

Malcolm Clemens Young
14

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2B19

12 Pentecost (Proper 15B) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 15 August 2021

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-

Psalms 111

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6:51-58

How to Meditate

"Do not get drunk with wine... but be filled with the spirit" (Ephesians 5).

1. This morning I am going to teach you how to meditate, or at least how I meditate. But first I want to point out something that you may have already noticed.

On the corner of Arguello and Jackson you will find a stop sign with magical properties. Under certain circumstances it becomes invisible. Even though I am well aware of this phenomenon, I have run straight through the intersection without stopping twice. I've seen many other people do the same thing. It's not hidden, or smaller, or less red or octagonal than other stop signs, but something about that intersection makes it hard to notice.

We never come close to really seeing what is in our field of vision. You realize this riding a bicycle around San Francisco. You can be in the very middle of an intersection and discover that a driver doesn't even see you. My brother bought me a red helmet and a red jacket. I couldn't believe what a big boost this gave to my visibility.

I believe that our experience of God is a little like this. For the most faithful believers and the most ardent atheists, God is in our field of vision or rather in the range of what we experience and yet most often we don't notice. We are absorbed by inner dramas, daydreams about what we are going to do next, or thoughts about other people, regrets about the past, fear about the future, politics, etc. So we just don't see God.

The purpose of this striking Cathedral, with these majestic columns and the light filtering through these arresting stained glass windows and the extraordinary music, is getting us to notice God who is with us not just at this moment but at all times.

I do not know why God chooses to appear in this way to us. I do not know why this seems pretty much like the nature of reality for human beings. I can't really imagine what any other existence would be like. Many people I know have had the experience of God's brightness being so obvious that they couldn't help but notice. And many of the same people have had times when they were desperate to recognize God but couldn't find anything Holy.

Meditation helps me to really experience God's companionship throughout each day. It helps me to be less at the mercy of my fantasies and worries, and more present in what is really happening.

2. Twenty-five hundred years ago the Buddha began teaching meditation in India. People like me wondered what he was doing and would come to him and ask, "are you a god?" He said no. "Are you an angel?" No. "Are you a great prophet?" No. "What are you then?" And he answered, "I am awake." The word buddha comes from the Sanskrit word to wake up.¹

So much of the time we go through life never really being awake. On Thursday night I was filming my little weekday message and accidentally captured a few seconds of me talking to myself. Let's just say I was not being very complimentary or kind.

Mostly our minds act like the color commentator on a football television broadcast who tells us how fast each linebacker can run a forty yard dash, or that a receiver grew up in a foster home, or that a kicker has lost his edge and should retire. Our minds are constantly evaluating everything, full of criticisms of others and ourselves. We go through life at the mercy of this ego.

So many people around us believe that happiness comes from money, fame, popularity, intelligence, from having a perfect body or a perfect soul. We take this in, thinking that if we just accomplish the next goal then we will really be happy. But this is like chasing the horizon. As soon as you arrive at the place where the horizon was, it has moved an equivalent distance away.

What really makes us happy is being thoughtful toward others, patient, cheerful, helpful, kind, especially toward the people we see most often. Paul calls this being "in Christ" or "having the mind of Christ." And to do this we require a certain freedom from envy and selfishness, from the compulsions, irritation, and pettiness of our ego. The Buddha says, "all we are is the result of what we have thought."² Meditation as a form of prayer reshapes the way I think.

3. I feel blessed that my parents understood that children need to have a spiritual life. As a teenager they introduced me to a Hindu teacher named Eknath Easwaran. Easwaran came to the United States on a Fulbright Scholarship and lectured on English at U.C. Berkeley until he began teaching meditation fulltime. His friends sometimes called him EE. He was humble, kind, down to earth and helped me immensely to become a better Christian.

His first lesson was a simple one: we are not our bodies. He used to say, "You wouldn't confuse me for my tan wool jacket would you? My body is not me either!" We need to take care of our bodies, eating healthy food, getting enough exercise and sleep, but that isn't us. We do it because our bodies are useful for accomplishing our spiritual purposes.

EE's second lesson felt a little more startling. We are not our thoughts. When you are in traffic on Fell Street and the driver of the car ahead of you is clearly reading a long email as he drives, you may feel anger rising up in you. But that anger is not you. It is a passing feeling. You don't have to let it control you. The same is true of fear, resentment, envy. These emotions do not have to own you.

So if we are not our body and not our mind, what are we? EE taught that in profound meditation we become concentrated on our true identity as children of God. The boundaries that separate us from others and from God disappear and we experience a deeper way of knowing which is a connection to all things.

Albert Einstein wrote about this experience, "A human being is a part of the whole, called by us "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical illusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."³

4. Practically speaking I meditate for half an hour first thing in the morning. I sit comfortably in a straight back chair with my eyes closed and very slowly repeat a passage from the Bible or a great spiritual teacher like St. Augustine. You might start with the Prayer of St. Francis. "Lord make me an instrument of your peace, where there is hatred let me sow love..." Or with Psalm 23 "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want."⁴ I say each word slowly so it drops deep into my consciousness.

It is far easier to describe than it is to practice. Our bodies and minds both have their own ways of rebelling. You may find your leg falls asleep or your arm twitches. More common though are thoughts about the day's appointments, or the newspaper, or a million other distractions that cause the mind to wander. Each time I get distracted I gently bring myself back to the passage. If I go too far in following the train of my thoughts I start at the beginning of the passage again.

Sometimes one experiences a tremendous wave of joy. At other times it's hard to even stay awake. One might hear sounds or see lights. All this happens as we descend to another level of consciousness. It's important not to be distracted by these things and to return to the words of the passage. I don't know how to describe this sense of God's presence but later in the day I can come back to that feeling of really being with God.

St. Frances de Sales writes, "Even if you did nothing during the whole of your hour but bring your mind back and place it again in our Lord's presence, though it went away every time you brought it back, your hour would be very well employed."⁵

Finally, you may be asking yourself is this kind of meditation Christian? For me it is a very practical way of realizing the promises that we hear in Scripture. For instance, in the biblical readings appointed for today Solomon asks God not for wealth or power but the wisdom of the heart and Mind (Leb) to understand the difference between good and evil.⁶ Paul encourages the Ephesians to sing psalms and hymns and make melody to the Lord in our hearts as a way of thanking God in Jesus.⁷ In the Gospel of John Jesus talks about the way that he lives because of the father. He promises that we can abide in him.

For me all of this happens through meditation. Every day praying like this helps me to draw more deeply into the divine wisdom, it gives me a way to thank God for my existence and to live more completely in Christ. Above all it helps me to really see what is already in the field of my vision, the abiding joy that God delights in through creation.

¹ Eknath Easwaran, *Passage Meditation: Bringing the Deep Wisdom of the Heart into Daily Life* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2010) 17.

² Ibid., 21.

³ Ibid., 34.

⁴ Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer* (NY: Seabury Press, 1979) 833 and 612.

⁵ Eknath Easwaran, *Passage Meditation: Bringing the Deep Wisdom of the Heart into Daily Life* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2010) 46.

⁶ **βῆε** 1 Kings 3:9.

⁷ $\lambda\alpha\lambda\omicron\upsilon\nu\tau\epsilon\beta\ \epsilon^{\circ}\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\iota\nu\beta\ [e^{\circ}n]\ \gamma\alpha\lambda\mu\omicron\iota\nu\beta\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \upsilon\check{\sigma}\mu\nu\omicron\iota\beta\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \omega^{\circ}\acute{\omicron}\delta\alpha\iota\nu\beta\ \rho\nu\epsilon\mu\alpha\tau\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\nu\beta,$ $a^{\circ}\ \ddot{\zeta}\delta\omicron\tau\epsilon\beta\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \gamma\alpha\zeta\lambda\lambda\omicron\tau\epsilon\beta\ \theta\emptyset\nu\ \kappa\alpha\rho\delta\iota\div a^{\circ}\ \upsilon\jmath\mu\omega\delta\eta\nu\ \tau\omega^{\circ}\ \kappa\upsilon\rho\iota\div\omega^{\circ},$
 $e\upsilon\jmath\kappa\alpha\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\upsilon\nu\tau\epsilon\beta\ \rho\alpha\zeta\eta\tau\omicron\tau\epsilon\ \upsilon\jmath\rho\epsilon\kappa\kappa\ \rho\alpha\zeta\eta\tau\omega\nu\ \epsilon^{\circ}n\ \omicron\jmath\eta\nu\ / \mu\alpha\tau\iota\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\nu\ \kappa\upsilon\rho\iota\div\omicron\upsilon$
 $\eta\jmath\mu\omega\delta\eta\nu\ \Delta\iota\eta\sigma\omicron\upsilon\nu\ \kappa\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\upsilon\nu\ \tau\omega^{\circ}\ \kappa\epsilon\omega^{\circ}\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \rho\alpha\tau\epsilon\rho\div.$ Ephesians 5:19-20.