

How Meditation Makes You Better

The goal of reaching our highest potential calls out to each of us. Over centuries, the genius of the human spirit has searched for what this requires of us. The narrow pursuit of money and power count among goals discarded. Service to others and the experience of peace-filled union continue to stand out, their attraction undimmed. Buddhism and Christianity both offer easily summed up methods of attainment. Compassionate service translates similarly in both traditions. The development of peace within has a different meaning for Christians compared to Buddhists but in each, assuming the right spirit is crucial. Both traditions stress the centrality of contemplative/meditative practice. Christians use the term “contemplation” to describe the inner quiet of “resting in God” (Keating). Contemplation serves as both path and destination. For Buddhists, “shamatha” or mindfulness of breath, offers a technique to carry one towards the “attentional balance,” neither dull nor distracted and ultimately “right concentration.”

Scientists have enthusiastically embraced the study of meditation in recent decades. Research indicates that even brief periods of practice can improve our ability to pay attention and this improved attention or focus directly affects our happiness. Loss of focus and distractibility, science teaches, make us unhappy (Killingsworth, p. 98). Always remember, however, that science’s reach is quite limited. The world’s leading experts warn that *“we have no way of knowing how any of those ‘left-behinds’ (‘grounded faith,’ ‘supportive culture’) might actually be active ingredients in the altered traits that scientific research has begun to document in the lab”* (Goleman, p. 271).

With detachment, calm, heartfelt peace and happiness as goals, both Buddhism and Christianity offer pathways for growth. The following sets of practices point the way.

Turning first to Buddhism’s teachings (about 500 B.C.E.), its “Noble Truths” consist of acceptance that to live is to struggle with pain because we desire what may not be in our best interest. The solution to this mistaken striving comes from surrendering our desires by mental training. This culminates in “right concentration” which is a state of letting go, mental calm, joy, and awareness, and inner balance or equanimity. These are meditation’s fruits.

- This meditation technique synthesizes an 8th century Buddhist method as described by noted scholar B. A. Wallace. It is a foundation from which a solid study of Buddhism can grow. Begin by picking a quiet place, a simple timer, and a desire pay attention to one’s breath as completely as you can during your session (start with 3-5 minutes and work up to 20 minutes twice a day). Aim for a focus in between the two extremes of *hyperactivity/over-excitement* and *laxity/inattentiveness/“spaced-out vacancy”* (Wallace, p. 44). The meditative path is characterized by stillness and calm balanced with vigilance (p. 45).
 1. The first step is *three “slow, deep breaths”* starting lower in the abdomen and then up to the chest. Do these with the utmost attention. After these three, “let your breath flow of its own accord, settling into its natural rhythm” (p. 45).
 2. Next, on to “vivid attention”. This involves “elevating the focus of attention” as you “direct your attention to *the tactile sensations of your breath . . . above your upper lip,*

wherever you feel the in- and out-flow of your breath" (p. 46). The goal is an all-out effort to steady your attention on these sensations of breath.

3. To increase focus and ward off distractions, *it can further help to count breaths backwards from ten to one, and then start back from ten to one for the duration of the practice time* (Wallace, p. 47).

For the Christian, the heart of the message is communion with and participation in the source of our being. It is the realization of Godhead as transcendent (utterly beyond), omnipresent (all and in all), and immanent (the Spirit within). The way of perfection for a Christian involves "purification" of our sense life and spirit culminating "if we consent, to divine union" (Keating). Christians view this attainment as a gift, an experience of "silent love" (John of the Cross) shared between God and God's beloved, that is, us.

- "Centering Prayer" is an interdenominational practice rooted in earliest mothers and fathers of the church (common to Lutherans, Anglicans, Orthodox, Catholics, etc.) beginning around 350 C.E. Guidelines are below. Again, pick a quiet place, a timer, and a desire to focus as completely as you can during your session (start with 3-5 minutes, work up to 20 minutes twice a day or one 30 minute session).
- 1. *"Choose a sacred word* (for example, Mother, Father, Abba, Amma, Love, Peace, Mercy, etc.) *as the symbol of your intention* to consent to God's presence and action within.
- 2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
- 3. *When you become aware of thoughts* (feelings, sensations, etc.), *return ever-so-gently to the sacred word*. (Here you practice letting go of worry and doubt).
- 4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes" (Centering Prayer).

Find out more: *Wallace*-Buddhists; *Keating*-Christians; *Kabat-Zinn*-for a secular view.

- Centering Prayer at: <http://www.cpt.org/files/WS%20-%20Centering%20Prayer.pdf>
- Goleman, D. & Davidson, R. *Altered Traits*. New York: Random House.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2010). *Full Catastrophe Living*. New York: Harper.
- Keating, T. (2009). *Intimacy with God: Introduction to Centering Prayer*. New York: Crossroads.
- Killingsworth, M.A. & Gilbert, D.T. (2010). A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind. *Science*. Nov 12; 330(6006):932. doi: 10.1126/science.1192439.
- John of the Cross, "Maxims and Counsels, 53" in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. (Washington DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), 678.
- UN at: www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/article24073928.ece/BINARY/World+Happiness+Report.pdf
- Wallace, B.A. (2006). *The Attention Revolution: Unlocking the Power of the Focused Mind*. Boston: Wisdom Publications (First four chapters).