

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Ways Into Silence

A Guide to Christian Meditation

Silent prayer and meditation is an ancient form of Christian prayer practised by an increasing number of people in our busy, noisy world. Silent prayer is for everyone and doesn't require any special expertise.

This leaflet describes three techniques for meditation. Each technique is relatively simple, but experience says that the practice is more difficult. There are many different forms and traditions of Christian meditation. The aim is to be more deeply aware of God's presence that is beyond words and thoughts. A few basic principles are worth following.

Posture is important. When sitting in a chair keep both feet on the ground, keep your back upright, place your hands comfortably either on your legs or in your lap, together or apart. Prayer stools and sitting crossed legged on the ground are also good positions.

During meditation we don't do anything or achieve anything, but the silence is an attentive silence, a silence beyond words and so beyond our restless minds. It is an attitude of openness, attentiveness, and readiness to wait, without any obvious reward, or even any purpose other than dwelling in God. We seek to attend to God's presence in us and around us.

Being aware of your breathing is a good place to start. Breathing slowly and steadily has a calming effect – feeling the breath enter and leave your nose, feeling your lungs inflate and deflate.

Our experience of meditation varies and is affected by our mood, recent experience, level of tiredness and so on. Perseverance and commitment are important. Try not to worry about the quality of your meditation for that is just another ego/mind game. It is natural and normal for your mind to wander off and to be distracted by thoughts and feelings.

Using a Mantra

Meditation techniques include simple ways of focusing our attention. Focusing on our breath, on the sensation of breathing in and breathing out, can be a form of meditation in itself - not just a calming technique. Using a mantra is another technique. A mantra is a short phrase that is repeated over and over again during meditation. This focuses and occupies our active mind whilst our spirit communes with God.

It helps, but is not essential, for the mantra to be in another language so that your mind isn't distracted by what the words mean. The meaning is significant, but thinking about that is not the point. So phrases that have stood the test of time include "Maranatha" (Come, Lord Jesus) and "Kyrie Eleison" (Lord have mercy) and "Deus Amor" (God is love). The mantra is repeated slowly, internally, lightly, with syllables of equal length. Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. If you notice your mind has been distracted by some thought, simply return to the mantra.

It is normal and natural for our minds to jump all over the place during meditation. This is a like taking a dog for a walk. You walk in the right direction along a path, but your dog runs this way and that, straying from the path, sniffing a bush on one side, chasing a rabbit on the other side... There's a story of a priest teaching a nun about meditation. The nun tried, but she got downhearted and said, "Father, its hopeless. Just in one hour my mind wondered off 10,000 times". "Ah," replied the priest, "10,000 times to return to God".

Noticing our thoughts during meditation has been described as like watching clouds pass across the sky. We see our thoughts drift across our mental space and we let them go. They are just vapour and transitory, including spiritual thoughts and images.

With practice you will find that saying the mantra occupies your mental space, but at the same time you feel a deeper connection with God.

The Jesus Prayer

LORD JESUS CHRIST, SON OF GOD, HAVE MERCY ON ME

The ancient words of the Jesus Prayer have their roots deep in the eastern orthodox tradition. It is used throughout the world by people in all sorts of circumstances. It is used by the Sisters in the Home for the Dying in Calcutta. They chant it whilst washing the dying people whom they have brought in from the streets. The sisters treat everyone who enters as they would Jesus himself, and they chant this prayer as a way of drawing closer to Him as they work. It is also used in an orthodox monastery in Essex. Each evening their three hour liturgy is a continuous repetition of the Prayer, with different members of the community repeating the words 100 times each.

The Jesus Prayer is also a mantra. As we repeat the name Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, over and over again, it becomes a way of being constantly recalled to God's loving presence: a reflection of our Christian life as being a constant return from our wanderings, back to God, to where we are known and loved unconditionally. This is reflected when our minds wander or even fall asleep as we pray. Falling asleep is very natural because any sort of continuous gentle rhythm can have that effect on us.

The second part of the prayer – *HAVE MERCY ON ME* – is not grovelling in our sins. That is not what God wants from us. It is a cry to God for His help, a longing to be grasped by and enfolded into His great love: a deep desire for that intimacy of relationship which both we and He longs for.

The Jesus Prayer can be used privately as well as corporately and we can personalise the words. For example, by saying 'Son of the living God'; or 'have mercy on me, a sinner'. By replacing the word 'me' with 'us', we are filled with longing, not only for ourselves, but for the sin and suffering of the whole world. Some people link the prayer with their breathing, thus ingesting the love of God when breathing in 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God; and breathing out, 'have mercy on me', as a way of expelling from deep within us all that is not of God.

Some people who pray this prayer regularly will talk about it taking on a life of its own, and so pray it at an unconscious level throughout the day. Thus it can become a sort of habit, which can sustain and feed us moment by moment, especially when our spiritual journey may be tiring or challenging.

LORD JESUS CHRIST, SON OF THE LIVING GOD, HAVE MERCY ON ME, A SINNER

The Use of Visualisation in Prayer

Visualisation is the picturing of an object or place in your mind; seeing it with your 'mind's eye'. Visualisation can be used to help you relax in preparation for prayer. You could picture being back at some favourite restful spot. Alternatively, picture lying on the white sand of a beautiful desert island beach, surrounded by an amazing turquoise blue sea with a deep blue clear sky above. Listen to the waves as they gently go in & out on the shore and breath slowly in time with them. Feel the warmth of the sun on your face....

You could use visualisation, as an alternative to words, for a focus of prayer. You could picture an object such as a candle or cross. You could picture yourself being present at a biblical event. You could place yourself back somewhere in the past that has particular meaning for you.

Alternatively, it may be something abstract such as a colour. If thoughts are distracting you, you could imagine putting them in a box and putting the lid on. You might like to then hide, or throw, the box away. Alternatively, you could imagine the intruding thoughts slowly meandering away into the distance, until you can no longer see them. It can be helpful to visualise leaving your worries, plans, fears etc 'outside the door' as you imagine entering your quiet place to pray - to be returned to later, but not now.