

CHRISTIAN MEDITATION: The Essential Teaching

Meditation is as natural to the spirit as breathing is to the body. Deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, it is an ancient spiritual discipline, a simple way into peace within oneself and union with the Spirit of Christ.

This is not to say that meditation is “the only way” to pray or the only way to wisdom. But meditation – silence, stillness and simplicity – does lead to the experience of wholeness that opens, in faith, to holiness. Holiness is the integration of wisdom and compassion applied to daily living. Because it is simple and yet calls for discipline this tradition advises the following simple practice:

- Choose a quiet place.
- Sit down comfortably, with your back straight.
- Close your eyes lightly.
- Sit as still as possible.
- Breathe deeply, staying both relaxed and alert.
- Slowly and interiorly, begin to say your “mantra” (prayer word). Listen to the word as you say it.
- Continue repeating it gently and faithfully for the whole time of the meditation.
- Return to it as soon as you realize you have stopped saying it.
- Stay with the same word during the meditation and from day to day.

You don't have to evaluate your meditation. The fruits will appear in your self and in your life and in all your relationships. Don't be discouraged or disappointed by finding how distracted you are. That's why we meditate, to go through the distractions. So there is no need to try to repress or blank out your thoughts or images. Just let them come and go but keep your attention on the “mantra” (the prayer word or sacred word).

The mantra we recommend is “Maranatha,” an ancient Christian prayer from the language Jesus spoke, Aramaic. It means “Lord, come”. Repeat the word in four equal syllables, Ma-Ra-Na-Tha. Listen to the word as you say it and give it your full attention, but don't think about its meaning. Distractions will come and go but don't try to repress or fight them. Simply let them pass. When you do find that you have got distracted again, some thought or daydream has hooked your attention, simply return, in faith and love, to the word. This is what the Cloud of Unknowing calls the “work of the word.” John Cassian taught to say the word “in prosperity and in adversity.” Meditate twice a day, ideally in the early morning and early evening. The optimal length of time for meditation is thirty minutes, but you can begin with twenty and gradually increase to twenty-five minutes or the full half hour. Be patient, simple and practice.

On the Mantra

“This is the verse that the mind should unceasingly cling to, until strengthened by saying it over and over again and repeating it continually, it renounces and lets go of all the riches of thought and imagination. Restricting itself to the poverty of this single verse it will come most easily to that first of the Gospel beatitudes, for he says: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’”
– John Cassian (c400AD), Conference 10:11

Once you have begun this as a simple daily practice, there are a few guidelines concerning your attitude to the experience that will help you to go deeper. First, don't assess your progress. The feeling of failure – or success – may be the biggest distraction of all. Do not expect or look for “experiences” in meditation. You don't have to feel that anything should be happening. This may seem odd at first, because the experience of silence is so unfamiliar to most of us personally and so different from what we may think that prayer means.

And we are not used to being simple. The silence, stillness and simplicity, however, do have an ultimate purpose. In one of the parables of the Kingdom, Jesus compared the Kingdom to a seed that someone plants in the ground. The person then goes off to live an ordinary life while the seed grows silently in the earth “how he does not know.” The same thing happens to us, as the word is rooted evermore deeply in our hearts. And, as in the parable, there will in time be signs of growth. You will not always find them in your meditation itself, but in your life. You will begin to harvest the fruits of the Spirit; you will find that you are growing in love. And if you ever stop the practice of meditation, whether for a day or a month or a year, simply return to it again with confidence in the infinite generosity of the Spirit that dwells in and among us all.

On John Main & the Christian Contemplative Tradition:

“One of the essential teachings I have taken from John Main and the Christian contemplative tradition that he has helped restore is the importance of a particular kind of stability or faithfulness in the daily practice of meditation. In being faithful to and with the mantra we are staying. That relates directly to what the Desert Fathers teach about stability. The whole practice of staying with the mantra and the discipline of meditating, the saying of the prayer ‘formula’ makes most sense within the context of the kind of life the Desert Fathers talk about. That means a life where we are always trying to put our self-preoccupation and self-dramatizing, our compulsion to be in charge to one side.” (Rowan Williams, in Silence and Honey Cakes)