

CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

St Augustine, in the 5th Century, wrote, '**Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.**'

Richard Baxter, a leading 17th Century evangelical Anglican wrote: '*Sirs, if you never tried this art, nor lived the life of heavenly contemplation, I never wonder that you walk so uncomfortably, that you are all complaining and live in sorrows, and know not what the joy of the saints means ... [people] have such languishing and starved souls. I know no truer or greater cause than their ignorance and unconscionable neglect of contemplation.*'

We are made in the image of God who is Trinity - eternally one in love and relationship. Humans are therefore made for relationship and love, not only with each other but supremely with God. Meditative prayer is one way to find the grace, to peel off the onion layers of false self with its superficial desires, and find the deepest yearnings of our hearts which God alone can and longs to satisfy. '*He*' (God is beyond gender) reveals himself and initiates the relationship of love with us, supremely demonstrated by sending his eternal Son, Jesus Christ, into the world as a fully human person.

We often wish God would communicate with us

There is an insight into how we can meditate in George Bernard Shaw's play, *Saint Joan*. Joan claims to hear voices from God. The king is annoyed: "*Oh, your voices, your voices! Why don't they come to me? I am king, not you.*"

Joan replies, "They do come to you, but you do not hear them. You have not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the angelus rings you cross yourself and have done with it; but if you prayed from your heart, and listened to the trilling of the bells in the air after they stop ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do."

In another part of the play, Joan explains to Robert how she hears God.

Robert says, "*The voices come from your imagination!*"

Joan replies, "*Of course. That is how the messages of God come to us.*"

Defining Meditation

The meaning of the word 'meditation' like many terms, varies depending on context. In the Christian tradition, the term includes both the concept of contemplation and prayerful reflection, often using scripture. The emphasis is on silence and solitude. This helps still our ego driven minds to listen more attentively to our spirits and enter into more intimate communion with God.

Some background information

Many places in the Old and New Testaments, especially the Psalms, indicate that meditation is part of the Christian heritage, emphasised in the church through religious movements as far back as the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 4th Century AD.

Unfortunately in recent centuries, the Church, especially Protestants in the West, has largely ignored it. We have tended to concentrate on 'left brain' learning (logical, intellectual, narrowly focused, result oriented, thinking) which formal education and many churches have adopted. Recent scientific research has revealed the role of the 'right brain' (creative, imaginative, intuitive, feeling, lateral thinking) as being essential in solving complex problems and maintaining balanced psychological health and social relationships. Both modes are essential for a healthy spirituality too. Jesus reiterated the Old Testament command that we should love God with **all our mind** - not just the left side. Much of his teaching such as his parables, appeals to our right brain.

Christian and Eastern Meditation

Christian meditation may use some similar 'techniques' as Eastern traditions: relaxation, music, focus on a word, image, story or symbol. These help us disengage from temporal concerns so we can be available for God. But the purpose is not to achieve a void, to seek a state of nothingness, an 'absorption' into the cosmos, or 'Nirvana'. Such risks making the meditator vulnerable to malevolent spiritual influences which can fill the void. The Christian meditator seeks communion with the living God, 'the still small voice of God' (1Kings 19:12), the way God usually seems to speak to us subjectively. The Psalmist exhorts us, '*Be still and know [not just intellectually but experientially] that I am God*' (Psalm 46:10) and '*My soul, wait [be silent, cease, be still] only upon God.*' (Psalm 62:5)

A spiritual director is of great benefit in assisting a person discern and interpret their experience. Without guidance, there is a danger of misguided mysticism that convinces itself that the voice of the subtle false ego and exalted feeling is really the voice of God.

Some helps to meditation

- A quiet unhurried atmosphere
- A relaxed mind and body
- good posture (lying flat on your back; kneeling or sitting with a straight but not stiff back)
- muscle relaxation exercises
- focus on breathing - long, slow deep breaths from the diaphragm.
- focus on a symbol, word, phrase or scene in the imagination
- pray a 'prayer of the heart' - slowly, deliberately and repeatedly; eg, "*Lord have mercy*"; or the Lord's Prayer, reciting each word in time with your breathing.
- A short explicit prayer to God for help and guidance
- Discipline - set aside time regularly. Start modestly. Some people with busy family and work commitments may pray this way for say 15 minutes daily but find a longer period once a week.
- Perseverance to keep returning to God and the meditative focus when distractions come.

- Meditate on the scriptures, especially the Gospel stories. Imagine being in the scene, engaging all the senses. Then let the Holy Spirit guide what happens.
- A sense of poverty and humility. Poverty makes beggars of us and creates a sense of urgency and humility in our desires. It is not that God is unwilling to respond, in fact our relationship is always initiated by him. He knows that our ability to receive is limited without a real sense of need. Jesus said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*" (Matthew 5:3). Part of this poverty is an awareness of our sin and shortcomings. Thus we come to God confident only in his gracious acceptance of us.
- A hunger and thirst for the things of God. Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.*" (Matthew 5:6) Note that it is the desire for righteousness (ultimately the desire for God, its source), not desire for ecstatic feelings, which Jesus promises to fulfill.
- The Holy Spirit. He is God on our side, our ultimate Helper. He communicates with God the Father on our behalf, beyond words (Romans 8:26-27). Invite him to help, to reveal both your own heart and God's heart for you.

What to expect

It might be difficult to let your mind be still. Do not worry if this happens. Keep returning your focus to God, appreciating whatever you receive - which may simply be the grace to persevere despite the struggle. This is pleasing to God. You might experience strong emotions which surprise you. Release them and offer them to God - this often brings relief, healing, self-understanding, revelation of God's love and growing intimacy with him.

You may hear God's voice as interiorly audible words, impressions, images or pictures (a vision), or through a dream when sleeping. But remember, such wonderful experiences for which you should thank God, are not an end in themselves. It is a mistake to become focused on experiences rather than the God who gives them. You may not experience any interior voice or vision but just have a sense of God's presence bringing you some freeing truth or sense of his love. Often, there is no discernible experience of God. We cannot manipulate him by following particular rules or techniques. Prayer is about a relationship between two persons - you and God. Sometimes we get to know God better in the deserts and shadows of life.

The evidence of the value of meditation is not ecstatic experience but a fruitful life producing love, joy, peace, patience etc which strives to make God's kingdom, including justice and mercy, real in the world. Finally be prepared to be surprised and delighted. Remember, Jesus rose from the dead and is fully alive. He is therefore able and desirous of meeting with you, where you are and as you have need and desire. The risen Jesus says, "*Behold I am with you always.*"

NB: *God is not 'masculine' gender but is personal and incorporates both genders which allows us - men and women - to be his image bearers. I use the masculine personal pronoun only because English (unlike Chinese!) lacks a personal non-gender specific pronoun.*