

Lectio Divina & Meditation

MEDITATION: What is it? And is it for me?

Whatever you feel about meditation, you can certainly say that it is now mainstream. It may be ancient but it is flourishing as never before in modern times along with other traditional and holistic complementary therapies. Look in any family medical reference work and you will see that GPs prescribe it routinely to help patients cope with anxiety and stress and it is increasingly likely you can take evening classes to improve your technique in a local college.

As researchers learn more about the complex interaction of our genetic inheritance and the external environment with our bodies, minds and emotions, it is generally accepted that we must treat patients, not just their diseases. Technological medicine was the only way ahead when medicine was largely about removing symptoms, repairing and replacing. But for good reason we can no longer think of human beings as machines, we want to care for their souls as well as their bodies.

It is scarcely surprising, then, that there is such interest in what we may call mind/body, holistic or spiritual approaches to health, or to use a new word invented precisely because we now attempt to achieve something different, *wellness*, a concept which includes factors other than physical health. It is easy to overlook what a revolution in attitude this represents.

Learn to Relax!

In everyday language, we often use the term *meditation* to mean a state of absolute stillness in mind and body. Strictly speaking, this better describes *relaxation*, the precondition for successful meditation. You might think you know how to relax, but many of us do find it difficult. Think for a moment about when you want to relax. What do you do? Does it work?

Above all, how do you feel afterwards? **The word *Restless*** (*restless*, as in *sleepless*, *joyless*, *hopeless*!) describes how many feel in such a situation. It reminds us that doing nothing is not the same as having a rest, and certainly not the same as relaxing. We know how unsatisfying it is to lounge about, watch television programmes we are not interested in and fall asleep on the couch.

If you are at home, signal that this is a special time and permanently or temporarily mark the space you use for meditation in a way you find appropriate: with a crucifix, icon, statue, painting, or flowers and a candle, for example. The space can be a shelf or table, your bedside cabinet or a whole room.

Anybody liable to interrupt you should know that you are not available. Make sure you ask your flatmate or spouse not to disturb you, do not answer the phone or doorbell and remember to switch off your mobile!

What it involves

It is as straightforward as it sounds. You listen to a text read out slowly by a member of the group (a recording can be used if you cannot get to group), then you listen to it for a second time. The idea is to try to listen *as if you have never heard it before*.

Familiarity has deadened the effect of many of the most significant and beautiful passages in scripture. We think we know what it says, we hear, but we are not listening. You will be able to refer to the printed version of the reading while meditating to refresh your memory if necessary.

For each reading there is some background and guidance as to what to look for. The tasks are straightforward ...

1. You may have heard of *visualisation* in the context of sport, where it has been demonstrated that sportsmen and sportswomen can improve their technique and performance by imagining themselves successfully performing the aspect of their game they want to improve. In this case, it involves imagining yourself in the scene described in the reading.

Once at ease with visualisation, you will get a lot from it. Let the scene reverberate in your mind. Sometimes you will find a word or phrase from the reading coming to your mind at once, while on other occasions, it takes some time but slowly emerges. It may take you (apparently) far from the context of the reading but it is your response.

2. You will also be asked to consider some *questions*: there are no correct answers, they are open-ended, designed to stimulate you to relate the reading your own circumstances.
3. Finally, you will be given some words to comment from the reading. Go with a word and see where it takes you as it engages with your memory and your life. This is the core of *lectio*, *it's all about responding to the reading ...*

The readings are taken from the *gospels*. You are also given a short extract from the *Old Testament*, usually a *psalm*, as preparation before the meditation session.

THE CALL: READING PASSAGE

Jesus of Nazareth (Luke 4, 16 to 21)

Preparation Isaiah 61 verses 1 and 2
The Spirit of the Lord

Jesus spoke Aramaic, but the gospels were written in Greek, the international language of the Eastern Mediterranean even under the Romans. According to most translations into English, Jesus proclaimed the *Kingdom of God* and called for *repentance*, but scholars think it would be more accurate to speak of *The Kingship* (or rule) of God, while the Greek word *metanoia* means rather more than simply *repentance for sin*, it translates literally as *new mind* or, to put it another way, implies taking on a different mind-set or mentality.

He was now about 30 years of age and ready to embark on his mission. Having spent forty days alone in the desert preparing himself, Jesus went back to Nazareth, his home town. You can sense his presence and inherent authority in the account of his visit to the local synagogue. Rather like a modern candidate for political office launching a campaign on familiar ground, he has returned to where he grew up. We can imagine the variety of reactions, from pride in one of their own to resentment and jealousy: *Who does he think he is*. (Read the verses immediately following this extract to remind yourself just how fickle people can be.)

Jesus was a faithful Jew and so were his first followers. One happy consequence was that the church inherited the riches of the Jewish Scriptures and we have a good example of that background here when Jesus refers to the prophet Isaiah.

It was the Sabbath and we can imagine the congregation falling silent as he came forward, unrolled the scroll and looked down to find the opening words of the reading. The text is heavy with significance. These verses were normally interpreted as applying to the *Messiah*, so when Jesus declared that the prophecy was coming to pass there and then, some of those present concluded he was applying it to himself ...

Visualise

Imagine you have been a member of the congregation and later that day you are running through the events in your mind. Try not to analyse or speculate, simply re-view it as you would a DVD or video.

Questions

- a. Having visualised the scene, how do you feel you would have responded to that call to repent and change your mindset?
- b. How would you respond now to a similar challenge? What do you think needs changing in your life?
- c. What does *repentance* mean to you? Is it relevant in any way to your life?
- d. And what about the expression *a new mentality*? Follow the train of thought into your own life.

Words and phrases

written	synagogue	spirit	good news	fulfilled
today	Prophet	Listen	fixed	set free

Follow up: Palm Sunday The triumphant entry (Mathew 21 v 5 to 11)
Hosanna!

RESPONSES: READING 1

The tax collector (Luke 4 16 to 21)

Preparation Psalm 139 verses 1,2, 5-7, 12

*God watched over me as I was formed
in my mother's womb,
He knows me through and through*

When it comes, the call is uncompromising and urgent.

Meditation begins with a conscious withdrawal from everyday concerns, and just as Jesus prepared for his mission by withdrawing into the desert, you can visualise leaving your concerns and plans at the door or taking them and putting them outside the room. Now you are ready as well ...

This is the start of the road he has chosen to take. Returning from his forty-day retreat, Jesus set about gathering followers. Here, the tax collector is sitting at his desk and Jesus approaches him. Levi looks up to see the famous Rabbi directly in front of him. Within seconds, they are walking together in conversation, on their way to lunch at his house. Levi has made his choice and simply abandoned his work.

Accepting hospitality from a tax collector would have shocked respectable religious and national opinion. Not only was taxation gathered on behalf of the heathen Roman occupier, tax collectors were considered almost criminal in that as commission, they took a cut of what was collected.

The gospels show Jesus deliberately mixing with such outsiders. On this occasion, he sums up his mission in a typical metaphor: he is the doctor offering the healing treatment a sick society needs.

Visualise

Imagine yourself there, without analysing what is happening, concentrate on the scene before you, take it all in.

As the rabbi approaches, the noise of the crowd changes from a loud background murmur to an excited babble. You catch occasional glimpses of him through the crowd. He is walking purposefully across the dusty street. You're watching him when suddenly you realise, you just know, what is about to happen. In the time it takes to think that, he is not far away at all and heading straight towards you. You can see he intends to speak to you and you know what that will mean ...

Now he is in front of you, about to invite you to join him. Everybody is looking at you. What are you going to say?

Questions

1. Have you ever felt called for some purpose? What was your response?
2. Think of a decisive moment in your life. What has flowed from the decision you took then? Have you ever regretted a major decision?
3. Think of the most charismatic person you know: what is it about them that makes them seem so fascinating/attractive/authoritative? What do you think were the qualities that made Jesus so compelling?

Words

Repentance *sat down* *mercy*
with Jesus *sinners well/sick* *at table*

Follow up: **Luke 1 The Annunciation**
Be it done unto me according to thy word

RESPONSES: READING 2

The woman of ill repute (Luke 7.36-56)

Preparation Psalm 25 3-6 Lord, teach me your ways

Luke's gospel often portrays Jesus dining in company. He enjoys social occasions and is no puritan when it comes to the pleasures of the table. He is also remarkably at ease with women and has many female followers.

In this dramatic encounter, the mention of anointing is doubly significant. In the first place, it is one more reference to the *Messiah* (the word means *anointed one*, as does the Greek *Christos*, Christ) but, more grimly, it also points ahead to his impending death. Later, we read that it was women on their way to anoint his body who discovered that the tomb was empty.

The account is surprisingly physical. When the woman comes in, he allows her to approach him, touch him, kiss him and weep over him. Her loving attitude demonstrates that she has been forgiven, he states. He is careful in his choice of words: he knows he is being watched.

Jesus challenged the ancient distinction between clean and unclean, whether it had to do with the preparation and consumption of food or with illness and sexuality and Simon's reaction is one of genuine shock. A woman touching the Rabbi was bad enough, but such a woman! And there is an even more important point bothering him: what right had Jesus to forgive sins?

Visualise

The room is crowded and noisy, all eyes on the guest of honour. When the woman enters and walks across the room towards him, silence falls on the gathering. What is she going to do? And what will Jesus do?

Imagine yourself present, at the next table. Concentrate on the events you witness. What strikes you about what she does? What strikes you about Jesus' response?

Questions

1. Think of an occasion when you felt the need for forgiveness. Were you forgiven? How did that experience change you, if at all?
2. Have you ever forgiven someone who wronged you? Was it difficult? Have you ever been unable to forgive?

Words

Woman weeping kisses anointed many sins
forgiven Peace meal

Follow up John 8 **The woman taken in adultery.**
Neither do I condemn you: go and sin no more

RESPONSES: READING 3

The rich young man (Matthew 6, 16 to 24)

Preparation

With his question, this young man goes to the heart of what Jesus is proclaiming but he finds it impossible to commit himself to live a life of poverty for the sake of God. (The phrase *eternal life* is an alternative to *Kingdom of God*.)

Although there could be a hint of complacency in the question, this young man sincerely wants to be a better person and lead a holier life. He keeps all the commandments and presumably fulfils his religious obligations, so when Jesus refers to the commandments and what would normally be expected of anyone, he stops him impatiently. He already does all that, he wants something more challenging,

However, once the price of living that holier life is explained to him, the potential disciple is honest enough to realise he would be unable to change his lifestyle and live according to radically different values. His sadness demonstrates his sincerity. Jesus sums up using another memorable image and the message is clear: *riches make it much harder to enter the Kingdom of God*.

Visualise

You are in the crowd when the young man asks his question. Follow the exchange and listen very carefully to the answer given by Jesus. What is your reaction to what he says?

Questions

What in your life is currently the greatest obstacle to spiritual development? Is it possible to overcome or remove it? Do you want to?

Words

sell all	good	eternal life	possess	commandments
The poor	Kingdom of Heaven	life	good deed	perfect
wealth	life	sad		

Follow-up Luke 6 19 to 21 and 24 to 34

For there where your treasure is, your heart will be also

RESPONSES: READING 4

The blind beggar (Mark 10)

Preparation Psalm 129 *Lord, hear my voice*

It is often forgotten that healing played a central part in Jesus' ministry and this gospel above all emphasises it

Possibly the beggar had come into town that day with the intention of trying to catch Jesus' attention, or perhaps he was there as every day, trying to beg enough to live. In any event he certainly knows who Jesus is and is determined to meet him. Above all, he is confident that Jesus can cure him and is determined to get to him despite his own disability and the crowds surrounding the healer.

Those crowds grew ever denser and their excitement more and more apparent, until the noise was such that he realised Jesus must be very near. At first, he shouted out but given the number of people shouting and chattering excitedly his voice was inaudible. He would not be put off and shouted even louder. His cheek paid off and he got to speak directly to Him, addressing him as *Son of David*.

He asks for his sight to be restored, clearly confident that he will be granted what he has requested ... and so he is.

Words and phrases

have pity on me	louder	scolded
At the side of the road	faith	Court
He is calling you	saved	What do you want of me?
Call him	followed	along the road

The remaining exercises are different this time. They have to do with language, literal and figurative.

Sight and blindness

Think of seeing and blindness in connection with the words *eyesight* and *insight*, or even *foresight*.

It is clear that ***blindness*** can work at two levels here: What do you think are the symbolic implications? Could they relate to your own life and circumstances?

Explore what it means in concrete expressions such as

- *faithful*
- *to keep faith with*
- *to have faith in ...*
- *unfaithful*
- *faithless*
- *a faithful copy*
- the hymn “Faith of our fathers”

What can you conclude from the examples about the meanings of the word?
If possible, talk about your conclusions with somebody else.

Some other words, if you have time

True *a true story* *a true likeness* *a true friend*

Believe *I believe you* *I believe in you*
I believe Joan has got married ...
We believe in socialism

MEDITATION: IDENTITY

Who do you think I am?

“Come to me all you who labour and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest, for my yoke is light and my burden easy.”

Matthew 28 v 27-29

If you accepted that invitation, what exactly would it involve? As we can see in the extracts from the gospels which follow, a call from Jesus was hard to resist....

When asked to commit ourselves, our instinct is to be cautious, to hesitate and play safe, but sometimes even the least perceptive or heroic of us can realise something vital is at stake, especially if inspired by an exceptional person.

His followers kept his memory alive throughout the following decades, telling and retelling the stories, quoting his actual words and passing them on in turn. shaping the narrative as they did. Eventually, when the first generation was beginning to disappear, the gospels were given definitive written form(s).

So the gospel accounts are themselves the products of intense meditation over decades on the sayings and deeds, the life, death and teaching of Jesus Christ and, crucially, on continuing experience of his presence, because these are not biographies, but spiritual responses to lived experience.

Consider the invitation at the top this page. Let it make connections and open doors in your mind.

Then you can examine some of the responses given in the gospels to the question in the light of your own meditation.

Use these responses for meditation. They are short and easy to remember.

- **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Matt 16 v 27-29**
Peter answers decisively. So It is all the more painful for him later when he fails to prevent his master’s arrest and then, as Jesus predicts, three times
- **“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me” Mark 10 v 47**
The blind beggar who demonstrated such faith refers to Jesus as a descendant of the greatest Jewish King.

- **“My Lord and my God” John 20 v 28**
The apostle Thomas (doubting Thomas) to the risen Jesus. He wouldn't believe what his companions told him about the appearance until he had seen for himself. This is addressed to us, as well: blessed are those who do not see and yet have faith.
- **“Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, only say the word and my servant (soul) will be healed.” Matt 8 v 8**
The centurion, a gentile who had faith. Amended in the way shown, His words are used in the Mass just before Communion

Take the closing message with you ...

“I tell you most solemnly, whoever listens to my words, and believes in the one who sent me, has passed from death to life without being brought to judgement.”

John 5 v 24, 2

MEDITATION: THE PSALMS

Before each reading there is normally a psalm. It is designed as preparation before or at the start of your meditation session. This religious poetry from ancient Israel still speaks to us directly. It has been described as a **dialogue with God**. And it is a concrete reminder of how a small obscure people from the Eastern Mediterranean, often conquered, incorporated into greater empires and eventually dispersed all over the world, achieved something greater than the Roman Empire, Alexander the Great or the builders of the pyramids in neighbouring Egypt.

Two topics for which you will find much material in the Psalms are at the opposite ends of the universe, namely rejoicing in the universe as a manifestation of the glory of God on the one hand and intimate personal prayer and meditation on the other.

Psalm 19 V 1,2 and 7 to 14 *the heavens declare the glory of God*. The author makes a remarkable connection between the glory of the night sky above us and the Jewish Law, the Torah. There is also a sense of grateful recognition for the place of humankind in this creation, which exceeds what we deserve.

Psalm 139 *You examine me and know me*
The deeply personal note here is something we can easily relate to. Over the centuries Judaism developed a demanding and austere view of God at the same time, however, it retained a deeply.

