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Meditating or Praying Contemplatively in the Christian Tradition

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What Meditation or Contemplative Prayer Is

‘Be still and know that I am God’ (Psalm 46:10). Meditation or contemplative prayer is really the response to this invitation. Silence, stillness, attention, listening and simply being in the presence of God are the characteristics of this type of prayer. Jesus urged us not to heap up empty phrases in prayer but rather to ‘go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you’ (Matthew 6:6).

This kind of prayer is also a form of love. When two people really love each other, they can sit in silence without the need for words. There’s a profound communion beyond all that can be articulated. This is true of our relationship with God. We’re already grounded in God, for ‘in [God] we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28). Meditation or contemplative prayer is simply the realisation – the making real – of this fact. It’s not simply that words aren’t needed: words can also get in the way. The author – possibly a Carthusian monk – of the 14th century mystical treatise on contemplative prayer knows this all too well. Words, thoughts and ideas even about God are no substitute for the living reality of God, just as a written description or a photo of another person falls far short of the living reality. So the author writes:

But now you will ask me, ‘How am I to think of God himself, and what is he?’ and I cannot answer you except to say ‘I do not know!’ For with this question you have brought me into the same darkness, the same cloud of unknowing where I want you to be...of God himself no man can think.

In light of this dilemma, how are we to proceed? The author states that it’s a matter of love: ‘By love may [God] be caught and held; but by thinking never’ (*The Cloud of Unknowing* 6).

Two Approaches

Meditation or contemplative prayer is utterly simple. In the present day, there are essentially two approaches: using a mantra, as advocated by the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), or praying with a simple intention, as advocated by Contemplative Outreach and its approach known as Centring Prayer. The former has its roots in the practice of the 4th century Desert Fathers and Mothers and in the Benedictine method of *lectio divina*; the latter is closer to the practice suggested in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Neither is better than or preferable to the other; it depends as much on

personality preferences and what appeals to us at any given time as anything else. It might be worth trying both and seeing how you get on. Once a particular approach has been chosen, though, it's worth sticking with it for a while rather than chopping and changing.

Using a Mantra

If you wish to adopt the Christian Meditation path, the mantra proposed by WCCM is the Aramaic word, which appears almost as the last word in the Bible: *Maranatha* – 'Come, Lord.' This may be too prescriptive. Other possibilities readily come to mind: 'God,' 'Jesus,' 'Come, Holy Spirit,' 'Love' and more. Such a mantra is repeated with the breath, so that one's whole being is focussed in this one mantra. It's important not to think about the word and what it means; it simply expresses our desire to be in the presence of God without 'heaping up empty phrases.' The gentle inner repetition is intended ultimately to lead us into a deep peace, the peace of God, which, as St Paul notes, 'surpasses all understanding [and which] 'will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:7).

Praying with an Intention

Centring Prayer advocates the use of a 'sacred word' but differs from the path of Christian Meditation in the sense that the word isn't repeated in rhythm with the breath, but is only used when we 'catch ourselves' having become caught up in our thoughts. At that point, we simply introduce the sacred word. By 'sacred' is meant not that the word itself is a holy word, but rather that it acts as a kind of focus for our intention or desire to reach towards God. It could be any word, such as 'peace,' 'love' or whatever. As the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* suggests, though, this reaching out is a 'naked intention directed to God' (*The Cloud of Unknowing* 7). In other words, it's not 'clothed' with words or images.' It just is. And it could be no more and no less than the awareness of the breath itself or even just of oneself sitting or kneeling or walking. It's worth remembering that the words *ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek can each be translated in three ways as 'breath,' 'wind' or 'spirit.' Simply being aware of the breath can itself be an expression of our desire to be at one with the Holy Spirit and with Creation.

What can I expect when Meditating or Praying Contemplatively?

Initially or even habitually there may be a real sense of peace, calm and stillness. Thoughts and ideas may disappear almost entirely. Alternatively, the experience of some might be that thoughts arise incessantly, such that any kind of so-called peace seems a long way off. The important thing to remember is that meditating or praying contemplatively isn't primarily about having a 'good experience' or judging that experience; it's simply about

being with God, whatever arises. Sometimes this being with God is delightful and wonderful; at other times it can be difficult and even painful – this is the experience of the Cross.

The basic practice is to keep our attention or intention focussed on God, either with a mantra, a sacred word, the breath or simply with a sense of presence. Thoughts, which include emotions and physical sensations as well as what we generally consider to be thoughts, will inevitably arise. The simple rule is this: accept everything but engage with nothing, not even thoughts of or about God. Such things are just thoughts and not God. Just let things come and go. When you become aware that you have engaged with a thought, a narrative, or some kind of inner soap opera, gently return to whatever is helping you to focus your attention on or intention towards God. In this regard, St John of the Cross, the great 16th century Spanish Carmelite exponent of contemplative prayer, encourages the practice of simply being with God in the darkness of pure faith.

Practicalities

It's helpful to choose a physical location that's conducive to prayer. This should preferably be somewhere that's uncluttered. Some find it helpful to have at hand a religious symbol of some kind to create the right ambience: a candle, an icon or a crucifix, for example.

All contemplative traditions affirm that attending to the body is very important. Posture can make all the difference in the world. It's perfectly acceptable to sit, kneel, stand or lie down on the floor. If you're sitting, it's generally preferable to sit in a straight-backed chair rather than an armchair. Governing any decisions about this is the aspiration to be relaxed, alert and attentive without inducing drowsiness and sleep on the one hand, or undue tension on the other. Some might be confined to bed; there's nowhere we can't pray. Ideally, though, the back should be straight with the head balanced and the neck not strained or tense. The hands can be placed palms down or up on the legs or folded in one's lap.

It's helpful to decide in advance how long to pray for. It's better to pray for short periods of time a little and often, rather than for long periods infrequently. As the practice becomes established, the length of time given to meditating or praying contemplatively can be extended, usually up to about 25 minutes at a time. If you wish to pray for longer than this, it's usually advisable to have a short break between periods of prayer. In order to establish the practice, it's highly desirable to find the same time of day when you can pray, and to switch all electronic devices on to silent, although you might like to set the timer on your phone to sound when the time is up.

Getting Started

- Settle down in the place you've set aside for this purpose.
- Adopt the posture you find most helpful.
- Spend some time ensuring that you're comfortable and relaxed but attentive and alert.
- Acknowledge your surroundings, along with any sounds you can hear.
- Close your eyes or keep them open as you wish.
- Be aware of your mood and general disposition. Accept it as it is.
- Notice what's on your mind. Accept whatever arises without engaging with it.
- Bring your attention to your body. Acknowledge any pain or discomfort but let it be.
- Tune in to the breath. Be at one with the rhythm of the breath.
- You might like to say the following prayer at this stage:

Come, Holy Spirit,
breathe your life in me,
fill me with your love,
unite me with all living beings,
and open my heart to the compassion of Christ;
for with the Father and the Son you are one God,
now and for ever. Amen.

- If attending to the breath is all you need, just continue being aware of the breath.
- If you're saying a mantra, introduce it now with the in-breath or out-breath or both.
- If you're using a sacred word, introduce that only whenever you find your mind has wandered and then let it drop out again.
- For the length of time you've decided on, continue with this simple practice.
- Thoughts will come and go. Let them do so without engaging with them.
- Whenever you find you've got caught up in thought of whatever kind, return gently to the practice without self-recrimination.
- When the allocated time is up, avoid making any judgements about whether it was 'good' or 'bad.' Accept whatever occurred with love, compassion and kindness.
- Spend a moment or two before continuing with whatever will engage your time and attention next.