

Abiding in the Stillands: Meditative Living in a Stress-Filled World

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In the closing lines of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan assures Peter, Edmund, and Lucy they will never have to return to the Shadowlands: "There was a real railway accident, said Aslan softly. Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadowlands—dead."¹ He then tells them that the endless "morning" or Heaven had finally dawned for them. For Lewis, the Shadowlands represent the shallowness, the illusory, and the impermanent nature of earth life. Only those who "divorce" themselves from their prideful attachment to it can obtain Heaven or true happiness:

If we insist on keeping Hell (or even Earth) we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell. But what, you ask, of earth? Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell: and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself."²

In contrast to the darkness of the Shadowlands is the light of the Stillands—a metaphoric place or state of mind that engenders all things peaceful, sanctifying, and eternal. Meditation provides access for abiding in the Stillands, and is excellent preparation for being more receptive to the "enticings" of the Holy Spirit. (Mosiah 3:19) Being meditative also helps us to let go of the cravings, obsessions, and attachments of the "carnal man," (Moses 5:13) and to align ourselves with "currents of divine influence."³

So why should we meditate? I believe meditation can have a direct influence on the way we see reality. If we accept the premise that our view of reality is determined by the quality of our thoughts and feelings and by the presence of divine influence, becoming more reflective and less reactive, more enlightened and compassionate, and less resentful and selfish is of profound importance. Think of how many times you may have acted or spoken or thought or done something without careful reflection, and later realized that your perception of the "reality" of the situation was off, or misinformed. Think how often this happens in human interactions. I believe our clouded fallen-nature perceptions are the greatest danger we face. President Joseph F. Smith concurs:

For my part I do not fear the influence of our enemies from without, as *I fear that of those from within*. An open and avowed enemy, whom we may see and meet in an open field, is far less to be feared *than a lurking, deceitful, treacherous enemy hidden within us*, such as are many of the weaknesses of our fallen human nature, *which are too often allowed to go unchecked, beclouding our minds*, leading away our affections from God and his truth....⁴

Given the fact that we as human beings "...see through a glass darkly," (1 Cor 13:12) that we are known for "unsteadiness," "foolish[ish]," being easily "lifted up in pride," quick to "boast" and to stray from "wisdom's paths," (Helaman 12:1-7) any practice that gives us greater access to the stabilizing power of Christ is joyfully welcomed. Meditation is one such practice. It opens us up to receiving the comfort and safety and wisdom that God's presence provides. Consider these verses:

I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. (John 14:18) Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20) Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you; seek me diligently and ye shall find me.... (D&C 88:63) Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matt. 11:28)

Meditation therefore, isn't some mystical practice used to produce zombie-like devotees who extinguish all their thoughts while in a trance-like state. Meditation is akin to pondering with a listening and teachable frame of mind. Often referred to as mindfulness, meditation is the practice of making space for enlightenment or inspiration by managing our thoughts and emotions more skillfully. The idea isn't to ignore or eliminate them, but rather to notice them without clinging or attaching to them--almost like watching them on a movie screen, or across the way as if in an adjacent room.

One powerful way to be an observer of our thoughts and feelings, rather than becoming bound by them, is to regularly take time to be still. (D&C 101:16) When our thoughts and emotions begin to captivate us, we can pause and take some long, slow, and deep breaths. This can be done just about anywhere, but especially in quiet settings. Taking time out to breathe deeply helps train us to respond to life's exigencies more reflectively and meditatively, instead of habitually and reactively. One mindfulness teacher describes meditation practice this way:

...Take it easy alertly, repose in wide-awakeness; rest in openness. Because we're so used to speeding along on the expressway of doing, we can start with a bit of breathing practice as a sort of deceleration lane, an off-ramp to non-doing. Take a slow, full breath, hold it for a few moments, then let out a deep sigh, as if breathing out through all your pores, letting go of everything, all burdens and decisions, stress and distress: We can develop a new habit of attentive tranquility....⁵

With the purpose of encouraging more “attentive tranquility”⁶ and an intentional reduction of distracted commotion, I will now offer five reasons why meditation is beneficial. These reasons are not all-inclusive, but are instead an outline of some of the benefits of learning to live more meditatively or mindfully.

1. Meditation Invites Spirituality and Enlightenment.

President David O. McKay has taught us, “I think we pay too little attention to the value of meditation, a principle of devotion. *Meditation is one of the most secret, most sacred doors through which we pass into the presence of the Lord.*”⁷ In response to President McKay’s counsel, President Harold B. Lee similarly urges us, “Let that be something to remember—you do likewise. *Take time to meditate.* Many times you will be wrestling with problems, the solution of which can be spiritually discerned. Don’t get so busy that you don’t have time to meditate. *Take the time.*”⁸

2. Meditation is a Pathway to Greater Self-mastery.

Much of our suffering is caused by carrying around the heavy load of our own egocentrism. Elder Neal A. Maxwell has observed, “Such is the scope of putting off the *burdensome* natural man who is naturally selfish. (See Mosiah 3:19) *So much of our fatigue, brothers and sisters, in fact, comes from carrying that needless load.*”⁹

Meditation is essentially a practice of putting off the weight of fallen man. It facilitates repentance because it is an exercise that runs counter to our entrenched habits. We’re chronically “...indentured to fabricating projections, scenarios, opinions, and story lines that we use to hold our creation together. Meditation is about seeing through the contrived sense of ‘me’ as the enlightened aspects [of] the mind [and the Spirit] reveal themselves.”¹⁰ In other words, Meditation helps us to clear some space for seeing more clearly because it encourages us to let go of habitual reactive patterns that sustain our fallen nature. This growing space expands our agency. In this *space of agency*, we gain access to the power of the atonement to leaven all our thoughts, words, and deeds.

Finally, many programs are offered for training the body through exercise, diet, and recreation, but what about training our minds? “With an untrained mind, we’ll live most days of our lives at the mercy of our moods.”¹¹

3. Meditation Helps Increase our Compassion for Others.

Recent brain research on meditation has established that regular meditation strengthens the pre-frontal regions of the brain,¹² thus improving psychological functions associated with these regions, including *attention*,¹³ *compassion*,¹⁴ and *empathy*.¹⁵

It's true that in spite of all our efforts to be compassionate, including meditation, we sometimes fall short. This is why developing loving-kindness compassion, or charity, is a long-term project. It takes repeated effort:

...we just have to keep choosing kindness. There's always a range of actions of which we're capable. Above a certain threshold we can't be that saintly (yet), and below another threshold we can't be that vicious (anymore). The trick is to keep leaning, gently but steadily, toward the uppermost level of your range. That way you're always doing the best that can be done by the person you are today and pushing your upper threshold a little higher for tomorrow.¹⁶

Living meditatively thus helps us cultivate a mental garden full of love, compassion, and wisdom, thus giving the “weeds of anger, jealousy, and self-[indulgence]...less and less room to grow. In peaceful abiding we become familiar with the ground of basic goodness. This is how we turn the mind into an ally.”¹⁷

4. Meditation Improves our Physical and Emotional Health.

Meditation has been found to decrease unhealthy levels of the stress-related hormone cortisol and to strengthen the immune system.¹⁸ Research has also shown that meditation helps a variety of medical conditions, including high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, asthma, type II diabetes, PMS, post-operative recovery for open-heart surgery patients, and chronic pain.¹⁹

Further physical health benefits include positive and permanent brain structure changes such as increased gray matter in the insula, the hippocampus, and the prefrontal cortex, along with the reduction of cortical thinning due to aging.²⁰

Research also verifies that mindfulness training provides relief for numerous psychological conditions, including insomnia, depression, anxiety, phobias, and eating disorders.²¹

5. Meditation Improves Cognitive Functioning.

Meditation has been known to help middle-school students develop better work habits, and cooperation among others, leading to higher grades.²² In another study, college students who were given meditation instruction experienced significant improvement in their perceptual and short-term memory performance over a two-week training period.²³ Other studies have confirmed that university students who meditate regularly experienced significantly greater IQ gains over a two-year period as compared to control subjects with no meditation instruction.²⁴

Having established the efficacy of meditation/mindfulness practice, I will now offer some tips for effective meditation:

1. Take some time out every day—close to the same time—to sit in silence in a quiet place and just breathe gently for 5-30 minutes. Sit with good posture (but not too stiff) in a comfortable chair, with hands and arms and legs unfolded, feet on the floor (the lotus position is traditional and stereotypical, but not essential, or in my case with legs that don't bend that way anymore, undesirable).

Coming early to sacrament meeting or to temple sessions and sitting reverently is a meditative practice. For example, the time before sacrament meeting begins is reserved for “prayerful meditation.”²⁵ Keep your eyes open or closed, depending on the context and what is most relaxing for you.

2. As I said earlier, don't try to get rid of your thoughts, but rather, just watch your thoughts like a movie. Let them come and go without clinging judgment or attachment. Our thoughts are like horses, sometimes rodeo horses, or race horses, or, as big as draft horses. Don't saddle up the horses and ride them off. Don't feed them or try to rope them, just let them come and go. You can even label them as good, bad, or neutral, but just don't cling to them.
3. Focus on your breath—long, slow, deep, gentle. This is the first exercise of what I call the “Bridle Meditations”—equanimity. To cultivate equanimity, is to avoid getting lost in your thoughts. When you start to drift from the present moment, come back to your breath. Stay there for as long as you want to. You are not trying to eliminate your “thoughting,” but rather, how much you think about your thoughts. Once you get fairly relaxed you can lightly focus—not losing track of your breath—on the next two “Bridle Meditations,” remembrance and compassion. A remembrance meditation is to start to direct your attention to all blessings, tender mercies, kindnesses of others, and simple joys in your life. It is like an extended prayer of gratitude to Heavenly Father. Start out with, “Heavenly Father I am grateful for”...then just let the thoughts of gratitude flow naturally. They will often be given to you through the Spirit. Inventory your lifetime of blessings anyway you want to divide them up—this hour, this week, this month, a certain time period, a location, etc. You decide the context for this remembrance. Be sure to direct your gratitude first to the Lord, and then to the people involved—but don't lose focus on your breath.

Once you have settled your thoughts (equanimity), and have remembered (remembrance), you are ready for the final “Bridle Meditation” of compassion. This is a meditation wherein you ponder or meditate on the welfare of others. This is like an extended prayer on behalf of others without losing track of your breath. Start first with the beloved people in your life. Then think of the “neutrals.” These are people you may not know, but who desire happiness just like you do. Or, they might be nameless people who have served or helped you in some way—people in society that make things better for all of us. Finally, turn your meditative attention to what I call the “angsters,” or people who invite angst from us. Send love and best wishes to them and ask Heavenly Father to bless them. The miracle is that if we do this, the Lord will give us the desire and the words to offer in our minds during the meditation.

These “Bridle Meditations” help us to “Bridle all our Passions,” (Alma 38:12) and are strategies for making space for the Lord's spirit to strengthen and enliven us. They help us to better center our thoughts in peaceful abiding. One could take all the allotted meditation time to just breathe and watch his or her thoughts, or divide up the time between generic breathing, remembering blessings, and pondering the welfare of others. I like to do a few minutes of each Bridle Meditation in my meditation sessions.

Meditation takes time and effort and extended practice. Like preparing to run a marathon, with enough training we improve our meditative conditioning. It only works if we do it however! Don't get discouraged or think you aren't doing it right. Even if our success is fleeting—like roping the wind, we are still being meditative just trying to be more mindful. Meditation is just like scripture study, prayer, repentance, service, temple attendance, exercise, a healthy diet, and getting enough rest, all of these practices contribute to our well-being only if we do them regularly and consistently.

Conclusion

Determined attachment to earth-life, or the Shadowlands, keeps us from experiencing the easier yoke and lighter burden of Christ. (Matt 11:29) Doing all things *without* wisdom and order, running *faster* than we have strength for, and always being in a state of *distracted commotion*, keeps us from sensing the Lord's “gentle solicitation and sweet enticement,”²⁶ thus making our lives more stressful, burdensome, and even less healthy. Meditation is a doorway out of this predicament and an opportunity to abide in the rest and relief of the Stillands. It enables us to create more space between life happening and our responses to life happening. Within this space we're able to respond to life's exigencies more skillfully.

Notes

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