Jesus Christ look at you **lovingly** and **humbly** (St Teresa's key words). Firstly, meditate on '**lovingly**': We might be able to grasp in the depths of our being his looking at us lovingly. Then move on to '**humbly**': that's probably much harder to grasp; and yet, is this not the God who washes feet?

"Perhaps part of our spiritual growth is to let him kneel before us" (Pritchard).

FROM MOTHER JULIAN OF NORWICH

Find a hazelnut (or other nut or seed) and hold it in the palm of your hand. Let it be the focus of a time of meditation, in the light of the reflections of Mother Julian:

"God showed me in my palm a little thing, round as a ball about the size of a hazelnut. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and asked myself: 'What is this thing?' And I was answered: 'It is everything that is created'. I wondered how it could survive since it seemed so little it could suddenly disintegrate into nothing. The answer came: 'it endures and ever will endure, because God loves it.' And so everything has its being because of God's love.

“In this little thing I saw three truths. The first is that God made it. The second is that God loves it. The third is that God looks after it.”