

Aberdeen Unitarian Church

THE CHALICE SCHOOL OF CONTEMPLATIVE MEDITATION



SESSION No. 7

PART ONE - SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Introduction

In this session we will be concentrating on two important aspects of the meditation life that is often overlooked. - First, an outline of some basic spiritual exercises, which can give our meditations some kind of form and structure. Indeed without those fundamental exercises our meditation sessions would lack any real substance. And second, the type of philosophy or thinking which is said to be found behind most of the deeper aspects of meditation - especially is this the case when we look at the centre, or the heart of the main religious traditions.

PART ONE - SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

First, we will take a look at some basic Spiritual Exercises.

In most forms of meditation practice some form of order and structure is needed. In this we need to give meaning to what we are doing, and in so doing a suitable vehicle is needed - in other words we need to put it all together in the form of a disciplined spiritual exercise which is adapted to our own particular needs. Without this we will never really get down to it, so to speak.

Having the Time. Having a regular period put aside is probably the most difficult thing to do - yet if we are serious about getting as much out of meditation as we can, then this is what we must do. Doing little bits here and there doesn't really help us build up a lasting benefit, and we can easily forget to do it.

Whether we are doing meditation on our own or in a group there is a basic sequence to follow. It has four parts - (a) the preparation, (b) going in, (c) staying in, and (d) coming out. That's it.

First - the Preparation

In this first stage we need to get ourselves into the right frame of mind. This can be achieved through the reading of suitable devotional or inspirational passages. It also goes without saying that a quiet environment is also needed - some place with the least possible distraction as possible - perhaps a room or a corner set-aside for this purpose. It is good to keep to the same place because of the association it may have. Once you are

adept in sitting down for fifteen or twenty minutes it then may be possible to meditate in other places without being distracted or disturbed. However, initially try keeping it at the same time and same place. Also the right posture is needed. Whether we are sitting in a chair, kneeling or taking up the "lotus" position sitting crossed legged on the floor, we need to keep the spine as straight as possible - but without straining. We need to be relaxed but not to the extent that we fall asleep. Try not to lie down, because we will definitely drift off. (I think however, for most people, the best position is to sit on a comfortable chair with our hands on our lap.). It is important not to have any muscular tension.

Second - going-in

To help in this, one may focus on ones breathing and repeating the phrase 'peace - be still' to help create the right inner calm. Doing this we bring the mind and the emotions under our control. (It must be said that this can also be used as a form of meditation in its own right - however this is more properly to be understood as the going-in stage, the quieting down stage.).

Third - staying-in

In this third stage we want to stay in - and in order to do this we can use a suitable mantra so that the mind stays focused. In this stage we want to enter the silence of meditation - we become absorbed so to speak in the subject of the meditation, which we previously set out for ourselves in the preparation stage. In this process the mantra will eventually drop away, and we just remain in that stillness and peace. At this stage however it is our intention to stay in as long as we can - but without straining ourselves. It is important to realize this because we don't want to create any unnatural conditions that may affect our health. If we feel any strain then gently but deliberately bring ourselves out - first by becoming aware of our breathing again, and also becoming aware of where we are. (And like the group sessions we open our eyes in our own time to take in our surroundings.). Avoid at all times the sudden coming out, and jumping up. We are likely to give ourselves a headache if we do.

So there are two parts to this stage, (1) the repetition of a mantra, and (2) entering the silence. When doing this, try to avoid a negative passive state - this often happens when we just allow anything that comes along to enter our minds. Some writers may affirm that we should be passive at this stage, but if this is not controlled it can leave us open to anything that comes along. Our minds are ours and we are the ones who should have the last say. It is quite possible to be at peace and maintain an inner silence without being passive in the negative sense.

The real key to this is to train the mind from a false separateness - to more of a unity of thought. There will always be distracting thoughts - but we always gently bring the mind back to the subject of meditation again without any worry or tension. There has to be a gentle training of the mental faculties, not a passive open invitation. To remain quietly at rest and inwardly at peace, but still being in control of our thoughts is the best way. It goes without saying that when a certain level of meditation and contemplation is reached we then pass beyond the actual duality of the thought process - but at that point we are under control of a higher *intuitive* faculty.

Forth - coming out

The coming out stage may be just the focussing on our breathing again, and the

awareness of where we are. (I should mention that the reason why I say this is because if any depth of meditation is achieved one can sometimes lose a sense of location and awareness of where they are. So it is always wise to go through this process.)

Once we have come out of our meditation session it may be helpful to repeat a few devotional sentences to ourselves again - to help us become aware of what the purpose of our meditation was. After the meditation is over try not to rush right back into our everyday duties, but rather sit relaxed until you are ready. We get back to our daily work at our own pace.

In practice

In practice the four stages may follow this idea- and this is where our spiritual exercises come into play. First, in the preparation stage one may use certain prayers, adorations, or invocations, which may follow a particular theme. It is quite possible to put your own meditation session together with a particular theme in this way - using the four stages. For example we may use some well-known passages of adoration and invocation:

1. *God be in my head* (from the 16th Century)

'God be in my head and in my understanding.
God be in mine eyes and in my looking.
God be in mine mouth and in my speaking.
God be in my heart and in my thinking (knowing).
God be at mine end and at my departing.'

2. *The St. Patrick's Breastplate*

'Christ be with me, Christ within me!
Christ behind me, Christ before me!
Christ beside me, Christ to win me!
Christ to comfort and restore me!
Christ beneath me, Christ above me!
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger!
Christ in heart of all that love me!
Christ in heart of friend and stranger!'

3. The well-known *prayer of St. Frances of Assisi* is particularly good for the preparation stage and sometimes for the actual meditation.

'Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.
O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying (to self) that we are born to eternal life.'

There is one that has been named Serene Light, which F.C. Happold uses. He calls it a mantric prayer. Apparently he used it during a meditation when he was at the Abby of Iona. He says it is an effective 'going-in' prayer.

4. *Serene Light*

'Serene Light, shining in the ground of my being,
Draw me to Yourself!
Draw me past the snares of the senses,
Out of the mazes of the mind,
Free me from symbols, from words,
That I may discover
The Signified,
The Word Unspoken,
In the darkness that veils the ground of my being.'

5. *Affirmations*

One could also use certain affirmations that are also used in contemplative meditation. For example: 'Be still and know that I Am God within you.' (And in place of God one could use the words Peace, Love, Power, Wisdom, Life, Joy, Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.)

The staying-in part of the silent meditation can be lead in through a set mantra at first, or a set meditation. Again this is only an example - the one that we have used in the meditation sessions is-**The bringing down of the light**. We focus our attention just above our heads, and as we breathe in we breathe the light down over our bodies. If we wish we can accompany this with the words:

'May the Light of Divine Wisdom and Truth descend upon me
To lead me from the unreal to the real
From darkness to Light From death to immortality
O Divine Light, may I be open to receive
That Illumination and a peace which passeth all understanding.'

(Composite)

6. A meditation on the Self and what it is not. Again this can be used for staying in and as one passes through into silent meditation. We say to ourselves - and also thinking what of what it means:

I am not the body
I am not the senses
I am not the mind
I am not this, and
I am not that,
What then am I?

The ideal with this meditation is that we are left in a deep silence where only the 'Self

with a capital 'S' remains. Again this is the staying-in stage where we remain absorbed in the Self.

The coming out stage takes place when our time limit is over. It is not wise in the initial stages to meditate for too long. We do this, as was said, by becoming aware of where we are, taking note of our surroundings, and not coming out too quickly. Before we get up to our everyday duties, we may conclude our meditation session by a short reading, again from some inspirational passage. All this is part of our spiritual exercise program and we fit it in to the four stages.

In short, spiritual exercises are more of a training of the mind - it is a self-imposed discipline that can help us achieve a more ordered life - a life where we are at peace with ourselves. If you think of it, the discipline of meditation in itself is a spiritual exercise. However, very often we need one exercise to help us with the other ones. For example: **the exercise of being silent**, not meditating, but just being silent - the control of the words we speak, our thoughts, our feelings. **The exercise of Prayer, or the genuflective exercise** - which is devout aspiration, inward questioning. **The exercise of persistence** - To continue despite set backs, to 'keep on keeping on' as they say. Being positive in all areas of our life, and being determined to carry on regardless - especially with our meditations.

These are but some exercises. There are many more, however you can see that a certain degree of order and discipline is needed with all of them. And this in itself can be seen as a spiritual exercise - why? - Because the goal is a spiritual one.

(Part Two - The Perennial Philosophy, next session)
