

Aberdeen Unitarian Church

THE CHALICE SCHOOL OF CONTEMPLATIVE MEDITATION



SESSION No. 1

INTRODUCTION

An Introduction to Meditation

A warm welcome to the **Chalice School of Meditation**.

I would like to begin this session with a well-known Hindu story.

"The story is told of two brothers who set out on a spiritual journey together. They had a common desire - to achieve Spiritual Enlightenment. On their journey they came to a river where the older brother said 'I have travelled enough, I will sit here in meditation until I achieve my Divine Goal.' The younger brother meanwhile had heard of some wandering Gurus who were reputed to have miraculous powers so he decided to go in search, and to learn of them. After many years the younger brother who had gone in search of the Gurus decided to return to see his brother. His older brother now lived by that same river. He had made his home there, and seemed very happy. They greeted each other and enquired if they had achieved what they were searching for. The younger brother told of his exploits and said he would show him what he could do. He went to the edge of the riverbank, stepped on top of the water, and walked across the river and back again. On his return he asked "And have you achieved what you were searching for?" 'Yes I have', answered the older brother, 'I have achieved that inner peace and enlightenment to which I have been searching, and when I want to cross the river I just take a boat'."

This story has been told in different ways, the idea however, is basically the same. The older brother achieved his spiritual goal by sitting in meditation while the younger brother spent many years learning how to walk on water. The one looked within - searching for peace and enlightenment, the other looked outside - searching for wonders.

When walking, just walk,
When sitting, just sit,
Above all, don't wobble.
(Zen Saying)

Can I ask you to think about this as we go through this first session together? I hope we will see this as a joint learning process.

In many ways this is like talking to the converted. We have all, in the course of our lives, I am sure, have either experienced some form of meditation, read something about it, or had the desire to learn about it - but never got round to it. In short I am sure we have got some idea of what meditation is all about - or we think we know what it is all about through what we may have read. With all the different classes that one can join these days, many people have also had some kind of background experience. However, there has also developed over the years what is believed to be a growing misrepresentation and misunderstanding about the whole subject. (As with many subjects of an esoteric or mystical nature.) It was because of this that it was felt that what was needed was some form of a basic structure - more of a systematic approach towards the whole subject - hence the reason for the formation of a *school of meditation*.

As you will be aware there are numerous meditation classes that one can join these days, but it is often very difficult to know which one is the best - if any - for people to join. If you add to this the various forms of meditation as practised within the differing religious traditions such as Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Zen and so on, you have yet an added difficulty. And of course bookshelves are full meditation techniques that it is no wonder that many people are even more confused about the whole subject that ever before. And also if you further add to this the actual difference between Eastern and Western meditation, and in some cases the philosophy behind it (which is sometimes overlooked), then it is not surprising that you see this growing misunderstanding and confusion arising.

It is firmly believed that many people out there are genuine, they are searching for something, practising different kinds of meditation, looking into this subject, trying this technique, and that technique, but more than often they don't know where to turn and end up quite confused about the whole subject. They then either give up, or they become, as we have often heard, 'a jack of all trades, and master of none'. Now in no way are we suggesting that this is what actually happens to all people. However, many genuine seekers are put off with what I can only describe as a kind of spiritual indigestion, trying to take in too much - which can leave us with an unpleasant taste in our mouths or even heartburn from being disappointed and disheartened - Or in some cases, 'heartache'.

THE PURPOSE OF THE SCHOOL

The school is not a substitute for any religion or spiritual path, or anything that one believes or has already gained from meditation. Nor does it seek to take away what we value, but it does seek to outline some basic principles. It is therefore important to note that no one can make us meditate. And at the end of the day only you can do this for yourself The purpose of the school therefore may be outlined as:

1. To provide a basis - and a general outline in meditation and contemplation for those who wish to go deeper into the subject - **as a search for Truth**. This being the goal of all meditation.
2. To try and remove some of the confusion which is often associated when involved in different practices, and
3. To give an outline of the Philosophy, which often lies within and behind the spiritual life - the life of meditation and contemplation proper.

Some of the areas that we hope to cover are:

What is meditation? Together with what it is not.
Meditation and positive thinking

Getting ride of stress through meditation Healing and Meditation
The Mantra method
The difference between Eastern and Western meditation
Meditation in some of the World Religions
Prayer, Meditation and Contemplation Spiritual Exercises
Meditation and the Perennial Philosophy

Some areas will of course overlap. It is difficult to talk solely about one area and not include other aspects at the same time. However, it is wise to keep to a more systematic approach because if we jump about too much it will result in further misunderstanding - which we really want to avoid. This would defeat our purpose.

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

So what is meditation? Can I say at the outset that meditation should essentially be a simple process. It is, in reality, a part of our real selves - when we are at rest or at peace.

But let me begin with what meditation is not. It may seem to be a contradiction to say what meditation is not - stating the negative side - when meditation should essentially be a positive experience. The reason for this, as was pointed out, is because there has been so much confusion and misunderstanding with regards the whole subject matter - over many years. At one time meditation was viewed upon as something weird and unnatural - and perhaps only for the few who wanted to live an isolated life. Meditation however is linked, and is an essential fact of, the religious and spiritual life. But the way that the words "spiritual" and "meditation" are used these days, the whole idea of the spiritual life is in many ways suspect and ridiculed. In her book *The Spiritual Life*, Evelyn Underhill wrote: ' "The Spiritual Life" is a dangerously ambiguous term; indeed, it would be interesting to know what meaning any one reader at the present moment is giving to these three words. Many, I am afraid, would really be found to mean the life of my own inside"; and a further section to mean something very holy, difficult and peculiar - a sort of honours course in personal religion - to which they did not intend to aspire. Both these kinds of individualist - the people who think of the spiritual life as something which is for themselves and about themselves, and the people who regard it as something which is not for themselves - seem to need a larger horizon....' This is so true. The same thing then could be said about the whole subject of meditation and contemplation in relation to the religious and spiritual life. It is therefore this wider horizon to which we are concerned with here. But we first have to try and clear away some of the dross.

What meditation is not.

First - meditation is not walking around with our heads in the clouds. It is not some kind of mental game where we take a trip, down memory lane - it's not daydreaming. Some people believe that it is all right to just sit in a chair and drift off into a kind of fantasy world.

Second - meditation is not the pursuit of psychic or occult powers. Its not, nor should it encourage, the pursuit of mediumistic tendencies. We have known some people to claim that they had a psychic vision, or have experienced strange feelings or received a message from a loved one. Meditation is not that. (Meditation is not leaving ourselves open in this way.)

Third - meditation is not a guided fantasy trip along a country lane, however beautiful it

may be. - Although visualisation can aid in some forms of meditation, this is not meditation in itself. Meditation should never be a passive thing - that is passive in the sense of being open to anything that might come along. I would strongly emphasise this. This is not meditation and can very easily distract from its real purpose

Fourth - meditation is not even the staring into a lit candle, as we sometimes see. This kind of thing may produce a kind of suggestibility state - although it is claimed to be a form of concentration exercise. All we are saying is to be aware of this. Meditation, in some places has been described as a form of hypnosis, but in actual fact true meditation is the exact opposite to this. I will explain this when we go on to describe the positive aspects. So it is not hypnosis - in the popular sense of the word.

Fifth - it is not the taking of drugs to create an altered state of consciousness. I bring this up because some people have experimented with drugs and so-called meditation. This is not meditation but rather a form of escapism. Meditation deals with 'Reality' with a capital 'R', not the fantasy which surrounds a mental running away, thinking that one has reached some altered exalted state of being.

Sixth - meditation is not making our minds a blank. We often hear this about meditation. The mind is constantly active, and it is essential to direct the mind to achieve more of a unity of thought. It does not become blank, nor do we encourage it to become blank. Again this will become clear as we proceed.

So what is meditation?

It is important that at the very outset we define our terms, and what better place to begin is to go to a good dictionary. The Chambers English Dictionary informs us that the word meditate means: "To consider thoughtfully; to consider deeply, reflect upon: to revolve in the mind." and the word meditation therefore is: "deep thought: serious continuous contemplation, especially on a religious or spiritual theme." The Webster's Dictionary describes it as: "reflection on a religious subject as a spiritual exercise." These definitions do not completely satisfy us, but they at least give us a starting point. At a certain depth of meditation and contemplation,- word fail us - nevertheless we should have some kind of understanding in order to make a judgement for ourselves.

Following on from the dictionary definition, meditation is a mental process. The mind is used, and it does involve the use of certain rational faculties.. However, a distinction must be made between meditation and contemplation. Meditation should lead to contemplation, just as prayer should merge in and lead to, meditation. However, they are not the same, although the terms are often used to mean the same thing. And here in lies the basic problem, and often the confusion, we believe, between Eastern and Western forms of meditation.

In meditation we seek to extract the essential element of the subject matter. Some people may want to jump in and say that it is more that that - yes it is when it crosses over into contemplation. But having said that there are definitely different degrees in meditation, which must be recognised. In the meantime, it is clear that the mind is used in a constructive way as to extract the main ideas - to reflect on the deeper spiritual significance of the subject. It is an exercise of the mind - but the mind elevated to consider spiritual ideals. It is, as the dictionary says 'thinking deeply'. It is also the mind at rest in the consideration and pursuit of those ideals - it is certainly not an agitated mind running around all over the place. And this takes time and effort to achieve. But when it is achieved it becomes a natural process.

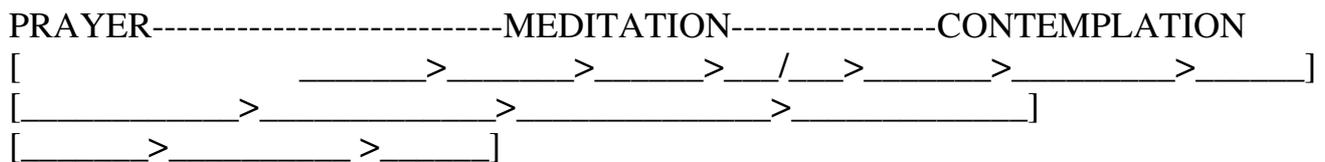
Perhaps we should add here that, on the one hand, in some quarters, the use of the mind is often associated with pseudo intellectualism, and is often dismissed. On the other hand, we are told that we must make the mind a blank, when clearly, it is the function of the mind to think. The mind is perpetually active in one way or another, and what we really should be aiming at is the *quieting down* of the mind by a *unity* of thought. And when this is done in the in the consideration of a great idea or ideal, then this is I would suggest is meditation. (There are other types of meditation, which we will also consider - such as the use of the mantra - to achieve this. But the mind is still used.)

The goal of meditation.

Meditation should be a search for truth, therefore the supreme goal and object of meditation is the love and the pursuit of Truth. And in that search we use all the functions of the mind. Meditation therefore is the training of all the mental faculties so that it can extract the essential ideas and principles of a given subject. Someone once said that it is the mind that determines whether or not we are spiritual beings or not. That is, of course, not to forget about the heart side - for the heart does indeed play a vital part in our meditations. Having said that, the heart does need to be directed, and it is the function of the mind to do this.

Meditation should not be an arduous process. It is essentially simple - yet many people actually make it more difficult for themselves than need be. And because the mind is used, we think it to be a grind. It is in fact a calm reflection, so that the mind can quietly consider great ideals, and the truth of those ideals. It certainly should not be a mental strain.

I don't intend to go over all the different kinds of meditation, prayer, and contemplation at this stage because it could well add to the overall confusion. However to explain briefly about the different stages involved a simple illustration may help to clarify what we mean.



Prayer is like the groundwork, the spadework, cultivating the soil. Meditation is the planting the right kind of seed. And contemplation is seeing the fruits of ones labour.

In this it is often difficult to see where one begins and the other ends, for very often there is a merging and overlapping of the three. For example, one of the stages of prayer is the Prayer of the Heart, which verges, to meditation and contemplation. Also, when we have what is termed Contemplative Meditation, Reflective Meditation or Mental Prayer, there is a further overlapping. As we can see there is no real dividing line between them. One can start off with a vocal prayer and immediately move to a level of contemplation. Or begin with a meditation and enter a state of contemplation almost immediately. Very often it depends, not only on the initial groundwork, the preparation, so to speak, but also on the attitude of the devotee. One also just may be naturally inclined towards contemplation.

FIRST EXERCISE

PEACE BE STILL

Now in this first exercise we sit in an upright position, keeping the spine as straight as we can without straining ourselves. We try to make the position as natural as possible and to avoid slouching. The hands lie naturally on the lap - try to feel comfortable - avoid any strain.

We will keep reminding you of this, but do try to keep it simple. Don't complicate it. There are plenty of books that will do that for you. And I would go as far as to say, don't even try to meditate - let it happen. Meditation is a natural state. It is, as I have said a part of our essential selves - but we tend to cover it up by all the other things that place a demand upon our time, so we never get a chance to 'think', really 'think'.

This first exercise is to help us unwind - to free the mental process so that it can calmly reflect on the subject of meditation.

Peace be still

- 1. Sitting as relaxed as possible - not even trying to meditate.**
- 2. Now focus your attention on your breathing - don't try to alter it, just be aware of it.**
- 3. Now as you breathe in mentally say 'peace' - breathe in, mentally say 'peace'**
- 4. Now when you breathe out mentally say 'be still' - breathe in, say 'peace', breathe out, say 'be still'. 'Peace - be still'**
- 5. As you say this to yourselves, try to think what it means - also try to feel yourself at peace. Again, keep it simple.**

As your breathing gets deeper and the breath going in becomes longer we can say, peace, peace, peace, and exhaling, be still, be still, be still.

People who say that they cannot meditate, or they have tried to meditate but cannot seem to unwind, will find that this very simple method will automatically help them to relax. Just breathing deeply helps us to relax and control our thoughts - but we help it by using the words 'peace - be still' as a kind of mantra.

Now if, and it will our minds wander, just gently bring it back to the words again 'peace - be still', together with our breathing, and we will find that gradually we will be in control. But above all, don't worry if your mind wanders - because worrying about it just makes it worse. Don't be over concerned about it, but when you realise that your mind is taking a trip down memory lane, or doing the weekly shopping, just gently bring it back again to 'peace - be still'. Above all don't worry about it.

Now there may well come a point when we get into a state where the words 'peace- be still' tend to drop away, and just the feeling of peace and stillness enters in, and we are almost bathed in a very deep peace. So think what the words mean, feel what they mean, become what they mean - inside you.

MEDITATION

PEACE - BE STILL

HOW LONG?

How long should one do this? Despite popular ideas on meditation, it is not good to overdo it, or meditate for hours at a time. Initially ten or fifteen minutes are enough, and this can be extended to twenty minutes in the morning and twenty at night before retiring.

But let me explain the duration by an illustration:

Peak [_____][_____]

You could meditate for an hour and give yourself a headache, but the peak or height of meditation may have been reached after the first ten or fifteen minutes, so we would be overdoing it if we carried on for an hour or so. The point here is, it is not how long your meditation should be - but rather the consistency and shorter periods. Having a daily routine, making a promise to yourself - to be consistent and regular in your practice. This is most important.

It is about developing an inner mental and spiritual balance - a spiritual life, however one may conceive it to be - a spiritual life according to one's own inner convictions and aspirations. And it's about developing a life-style - that can cope with the demands that society, in all its shades place upon it. And all this is not by trying to meditate for long periods at a time, but by being persistent and consistent. You know if one could look at someone's thoughts, someone who says they can meditate for hours at a time you will be astonished by the variety of their thoughts (perhaps even astounded.) The monkey mind has not been called the monkey mind for no reason. And, I make no apology for saying this, but there are very few people who can meditate for really long hours at a time - but this is where **contemplation** may enter in. And this is what I hope to explain in another session. There are degrees of prayer, degrees of meditation and degrees of contemplation. But first we must look at our thoughts, and this is the subject of the next session. Using meditation for positive thinking.