

Meditation, or Stillness

What is It, Why do It, and How do You do It?

Turn off your mind, relax and float down stream. It is not dying, it is not dying. Lay down all thoughts, surrender to the void . . . See the meaning of within. It is being, it is being. (Tomorrow Never Knows by Lennon and McCartney)

Not to be able to stop thinking is a dreadful affliction. (Eckhart Tolle)

Don't just do something—sit there! (Anonymous)

Be still and know that I am God. (Hebrew Bible, Psalm 46:10)

Lie down. Shut up. Die. (Peter Kingsley's definition of the type of meditation called "incubation.")

I die daily. (St. Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:31 in the Christian New Testament)

The Divine Light is always in man, presenting itself to the senses and to the comprehension, but man rejects it. (Giordano Bruno, who was executed by the Catholic Church in 1600 for saying things like this)

You will know the truth and the truth will set you free. (Christian New Testament, John 8:32)

Never under any circumstances say mistakenly that meditation and wisdom are different; they are a unity, not two things. Meditation itself is the substance of wisdom; wisdom itself is the function of meditation. (Huineng, 638-713; and remember that "philosophy" means "the love of wisdom.")

Man, in order to escape his conflicts, has invented many forms of meditation. These have been based on desire, will, and the urge for achievement, and imply conflict and a struggle to arrive. This conscious, deliberate striving is always within the limits of a conditioned mind, and in this there is no freedom. All effort to meditate is the denial of meditation. Meditation is the ending of thought. It is only then that there is a different dimension which is beyond time. (Jiddu Krishnamurti, 1895-1986)

The ignorant who strive for control of the mind never achieve it; but the wise whose chief delight is in the Self, achieve it without effort. (Ashtavakra Gita 18:41; trans. Shastri)

The truth is always something that is told, not something that is known. If there were no speaking or writing, there would be no truth about anything. There would only be what is. (Susan Sontag, 1933-2004)

In answer to the question about what is real, the "highest" response is to remain silent, like the Buddha. This does not evade the question, but rather manifests the answer in a different dimension. (David Loy)

Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! What is it about "Shut up!" that you don't understand? (Apu Nahasapeemapieton, PhD, to Ned Flanders)

What is Meditation?

Here are several definitions, certainly overlapping, and, possibly, saying the same thing:

- Meditation is the gentle effort of focusing your mind completely in the present, and, as much as you possibly can, avoiding thinking.
- Meditation is awareness of awareness (rather than awareness of thoughts and feelings).
- Meditation is emptying your mind of its incessant thoughts and personal concerns, and then resting in the darkness (Chinese: *yin*) of alert mental silence.
- Meditation is sitting in quiet alertness with the intention of experiencing your empty mind or pure consciousness. (The word “intention” is very important here, as you will have days when your meditation doesn’t seem to be “successful.” It is always successful, however, if undertaken with pure intention.)
- Meditation is dying while still in this illusory life.

Why Meditate?

There are various good reasons to meditate. Daily meditation gives the meditator a greater sense of being in charge of his or her life. It also reduces stress, sharpens your mind and shortens response times, improves your overall health, makes you gentler and more peaceful, etc.

But the reason I recommend you practice meditation is directly related to my courses, Introduction to Philosophy, and Introduction to Comparative Religion. Both philosophy and religion—at their highest and best—are about the same thing: connecting with highest truth or with what is truly real. And that connection can only be made when your mind is still, when normal mind-chatter is turned off.

The greatest barrier to knowing what is real is our own thought, our incessantly thinking minds. We must become still often; we must stop thinking so that we can let Reality (or Being, or God, or Tao, or whatever name you use for ultimate truth) speak for itself. If we never stop to let “what is” speak for itself then we are always telling reality how it should be or imagining what it is, and never discovering what it actually is. When we don’t know what real is, we live in fantasy (and doesn’t this world look like almost everyone is living in a mad fantasy pseudo-reality?)

I said we must sometimes let Being or God speak for itself. But does Being speak in words? Not usually. It speaks in silence and emptiness, and it takes time and practice to learn how to appreciate what Being is telling you.

How do you Meditate?

There are many methods of meditation. Find one that suits you.

- Mantra meditation: You can focus on a mantra, a short sound that you keep repeating. Inevitably your mind will wander into personal concerns and the past and future. When you realize it is wandering, just bring it back to the mantra. Many teachers of meditation, like Father Keating, below, recommend you choose a “sacred” word or phrase for your mantra. I recommend “I love you.”
- Insight meditation (often called by its Buddhist name, *vipassana* meditation; *vipassana* means “to see things as they really are”): You focus on whatever is going on in and around you right now. It could be your feeling of boredom, or the sound of an air conditioner, or a vague feeling of happiness, or your sore arm, etc. But again, stay out of the past and future.
- Breath meditation: Gently concentrate on your breath going in and out. When your mind wanders, bring it back to breath-awareness.

- **Open Heart Therapy:** This is done lying down on a firm surface such as a yoga mat or a carpeted floor. It combines progressive relaxation with visualization of light, and you can combine empty-mind meditation with it too. You can find a one page script for it [here](#).

The above are forms of focus-meditation, and they train the mind to focus rather than to remain in its normal state of scattered confusion. They are good preparations for empty-mind meditation.

- **Empty-mind meditation:** Just empty your mind of all thoughts, and even of mantras and awareness of yourself and your surroundings, as much as you are able. When you are alert and your mind is empty of thoughts it is fully open to reality. When you have gotten yourself still and empty-minded, ask the divine darkness for one thing: “Tell me what is real.” (In the Christian gospel of Luke, Jesus as he is about to slip into the divine darkness says “Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit”—that’s it.) Doing this daily—remember St. Paul, “I die daily”—is all that is needed to discover and live by what is real, rather than by our own fantasies of what is real. I recommend this method. (And don’t think this is a particularly Christian thing. Parmenides and Empedocles, and undoubtedly other presocratic philosophers, and the Muslim Sufis, knew this practice of death-in-life, going into the underworld to be given the truth. This is the way of real philosophy.)
- If you find it helps, start your empty-mind meditations with mantra repetition or watching your breath until you feel focused, and then let go and just rest in emptiness as best you can.

Is it hard to do?

Regular meditation is a discipline and a way of life. You might compare it to an exercise program, such as running every day. At first running takes will power, but as you keep doing it it becomes a “positive addiction,” and you miss it on those days you can’t run. It’s similar for daily meditation. It will become a part of your life you look forward to. It will feel like “coming home,” as in the famous story of the prodigal son in the Christian Gospel of Luke.

Two famous meditation teachers, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (founder of Transcendental Meditation, d. 2008) and Father Thomas Keating (see below) recommended two twenty-minute meditations every day, morning and night, and that’s a pretty good program for most people. (Some recommend just five minutes morning and evening.) However, you may find that several shorter meditations every day work better for you. This is a less disciplined approach, and it may fit your personality. What is important is “checking in” with reality every day and becoming and staying grounded in reality.

Below is an article from the *Austin American-Statesman* newspaper (January 24, 2005) describing a method of empty-mind meditation. It’s very simple and thousands of people use it. (And if you don’t like the concept of connecting with “God,” think of it as connecting with Being or pure reality, which is the same thing.) Father Keating calls it “prayer,” which can be confusing. It is not prayer in the sense of talking with God or asking for things; it is prayer in its purest form, inner silence. The silence *is* Reality or God. That’s meditation, and you don’t have to be a religious believer to benefit from it.

Monk Teaches Divine Silence:

Member of Trappist order leads Austin group in contemplative method of prayer

By M.B. Taboada

More than 650 people gathered at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church on Sunday afternoon for the simple purpose of being still.

Led by an 81-year-old Trappist monk from Colorado, they escaped the chaos of daily life through contemplative prayer, a growing practice of connecting with God by surrendering to silence.

"You sit quietly and try to open yourself to the divine without words," said 55-year-old Teresa Acosta.

Father Thomas Keating travels the world promoting [the "centering prayer" method](#), which resembles the meditations of Eastern religions, participants said.

In the 1940s, against his family's wishes, Keating entered a monastic community in pursuit of a more contemplative life. In the 1960s, he began teaching centering prayer.

Keating, who founded [the Contemplative Outreach organization](#), said the roots of this prayer method spring from Matthew 6:6:

But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

The inner room isn't so much a place as it is an attitude, Keating said. Closing the door, he said, is to stop the interior dialogue and preoccupation with self-interests.

Participants have no deliberate thoughts during the quiet time, describing it as allowing thoughts to go by without paying attention to them.

"To simply want to be in the presence of God is the origin and basis and beginnings of Christian prayer," said the Rev. Merrill Wade, rector of St. Matthew's Catholic Church. "We have a chance to be influenced by God to be gentler, to be patterned after the life of God."

The method now has more than 57,000 practitioners around the world who set aside two 20-minute periods of prayer daily. Acosta was introduced to the idea in June 2003 during a class about prayer at St. Austin's Catholic Church. Now, Acosta belongs to a small group that meets weekly to practice the meditative style.

She was among hundreds who filed into the church Sunday, some in their Sunday best, others in jeans and tennis shoes, to practice with Keating.

Keating told the group to

choose a "sacred word" — for example, "God," "Jesus" or "peace" — as a symbol of their intention to consent to God's presence within. If they become aware of their thoughts, they are to think of the sacred word.

Congregants sat upright in their chairs, many with their hands folded in their laps, all with their eyes closed. Some bowed their heads, others allowed their heads to sway or nod softly back and forth.

The group was serene and solemn for the next 20 minutes, disrupted only by an occasional cough.

Then, very quietly, Keating brought them out of the contemplative prayer with a verbal one. "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name . . ."

When the prayer was concluded, they opened their eyes. [End of *Austin American-Statesman* article.]

Two Final Notes

We will spend a good bit of time either directly or indirectly considering the four following points during our course.

Parmenides (fl.early 5th century BCE)

Parmenides is the most important philosopher we will study. He taught that there are three essential elements to ontological realization (i.e., to realizing what is real and distinguishing it from false appearances of reality):

1. Longing for the truth. Without this the following three points are meaningless; and I do not know what causes the longing for truth. Some people have it, others don't.
2. Understanding the logic of Being, viz. Being is, and not-being is not. Parmenides invented logic (specifically, deductive inference from indubitable statements). One necessary inference is that motion, change, events, and discrete things are impossible, illusory mistakes ("naming") our senses cause us to make.
3. Mental and physical stillness. Parmenides insisted that stillness was necessary for ontological realization. He didn't say what form of stillness, but as a priest of Apollo (a shaman) he probably practiced and conducted "incubation" (sleeping in a temple or other holy place in order to have oracular dreams). Incubation and empty-mind meditation are like a bird sitting on its eggs, knowing they will hatch in time. With time and the intention of knowing the truth, truth will manifest for you. I.e., reality will manifest as realization. It might take hours of meditation, or, more likely, it will take decades.

A Course in Miracles (1976)

This important nondual philosophy from America adds a fourth important element to the list started by Parmenides of what is essential for a person to come to realization of what is real (or to realize Being or God, which is the same thing).

4. Forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the "miracle" in the title, *A Course in Miracles*, which is designed as a self-study, do-it-yourself philosophy. But the forgiveness taught by *ACIM* is not what this world normally thinks of as forgiveness, as in "you really hurt me, but I forgive you and I will let bygones be bygones."

The forgiveness taught by *ACIM* is ontological, whereas the forgiveness in that illustration is moral and sentimental, even if it is well-intentioned. But such well-intentioned forgiveness assumes and covertly affirms that there is something that really happened needing forgiveness.

ACIM's ontological forgiveness stems from and reinforces the realization that whatever seemed to have happened to you actually was part of the world-illusion. It never really happened, and never could have happened—since only perfect Being or God is real (and individuals and events are unreal). By practicing true forgiveness every day you learn to forgive all insults and attacks, large and small, and this gradually increases your awareness that nothing ever happened, nothing will ever happen, and only Being—perfect Good (or God)—is real (which, we will see, is a necessary implication of #2, above, understanding the logic of Being). In other words, the habit of unrelenting forgiveness detaches you from the world-illusion.

Note the similarity to the Bible, Leviticus 19:18: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD."