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Expanding your spirit and life with meditation -- part 2

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Eco Catholic

Part 2: How to meditate successfully



The one feeling that is common to most people who undertake

meditation is that they are not doing it well. A comment in one of my meditation classes expresses the experience and frustration of many: "I tried doing it, but my mind kept jumping all over. I just couldn't still it. I guess I'm not cut out for meditation."

My first item of business in this blog is to clear up an almost universal error about meditation—that the objective is to have a still mind (or a focus on God with no distractions) and that anything short of that is flawed. If any of us start out with an expectation that high and unrealistic, no wonder we are doomed to failure, discouragement, and eventual abandonment of this prayer form altogether. Meditation is not designed to make people feel bad about themselves.

The first rule about meditation is to do it to the best of your ability and absolutely refuse to rate it or make a judgment about how well you did. If you absolutely can't live without an assessment of it, use this measure: if you do it, you get an A+. God doesn't care how many times your mind wandered. God only cares that you were there with a loving intention. In *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, Thomas Keating says, "Centering prayer is not so much an exercise of attention as intention." So relax and just show up consistently.

Do not make meditation too complicated. You don't need to read a lot of books on it before starting it, or you may never get to it at all. I'm reminded of a story by Eknath Easwaran. He was visiting a man with an extensive meditation library, so he asked him, "Have you read all these books?" The man said, "Yes, most of them." Eknath then said, "So you must meditate a lot." The man blushed and said, "Uh, well, not really. I've been too busy reading the books." Books and classes can be useful as long as they don't keep us from actually doing it.

Meditate in the morning if you possibly can. You are fresher then and probably won't fall asleep like you might in the evening. Your conscious mind is dormant overnight, so you should have the least on your mind to distract you when you awaken. Meditation will get your day going smoothly, which is worth a lot. If you wait until later in the day, chances are you won't take the time to do it. By then, you'll be immersed in various activities and more things will tug at your time. Once you are in motion, busy about many things, it is harder to stop in midstream to sit down and meditate. Remember the Martha and Mary story in the gospels.

Meditate in the same place if possible. Make it a sacred space, even if that only means lighting a candle and sitting in your favorite chair. If you pray there regularly, that space will be charged with peaceful energy. Your body and soul will respond in kind.

Recruit your body to be your ally in meditation. Sit with your spine straight, unless you are physically unable to. This is important so that the energy can flow freely. You don't want either a slovenly or tense posture. My friend Cheryl studied meditation in China for a week and they were made to sit on the edge of a chair with their back unsupported, and if they hurt, too bad. So I am being easy on you! Put both feet on the floor, hands resting on the thighs or in the lap. Another option is sitting cross-legged on the floor or using a meditation cushion or bench.

Have a ritual or prayer to begin your practice. I always say several prayers and would like to share my favorites: 1) Come, Holy Spirit, enlighten me. 2) You, who are the source of all power, whose rays illuminate the whole world, illuminate also my heart, that it too may do your work. 3) Holy Spirit, truth divine, dawn upon this soul of mine; breath of God and inward light, wake my spirit, clear my sight. Holy Spirit, love divine, glow within this soul of mine; kindle every high desire, conquer self in thy pure fire. Holy Spirit, power divine, strengthen this true will of mine; may thy sure support precede every thought and word and deed (from an old hymn you may recognize). Sometimes I take some deep breaths or visualize placing my concerns in a black box, closing the lid and giving it to God.

During meditation, stay steady in doing the process for your allotted time. Sit in silence (no music), close your eyes, and be aware of your breath or your sacred word/phrase, silently repeating it over and over. Thoughts and feelings will pop into your mind, but don't worry about them or give them any negative energy. Simply return to your focus whenever you notice you are thinking or distracted in some way. That's it. It really is that basic and straightforward. And don't quit early because you feel restless, bored, or not into it. Just observe these reactions and discipline yourself to stick with it.

Above all, don't analyze how it went. It is a work of grace, God's doing, and mostly invisible to our

mortal eyes. Don't expect anything in particular. Have faith that God is at work if you open your heart to God in this way. Be peaceful, grateful, and delighted each time you do it.

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And know that eventually you could be like the woman in this story. A medieval village was warned that a warlord and his soldiers were coming to destroy the town, so they all fled. All except one woman, that is, who kept praying in church. When the warlord came in and saw her, he drew his sword, pointed it at her heart and said angrily, "Don't you know I can run you through without batting an eye?" She looked up at him and calmly replied, "And don't you know that I can be run through without batting an eye?" Such courage, composure, and detachment can be ours.

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