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Expanding your spirit and life with meditation

Carol Meyer | May. 10, 2011 Eco Catholic

Part I: The living gifts of meditation

This is part one of a three-part series: 1) The benefits of meditation 2) Instruction and tips in how to meditate and 3) Meditation in daily life.

I?m starting with the benefits because motivation is what gets us started on this path in the first place and keeps us on it. These words of Antoine de Saint Exupery express it well: ?If you want to build a ship, don?t drum up people to collect wood and don?t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.? So we are beginning with the goal in mind.

I have been teaching meditation classes called Peace Within: Learning to Meditate for over 12 years and a steady stream of people come primarily to learn how to relieve stress. The first thing I tell them is what their expectations are way too low.

Most people don?t realize that the regular practice of meditation can positively impact every aspect of their lives, and has the potential to transform their lives quite radically. If you are seasoned in meditation or some type of centering or contemplative prayer, you know this to be true, and I invite your testimonials.

First, what I mean by the word ?meditation.? Because there are so many names for roughly the same thing?Christian meditation, contemplation, centering prayer, quiet prayer, etc.?I?m simply saying meditation to cover them all, mostly because it?s a word familiar to ordinary people and one used most universally, both in religious and secular circles. And in this short blog, I don?t have time to get into the nuances and differences between them.

I tell my students, who comes from all walks of life and varying degrees of faith, that I approach meditation from a spiritual perspective ? which I will do here ? but that it is not necessary for it to be beneficial. Anything that is in harmony with the nature of creation and truth, and done with sincerity, will confer its blessings whatever labels one gives it and wherever one is on her/his journey of life.

One of my all-time favorite quotes on meditation is the following by Franz Kafka, ?You need not leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. You need not even listen. Simply wait. You need not even wait. Just learn to become quiet and still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked. It has no choice. It will roll in ecstasy at your feet.?

I feel a joyful resonance in my heart every time I think about Kafka?s message. I long to experience more deeply the promise contained in this ever-rich metaphor. I think he sums up the core of what meditation can offer us?a more intense and clear-sighted engagement with reality, which includes God, our inner selves, relationships, the natural world, and our life experiences.
Because of sin and so much conditioning, most of us live out of our false self, an ego-driven identity that keeps us enclosed in a cocoon of narrow self-absorption and falsehood. St. Paul talks a lot about putting off the old

self and being re-born into the new self in God. I believe meditation can open us to this conversion more easily than most other means.

The reason this is true is because in meditation we are willing to be aware, open and surrendered to what is. We have the courage to remove our normal distractions and sit naked before God, unafraid of our own frailties or of the immensity of God. Anthony de Mello illustrates this in the following story from Song of the Bird.

I had a fairly good relationship with the Lord. I would ask him for things, converse with him, praise him, thank him?but always I had the uncomfortable feeling that he wanted me to look at him. And I would not. I would talk, but look away when I sensed he was looking at me. I was afraid I should find an accusation there of some unrepented sin. I thought I should find a demand there; there would be something he wanted from me. One day I finally summoned up courage and looked! There was no accusation. There was no demand. The eyes just said, ?I love you.?

In meditation, we move into a more direct experience of God. We?re in a listening, quiet, aware mode, seeking to rest in inner and outer silence, receptive to the limitless divine beyond words or thoughts. We?re putting our faith into practice that God is everywhere and in all things. We meet God in the silence, in our breath or sacred focus, the sounds we hear, and the thoughts and feelings that bubble up, although we don?t hold on to them but let them go without judgment.

Why is this so excellent? Because God is never outdone in generosity. God?s love and grace, indeed a part of God?s very self, pours into us if we but make the slightest opening. Sitting with intentionality in God?s energy and light for even 10 minutes a day can change us drastically over time.
Meditation is good for us physically. As our energy is calmed and we are less tense, our blood pressure goes down and the blood circulates more freely, bringing needed nutrients and healing to every cell.

On a mental level, we become more focused in general. We aren?t so scattered, but can stay more attentive to whatever we are doing. As we practice coming back to the present moment in meditation, we are able to do this more often in daily life. Our thoughts no longer tyrannize us, but we begin to have control over them. Worries disappear and are replaced by peaceful feelings and an innate trust in God.

People often find that they are more creative when practicing meditation. It is as if they are removing the blocks that keep their gifts from emerging. One man told me scripture started coming alive after he started meditating. He had a lot more spontaneous insights into its meaning. Many report that they are more receptive to the subtle urgings of the Holy Spirit. They are used to paying attention, so they receive a lot more guidance.
Studies have shown that meditation causes positive brain changes, resulting in greater intelligence, sense of self, and feelings of oneness. Compassion becomes natural. Loneliness and a sense of separation are supplanted by belonging and unity.

I believe meditation is one of the best prayers for the needs of others and the world. Turning all unspoken needs and intentions over to God, trusting God to take care of them, frees you to become the light and love of God in the world.

Thomas Merton sums up contemplative prayer in this bold statement, ?If you descend into the depths of your own spirit?and arrive somewhere near the center of what you are, you are confronted with the inescapable truth, at the very root of your existence, that you are in constant and immediate and inescapable contact with the infinite power of God.?

If that is true, then anything can happen in meditation or as a result of it. The infinite power of God knows no bounds, so we?d best just open our hands without expectation or entitlement, and be humbly grateful, knowing God alone is enough and anything else is pure gift.

NCR's Eco Catholic Blog

Eco Catholic is an exploration of the green Catholic imagination and ecological spirituality. Contributors include Rich Heffern, *NCR* staff writer, columnist and author, and Carol Meyer, executive director of the Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition.

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