

# Meditation

by Karen Morgan

After all the busyness and stress of the holidays, the topic of meditation seemed like a good one for the first sermon of the year. For many of us, “meditation” brings up images of a person sitting in what looks like a horribly uncomfortable lotus position, chanting a mantra. Yes, this is one form of meditation, but today I’d like to expand on this and share some thoughts about what the purpose of meditation is, and give you some different techniques and ideas for bringing meditation and stillness into your life.

So, what is meditation? Meditation is a technique that creates a stillness which brings us into the present moment so that we can find and face ourselves. It’s a way to unlock your full potential in all areas of your life. There are many different ways to meditate, which I’ll get into later, however the common thread amongst all of the methods is concentration. Each method involves a way to focus your concentration so that you become present to your deeper self. Getting connected with your deeper self will allow you to find answers to the questions you face in life. We have all had instances in our lives of this type of connection and stillness – think of a time when you looked into a newborn baby’s eyes, or looked at the night sky and felt the wonder of the vastness, or sat by a river and allowed the sound of the flow move you into a state of stillness. These were spontaneous experiences. Meditation is about having these experiences purposefully.

## **History of Meditation (Internet Sources: [History of Meditation.net](http://HistoryofMeditation.net) and [Wikipedia.org](http://Wikipedia.org))**

Even in prehistoric times civilizations used repetitive, rhythmic chants and offerings to appease the gods. Earliest references to meditation are found all the way back in the Bible, dating around 1400 B.C. Another early reference to meditation can be found in the Hindu traditions around the 15th century BCE. Around the 6th to 5th centuries BCE, other forms of meditation developed in Taoist China and Buddhist India.

Meditation as an intentional spiritual practice in the **Christian tradition** can be traced back to the third & fourth century in Egypt, Syria and Palestine. The Desert Fathers and Mothers left civilization and retreated to isolated wilderness places in order

to live as hermits or in a monastic community. In the Eastern Christian tradition, repetition of a phrase while in a specific physical posture was used during meditation. In Western Christian tradition, there was no repetition of phrases or specific physical postures. Instead, Bible reading and prayer were used to concentrate the mind.

The **Islamic** practice of Dhikr involved the repetition of the 99 Names of God since the 8th or 9th century. By the 12th century, the practice of Sufism included specific meditative techniques, and its followers practiced breathing controls and the repetition of holy words.

There is evidence that **Judaism** has had meditative practices that go back thousands of years. There are indications throughout the Hebrew Bible that meditation was used by the prophets. This form of meditation was through prayer.

The Jewish mystical tradition, Kabbalah, is inherently a meditative field of study. Corresponding to the learning of Kabbalah are its traditional meditative practices, and the ultimate purpose of its study is to understand and the Divine

**In Buddhist Meditation**, core meditation techniques have been preserved in ancient Buddhist texts. Buddhists pursue meditation as part of the path toward enlightenment.

Buddhist meditation techniques have become increasingly popular in the wider world, with many non-Buddhists taking them up for a variety of reasons. One of the most common ways to concentrate in this form of meditation is through the breath.

There are many schools and styles of meditation within **Hinduism**. Yoga is generally done to prepare one for meditation, and meditation is done to realize union of one's self, one's atman (or spirit), with God.

A 2007 study by the U.S. government found that nearly 9.4% of U.S. adults (over 20 million) had practiced meditation within the past 12 months, up from 7.6% (more than 15 million people) in 2002.

### **Mental & Physical Benefits (Internet Source: [History of Meditation.net](http://HistoryofMeditation.net))**

Since the 1960s, meditation has been the focus of increasing scientific research. In over 1,000 published research studies, various methods of meditation have been linked

to changes in metabolism, blood pressure, brain activation, and other bodily processes. Meditation has been used in clinical settings as a method of stress and pain reduction.

There is now ample evidence and a plethora of studies that show conclusively that meditation leads to other biological benefits. These include:

- Reduction of anxiety and stress
- Improved Concentration
- Lowering of Hypertension or Blood Pressure
- Reduced risk of Heart Attack and stroke

As you can see here – there are significant physical and mental benefits to meditation, regardless of your spiritual beliefs. Also, all of the major religions have developed a contemplative practice. I believe this is because as human beings, we are naturally drawn to stillness and contemplation. At some level, I think we understand that it's only through quiet that we can connect with ourselves.

Now, I'm going to get back to a discussion of what meditation is and how you can get started. As I said at the beginning of the sermon, meditation is a technique that creates a stillness which brings us into the present moment so that we can find and face ourselves. Meditation is about looking within for answers. Religion, in terms of how most of us know it, is more external. We're taught that the answers are outside of us – in the doctrine of the church, or in the priest, or in a God that is separate from us. Religion can teach us we are too flawed to determine the answers ourselves. The concept of meditation is that the answers to the questions and issues we face in our lives lie within us, as long as we are still enough to hear them. Jesus addressed this when he spoke of what he called the Kingdom of God. He said *"The Kingdom of God is within! Seek first the Kingdom of God and all else will follow!"* He is talking about the concept of wisdom being within each of us. In the old testament we hear *"Be still and know that I am God."* These familiar words of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures invite us to develop our capacity for contemplation and for giving full attention to the present moment.

If we can find ways to quiet our minds, that will allow our inner wisdom to speak to us. Call it your soul, your inner voice, your higher self, the God within – it's

that aspect of you that is connected to something beyond your physical self. True spiritual growth only begins when we have the courage to dive deeply within ourselves, and the path is through contemplation and stillness.

I've talked a lot about stilling the mind – so what exactly are we stilling it from? If you pay attention to the voices in your head, and there are always voices in our heads - typically they are concerned with either the past or the future. We spend most of the time thinking and worrying about the future, or reliving the past. We actually spend very little time in the present moment. I would encourage you to become the observer of your mind. Pay conscious attention to what the voices in your head are saying. Becoming aware of this will help you to know where your current anxieties or issues lie. For example, if the voices in your head are always criticizing or judging yourself or the people around you, then you may need to focus on being less critical and more accepting of yourself. Meditation practices help bring us into the present moment, to be fully aware and receptive – because it's only in the present moment where the answers lie.

### **Meditation Techniques**

Now, I want to share some techniques for stilling the mind and becoming present. Obviously, this will be a quick overview to get you thinking. What's important is for you to do what feels right for you. There are plenty of books out there that get into these techniques in more detail.

First, there is the traditional form of meditation where you sit quietly and still your mind through breathing techniques or by repeating a phrase. This form of meditation has many benefits, but it's something you need to work into. You can start with just 10 minutes a day and then work up to longer amounts of time. The key is to find a quiet space and set up a ritual around the practice. Find a comfortable sitting position. Then I suggest bringing your mind into the present by following your breath. You always have your breath with you, wherever you are. Simply concentrate on the breath coming in and out. If thoughts come into your mind, acknowledge them and let them go, and refocus on your breathing. As you get comfortable with this, you can gradually increase the amount of time.

If sitting meditation doesn't feel right to you – here are some other techniques to still the mind and bring you into the present moment:

1. Prayer – which is a technique most of us are familiar with. First, find a quiet place. Sit or lie down comfortably and spend a few minutes concentrating on your breath. Once your mind is calm and focused, start to pray. There are many reasons and ways to pray. There are prayers of thankfulness, prayers for help, etc. This should be a conversation. So - the key part of this is – once you've done talking, stop, be still, focus again on your breath. Pay attention to your feelings. Be still for at least as long as you were praying. I think for most of us, when we pray, we do all the talking but we don't take the time to listen.

2. Practice Mindfulness Meditation – In the fifth century St. Benedict founded Benedictine monasticism which was committed to finding God in the ordinary and daily aspects of life. Whatever you are doing, be it washing the dishes, driving, cooking, taking a shower, brushing your teeth – focus your attention entirely on what you are doing. If you are washing the dishes, watch your hands, feel the temperature of the water, hear the sound of the water. Another great opportunity to practice mindfulness is while eating. For example – eating an apple. Look at the shape and color. How does it feel when you take a bite. Concentrate on the taste and smell. Take your time and focus on each bite.

3. Another example of mindfulness meditation is to do a walking meditation – this is a great way to get exercise and quiet the mind. During your walk focus completely on what you experience. Feel the temperature, notice any living things, notice the colors and smells. If your mind starts to wander, bring it back to noticing what you are seeing and feeling in that moment.

4. Another type of meditation is to build stillpoints into your day. Take a pause during the day – whether at work or at home. Get up from your desk and walk to a window and look out. Or sit still and close your eyes and breathe in and out deeply for a minute or two. Just be still and focus on your breath.

5. Reduce the noise in your life - Bring quiet into your day by turning off the radio in the car, or turning off the TV.

All of these techniques can be used to create more stillness in your life. If you practice these techniques enough, you'll start to notice what stillness feels like to you – and then, if you are in the middle of a stressful situation, you can find that place. The primary purpose of the stillness created by meditation is self-awareness and self-

realization. At a basic level, it's about getting to know yourself – your true feelings, your true desires, your darkness, and your light – separate from other influences. It's about finding the answers that will help you live your life authentically. One of the benefits I'd like to discuss in more depth is getting to know yourself. In stillness, in silence, you naturally start to face yourself. The initial reaction many of us feel about this is fear. I remember thinking – what if I start digging deeply into myself and I don't like what I see? What if there's nothing there? Also – since meditation, stillness and the resulting self-awareness is all internal – you may think that you are being selfish focusing all this effort on yourself. However – I would say that true self-reflection is the least selfish thing you can do. What purpose have we here in this life except to grow as human beings? The only person you can change is yourself. The way you feel about yourself colors your view of the world and impacts how you interact with everyone in your life. If you are carrying around a heavy load of pain or negative energy – then you can't interact in a positive way with the people around you. When you're on an airplane they tell you to put your oxygen mask on first before helping others. Self-awareness follows the same principal. Getting to know and appreciate yourself deeply allows you to better appreciate others. You can only go as deeply into relationships with others as you can go into yourself. If you take the time to dive deeply into yourself, you'll be amazed to see what it does for the relationships in your life. This whole process of stillness and contemplation takes courage. It takes courage because the first things we tend to face are what we might call our dark side. It's the parts of ourselves that we've walled away, shut up in the dark out of fear that others will stop loving us if they see it. What we don't realize is that these parts of us are there, others do see them, we are simply in denial. By facing and embracing these aspects of ourselves, we move closer to wholeness. It's like the 12 step program for alcoholics, awareness and acceptance are the first steps. And once you face and accept aspects of yourself that for some reason you have denied or judged to be bad – you start to realize that any aspect of yourself has good and bad sides to it. One example for me is that I've come to face and accept the fact that I can be a controlling person. On the negative side, I can be bossy – telling people what to do or how to think. However – by acknowledging this aspect of myself, I am now aware of my behaviors and can consciously change them. I've also been able to acknowledge and embrace the positive side of being a controlling person. For example, I'm a great planner and organizer. So, now I can embrace all aspects of this part of me. It makes me more whole. Too many people live their entire lives without getting to know themselves, and hence without

knowing what they want. The end result is that they feel unhappy and unfulfilled. In the book *Quiet Mind*, by David Kundtz, there is a section about missing our lives. He says "One of the strongest and lasting images of my life is the vision of myself as an old man, waking up early one morning, and realizing – in the cold gray dawn – that I had "missed" my life. In my vision, I would know in that moment of truth that I had not been awake, had not been aware of the pleasures I truly wanted, and had been afraid to risk. It would be a moment of overwhelming sadness. Jack Kornfield makes a similar point: "As you walk and eat and travel, be where you are. Otherwise you will miss most of your life."

The meditation techniques I've talked about will help you to be more present, more aware, more fully in the now so that you can get to know and embrace your authentic self and make choices in your life that will result in a higher degree of happiness and fulfillment.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. What are your thoughts and feelings about silence?
2. Do you purposefully seek quiet time in your life?
3. Is there drama in your life that keeps you off balance?
4. Which of the types of meditation discussed in this sermon appeal to you and why?
  - 1) Traditional sitting meditation
  - 2) Walking meditation
  - 3) Mindfulness meditation
  - 4) Prayer
  - 5) Stillpoints during the day – pausing to reground yourself
5. If you aren't taking time to re-center are you letting events direct your life rather than you directing your life?
6. What do you think about the concept that the answers to your questions lie within you instead of coming from an external source?
7. If you were to die tomorrow, what would you most regret not having done?