

Meditation

Contemplation and creative imagination

SILENT MUSIC

Soul searching

‘My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night.’
(Ps 63:5-6)

At the core of a biblical understanding of spirituality, there is relationship and experience; there is also the call to reflection and understanding. Each of these elements are drawn together in the concept of meditation. That is, the soul (the whole of us as a living being) searching both the depths of ourselves and of God to strengthen the intimacy of our relationship and to grow and increase in wisdom. This being so, Christian meditation is important, both as an attitude of the mind and as a spiritual activity.

Deep insight

We look out at the world and wonder; we look deep within ourselves and are amazed. Everything about creation and human experience is far more profound and complex than we can truly imagine. There is a depth beneath and beyond every surface we ever see or touch. There is integration between all things, which is both awesome and perplexing. Here the physical and spiritual appear to flow into one another almost seamlessly, pointing beyond themselves to the mystery of being itself. Meditation is a means of making a connection with this reality and endeavouring to make sense of it and learn from it.

The word ‘meditation’ suggests, ‘considering thoughtfully and deeply, to reflect upon, serious continuous contemplation’.¹ Or, ‘intuition and insight leading to a direct knowledge of God or spiritual truth in a way that is different from ordinary sense perception’.² It is a difficult word to describe a complex range of experiences. It can mean different things to different people:

- Nothing more than a product of natural physical brain function;
- A means of encounter between the physical and the spiritual;
- Nothing less than a means of communing with God directly.

Meditation in its broadest sense has been described as including ‘discursive thinking and reasoning about ultimate matters as well as contemplation and mysticism ... it is the search for wisdom and the relishing of wisdom when it is

¹ *Chambers English Dictionary*

² *Webster’s Dictionary*



found'.³ It is the path of stillness; the sound of silent music, the way to union, harmony and ultimate values.

Across the world there are two main types of meditation:

- **Introverted:** turning inwards towards personal consciousness and experience, discarding visual concrete images, leading to essential oneness with ultimate reality (primarily the Hindu / Buddhist approach);
- **Extroverted:** linked to objective experience and circumstances, while encountering 'the mystery' it is linked to the factual and concrete (essentially the Christian approach).

Meditation stands in contrast to speculative theology and philosophy; it moves beyond simply the world of ideas to personal and spiritual encounter and experience.

Meeting place

Meditation is something that is experienced and understood by people of most faiths and cultures. For example, there is the:

- Vision – Medicine man (Primal);
- Yoga – *Sanyasin* (Hindu);
- Zen – Monk (Buddhist);
- Dance – Sufi (Muslim);
- Silence – Quaker (Christian);
- and very many more ...

The language of ideas often divides us, but the experience of meditation and the spiritual creates common ground around which we can begin to communicate. It is interesting how mystics from different traditions speak very similar language. Seven common shared characteristics seem to be a sense of:

- Cosmic oneness;
- Transcendence of time and space;
- Objectivity and reality;
- Blessedness, joy, peace and happiness;
- Holiness and the divine;
- Paradox;
- The ineffable (something impossible to describe).

Christians have many points of contact with those of other faiths and backgrounds when it comes to meditation, but there are also clear distinctives and differences. These are what we must now consider.

³ William Johnston '*Silent Music*' pub Collins / Fontana 1974 p 9

STILL WATERS

Christian meditation

As we have seen above, there is a significant biblical emphasis on 'meditation'. For example:

'Isaac went out in the evening to meditate⁴ in the field.'
(Gen 24:63)

'This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth;
you shall meditate on it day and night,
so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it.'
(Josh 1:8)

'... and after the earthquake a fire,
but the Lord was not in the fire;
and after the fire a sound of awesome silence'
(1Kg 19:12)

'Happy are those who ...
delight in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.'
(Ps 1:1-2)

'I, John, your brother...
I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day...'
(Rev 1:9-10)

Down through the centuries of the Christian church there has been a strong tradition of meditation. It has been ignored many Christian groups but never lost; today both individuals and Christian communities are rediscovering it once again.

Purpose of meditation

To develop meditation as an important expression our spirituality we must understand its purpose. The truth is that meditation opens doors. These doors help us access the totality of who we are; the doors of our body, heart, mind and spirit. Meditation helps us:

- To know God and hear God;
- To acquire both knowledge and understanding;
- To discover inner wholeness;
- To awaken spiritual perception.

⁴ The Hebrew word here (*siach*) is of uncertain meaning in this context and some translations simply use the word 'walk'

Meditation and life

True meditation must not be simply a profound inner experience; it proves itself to be valid and authentic only by producing very practical consequences in life. Thomas Merton has said, 'Meditation has no point unless it is rooted in life.' The scripture 1 Timothy 4:15 has usually been translated:

'Meditate upon these things;
give yourself wholly to them,
that your profiting may appear to all.'
(King James Version)

Whether or not the Greek word *meletao* should be translated 'meditate', a more recent translation emphasises the practical consequences of it all:

'Put these things into practice,
devote yourself to them,
so that all may see your progress.'
(New Revised Standard Version)

While there is certainly a place for quiet reflective meditation, there can be nothing passive about it. It must bare fruit in life.

Active-Creative meditation

Meditation is presented in terms of deep stillness and quiet; this is a very important foundation. However, beyond this we must discover meditation in the physicality of daily life. Meditation must also become tactile and energetic, while at the same time deep and profound. Two things:

- Deliberately develop meditations that have creative physicality at their centre; responding to a reflective theme / idea with play-dough, bendy pipe-cleaners, kneading flour for bread or flower arranging etc.
- Turn everyday tasks and actions into meditations; learning to live with 'mindfulness'.⁵

Meditation dynamics

For the Christian, meditation involves both 'detachment' and 'attachment':

- **'Detachment'** – not from the material world, as is common in much thinking about meditation, but rather from inhibiting things. It becomes a 'Sabbath of contemplation'.⁶
- **'Attachment'** – to the person of God, to other people and the world around. Meditation affirms our connectedness to everything that makes up the cosmos.

⁵ I owe this wonderful and helpful phrase to the teachings of Tich Nat Han, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk who has been very involved in Buddhist/Christian dialogue

⁶ A phrase used by Peter of Celes, a 12th century Benedictine monk

Jesus and meditation

Christian meditation has its central focus in the person of Jesus in whom God is most fully revealed:

- 'He is the outshining of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being' (Heb 1:3);
- 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Col 2:9).

Christian meditation is rooted in New Testament statements such as:

- 'Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me' (Jn 15:4);
- '... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love' (Eph 3:17);
- 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:19-20).

All this makes a Christian understanding, expectation and experience of meditation distinctive. It is a dimension of prayer but with a focus on reflection and contemplation and less on dialogue (though that may play a part). There is thinking as well as listening; looking, seeing and imagining as well as hearing. It is creative communion with God in the context of others, the whole creation and ourselves.

Questions and Difficulties

There are several questions and difficulties that meditation raises for some Christians.

'How do I know that my meditation experience is true?'

With meditation being practised in so many different faiths and cultures, many fear that it will open them up to psychic and even demonic influences that will be spiritually harmful. Clearly there is a wide range of meditative practice worldwide, and some do appear to be potential harmful. However if, as stated above, the Christian focus is on the person of Jesus in the illuminating presence of the Holy Spirit, there is absolutely nothing to fear.

Remember that meditation involves the whole of us, as a complete person⁷ – body, mind, spirit, and emotions – not isolated parts of us. The Holy Spirit works through the whole of us:

- The meditation experience obviously uses the mind and so is clearly something psychological; but it is also more than that. For some, however, that may be all it is.
- The meditation experience opens the whole of us up to the spiritual (as does prayer); some extreme practices might

⁷ We shall be exploring in much more detail what a biblical understanding of personhood involves, and its integrated nature, in the session 'The Image'



provoke a destructive spiritual influence. For the Christian these would be obvious and so be simply avoided.

When people from other faiths come to profound and truthful conclusions and behaviour as a result of meditation, it only proves the biblical statement that we are 'made in the image and likeness of God' (Gen 1: 27). There is nothing to fear. With the focus on Jesus and the witness of the Spirit, the influence on our behaviour in making us more Christlike provides a real safeguard. The test of true Christian meditation is that it makes us more eager to obey Jesus' call to, 'Follow me' (Mk 2:14) and echo Paul's desire to, 'Know Christ' (Phil 3:10).

'Why is my meditation experience so hard?'

Even when a Christian really wants to develop the practice of meditation it is often a real struggle for several reasons, including the environment around that can be frustrating and our inner struggles that can be inhibiting:

- **Environment** – everything in our world and society, which is fast and active, intrusive and noisy. The pressure of time and the demands made on us all oppose meditation. It has been described as the 'muchness and manyness'⁸ of life. Meditation appears to run counter to the normal patterns of our everyday life. A choice has to be made.
- **Inner struggle** – the deep personal, spiritual and emotional space created by meditation often reveals our areas of hidden weakness and vulnerability. We suffer from inertia, coldness and lack of desire. We want others to speak with God for us rather than direct encounter ourselves; 'You speak ... let not God speak or we die' (Ex 20:19).

The opportunity of meditation is a significant test of our desire to commune with God alone.

INNER VISTAS

Five steps

It is sometimes helpful to imagine that there are five simple footsteps to be taken from the noise and demands of everyday living to the quiet focus of meditation. They may be actual physical steps that need to be taken, or simply deep inner choices that need to be made. It will depend on the circumstances. The five steps are:

- Place
- Space
- Pace
- Grace
- Peace

⁸ A phrase of the psychiatrist Carl Jung



- **Place** – we need to find a focus of inner silence. We may feel that it also needs to be somewhere that is actually physically quiet (a separate room or out in the countryside), but it may be just finding a deep inner silence within yourself, to ‘practise the presence of the Lord’,⁹ while still immersed in hectic activity of the day.
- **Space** – we need to find room within which to be able to think, reflect and pray. We may want to mark it out on the ground or simply identify it in our mind. It may be helpful to mark or imagine its shape (circle, oval, hexagon, or even limitless), as a sphere and environment of thought and prayer.
- **Pace** – we need to find a rhythm of physical and mental relaxation and integration.
- **Grace** – we need to find a deep sense that the whole of who we are is embraced by the extravagant goodness of God. You must know (believe) that his love is totally towards you. Everything that is going to happen during the meditation is good.
- **Peace** – we need to find that complete wholeness of *shalom*. Integrated within ourselves, with others around us, with the whole of creation and within your relationship with God.

Physicality of meditation

We must recognise the physicality of Christian meditation. It is to do with the whole us, not parts of us. Remember ‘you do not *have* a body, you *are* a body’. Meditation is not an ‘out of the body experience’; the *whole* of us meditates:

- Ezekiel is carried bodily (Ezk 37:1);
- Paul is unsure whether he is in the body or out of it (2Cor 12:2);
- John steps into heaven through a door (Rev 4:1).

We need a posture free of tension:

- Lie, sit, stand, walk;
- Breathe deeply: imagine inhaling the Spirit, exhaling negatives;
- Body language: act out thoughts and feelings.

Across the threshold

You may enter meditation by any number of means. In the orient two aids to meditation are:

⁹ This was a phrase coined by Brother Lawrence, a French monk who lived in the 17th century, during the reign of Louis 14th, and died in 1691. See Brother Lawrence (trans E M Blaiklock) *The Practice of the Presence of God* Hodder & Stoughton 1981



- **The mantra** – a word or phrase that is repeated as a point of focus and stimulus;
- **The mandala** – an image that is used as an aid to concentration and inspiration.

The ideas of the word and / or the image are also helpful points to begin Christian meditation.

- **Imagination:** using the senses;
- **Scripture:** listening to the words;
- **Stepping:** into God's presence;
- **Dreams:** think, record, interpret;
- **Current affairs:** reflect on the news;
- **Icons:** pictures and images;
- **Observing:** nature and creation.

Meditation can be aided by music, candles, cross, flowers, bread and wine, calligraphy and so very much more.

THE MEDITATIONS

Meditation 1 'Feather on the breath of God'

Theme: The Holy Spirit

Time: 15 minutes

Focus: Music of 'Feather on the Breath of God' by Hildegard of Bingen

Our first meditation works with both sound and imagination. It uses a very powerful mental image accompanied by the beautiful music of medieval plainsong; both created by Hildegard of Bingen.

Hildegard was a remarkable 12th Century artist, author, counselor, dramatist, linguist, naturalist, philosopher, physician, poet, political consultant, prophet, theologian, visionary, and a composer of music. She was born, the tenth child, of a noble German family. Educated by a famous anchorite nun called Jutta, around whom a monastery grew. At Jutta's death Hildegard was appointed as prioress a role she held for the rest of her life. Her creativity and influence in so many areas makes her a woman of great significance in the story of the Christian community.

Hildegard gives us a powerful mental and spiritual image. She imagines that she is a soft feather, like eider down, resting in the palm of God's hand. God then begins to blow gently with the breath of the Spirit and feather-like she begins to rise, floating and dancing on the breath of God; in free child-like joy and trust.

As Hildegard's music plays imagine you are the feather, suspended and transported by the Spirit, the breath of God - see where it takes you!



The meditation begins when you hear the music playing and ends when you hear the sound of an Indian bell.

Have a pen and paper by your side so that during or at the end of the meditation you can note-down anything of significance that you do not want to forget. Time will be allowed for this at the end of this 10-minute meditation.

Begin the meditation ...

Meditation 2 'God as Mother and Father'

Theme: Knowing God

Time: 15 minutes

Focus: Silence

Our second meditation works with silence; exploring simply an idea.

When Jesus speaks about God what he says is startling. For instance he calls God 'Father' (a term far too personal for a Jew to feel comfortable using). But then we realise that the Aramaic word he actually used was *Abba* meaning 'Daddy'. Scandalously intimate!

In Luke 6:36 Jesus again makes a statement that on the face of it is challenging but appears fairly straightforward:

'Be merciful (compassionate)
just as your heavenly father is merciful (compassionate)'

However, when you look more closely at the original words that Jesus would have used ¹⁰ we discover that in Hebrew and Aramaic the word for 'merciful' or 'compassionate' is the plural form of the noun for 'womb'; so 'wombishness' nourishing, life-giving, embracing is how it should be understood. So the words of Jesus should read with the sense of:

'Be wombish just as your father is wombish'

Here is God spoken of both as mother and father, full parenthood.

The meditation takes place in silence. Repeat to yourself the phrase, '*Be wombish just as your father is wombish*' several times, allowing it to really take hold of your thoughts and then work with the ideas and emotions that it stimulates.

We will call the environment 'silence', but remember that it will be *relative* silence. As you meditate you will hear all sorts of sounds inside and outside the room. Don't spend your time wishing they were not there, embrace them and draw them into your meditation!

¹⁰ See Marcus Borg '*Jesus: A New Vision*' SPCK1993 see p102, 130-131 plus footnotes

Have a pen and paper by your side so that during or at the end of the meditation you can note-down anything of significance that you do not want to forget. Time will be allowed for this at the end of this 10-minute meditation. The meditation ends when you hear the sound of an Indian bell
Begin the meditation ...

Meditation 3 'Encounter with Jesus'

Theme: Being present at an event with Jesus

Time: 25 minutes

Focus: Reading quietly, imagining being present at the scene, sharing thoughts with another person.

Our third meditation works with a story and imagination.

Read Luke 7:36-50, the story of Jesus' invitation by Simon the Pharisee to share a meal in his house. During the meal a woman (was she of ill-repute?) kneels at the foot of the couch on which Jesus is reclining while he eats, weeping and then wiping her tears from Jesus' feet with her hair. Whatever reason lay behind the woman's actions, her behaviour was considered scandalous and Jesus' response astonishing.

Read the story *three* times quietly to yourself:

- *The first time:* as you read the story, try to reconstruct the scene in as much detail as you can. What can you see, hear and smell? What atmosphere's can you sense? Try *to be there* as fully as possible.
- *The second time:* as you read the story, try to identify with one of the characters in the story (any one) and re-live the story through their eyes, emotions and experience – try to *be* them. What are they seeing, hearing, smelling and most of all feeling?
- *The third time:* read the story identifying with another of the characters in the story (ideally one that is as opposite to the one you identified with last time) again re-live the story through their eyes, emotions and experience – trying once again to *be* them. What are they seeing, hearing, smelling and most of all feeling?

When you have re-read the story three times find someone else in the group, ideally someone you don't know very well, and share your findings, thoughts and reflections with them and then allow them to share reciprocally with you. Reflect on what you both discovered.

As previously have a pen and paper by your side so that during or at the end of the meditation you can note-down anything of significance that you do not want to forget. Time will be allowed for this at the end of this 20-minute meditation.

Begin the meditation ...



Questions

1. From the meditation exercises experienced during this session, how do you think you can practically develop this dimension of your spirituality further? What obstacles do you see to meditation in your personal lifestyle?
2. How could meditative scripture reading be creatively used in the context of church worship meetings? What fresh dimensions do you think it could bring, both individually and corporately?
3. People from many different spiritual traditions around the world practise meditation. What do you think all forms of meditation have in common? What might these particular common factors tell us about certain aspects of the meditation experience? What do you think ought to make a Christian experience of meditation distinct? What are your reasons and what do you think are significant about them?

Reading & Resources

C McAlpine, *The Practice of Biblical Meditation*, Marshalls 1981
J Forest, *Praying with Icons*, Orbis Books 1997
R Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Hodder & Stoughton 1982
W Johnston, *Silent Music*, Fontana 1976
P Harris, *Christian Meditation*, Darton, Longman & Todd 1996
T Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions 1962
H Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*, Ave Maria Press 1987

APPENDIX: MEDITATIVE READING

Reading and Understanding

This is a development and dimension of meditation:

- There is a particular focus on Scripture: here is revelation;
- There is a richness in the thoughts of others about God: here is inspiration.

Rhythms of reading

Weaving meditative reading into the broader rhythms of your life will increase the momentum of your spirituality:

- Regular reading patterns are helpful
- Getting to know the text [1,049 chapters in the Bible; 3 chapters a day to read it in a year]
- Getting to encounter the text [smaller portions explored more deeply]:
 - Use different translations
 - Return to the same text several times a day



Patterns of reading

There are many creative ways in which to read Scripture that integrate the mind with the emotions and the whole dimension of personhood:

- **Read to understand the text:** read several times, use different translations, build on serious study [don't treat the Bible like a magic book full of hidden meanings];
- **Read to imagine the text:** read using all your senses; hear, see, feel, touch, taste and smell what is happening in the story – what was it like to actually be there?
- **Read to focus the text:** read identifying the key words, phrases and ideas both linguistically and emotionally;
- **Read to hear the text:** read listening to what it is saying about God and Jesus; what is it also saying to me – instructions, promises and challenges.

Records of reading

Begin to keep a devotional journal:

- Noting what God has said;
- Returning to what God has said.

Devotional reading

Begin to extend your reading by turning to Christian classics of spirituality. There are of course many; below are three recommended to help you make a start:

- Brother Lawrence (trans E M Blaiklock) ***The Practice of the Presence of God*** Hodder & Stoughton 1981
- AW Tozer ***Knowledge of the Holy*** STL 1976
- GW Hughes ***God of Surprises*** Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985