
What Works: Why to meditate



A closer look at the benefits of meditation for Christians

Phil Fox Rose



In a famous exchange, Dan Rather asked Mother Teresa of Calcutta what she says in prayer and she replied, *“I don’t say anything. I listen.”* Rather asked, “Well, then when you pray, what does God say?” She said, *“He doesn’t say anything either. He listens.”*

I often describe meditation in this way: Imagine you and a loved one on the couch, each sitting quietly, not talking, just being in each other’s presence. Not thinking, simply loving. You don’t need to talk.

Meditation in the Christian tradition is sitting in the presence of God — not expecting answers, just being. And like sitting with a loved one, this simple act is heartening and strengthening.

Many people see meditation simply as quiet time — a refuge from their hectic lives. They know they’re spinning out of control a bit and they want some relief or some help. It is relief and it will help, but that’s not really what meditation is about.

When I last wrote about meditation almost a year ago — which remains my most popular *What Works* column — I focused on how to do it. So, I want to expand on why it’s so useful. In particular, I want to speak to why it’s so useful for Christians, because there’s a lot of fear-based misinformation out there. You can see it in the comment thread after that earlier column; I hear it from parishioners and friends. And most of the criticism starts with basic

misunderstandings that meditation is “Eastern” and self-centered.

Anyone who makes even a cursory survey of the literature on Centering Prayer will discover that its purpose is to cultivate one’s communion with God. While other forms of sitting meditation may not be as direct in this focus on God’s presence, almost all serve to help you become more awake and aware, and more accepting of reality just as it is, which in Christian terminology means accepting God’s Will as it unfolds, rather than fighting against it.

A challenge:

The benefits of cultivating your spiritual life through meditation start with greater communion with God, and with reduced day-to-day anxiety and irritation, and they extend to all those you touch. So, I challenge you, if you don’t have a regular meditation practice, to start one and stick with it for at least 40 days. If you have a meditation practice but it has become irregular or you’ve let it lapse, rededicate to doing it daily for 40 days.

Obediently accepting:

In meditation, we bask in the Love of God, but we also practice and deepen our experience of obedience and non-attachment. The **Kenosis hymn** found in Philippians 2 — one of the most ancient Christian hymns, chanted still by Catholic monks as part of their Vespers service — contains the best description of this obedience:

*“Though He was in the form of God,
Jesus did not deem equality with God
something to be grasped at.
Rather, he emptied himself,
and took the form of a slave,
being born in the likeness of men.
He was known to be of human estate,
and it was thus that he humbled himself,
obediently accepting even death.”*
(from The Liturgy of the Hours)

The Liturgy of the Hours and the NRSV and New American bibles use the term “slave,” but many translations say “servant.” Slave is better — slaves cannot quit their jobs. To be human means to be a slave to reality, a slave to the laws of the material realm, including death. We must “obediently accept” our powerlessness in the face of this reality if we are to be at peace, with ourselves and with God. Even Jesus, as a human, was obedient to this truth.

The Original Sin of the Garden of Eden was that Adam and Eve grasped at equality with God. It is in trying to play God — trying to defy God’s Will and not accept reality the way it is — that we create suffering for others and ourselves. Jesus’ example, for us to model, is to not grasp at equality with God, but to obediently accept God’s Will and the laws of the physical realm, “even death.” This does not mean that the laws can’t be overruled — but rather that if this happens it is through grace, not through our applying our willpower to the situation.

“Of God Himself can no man think”

Perhaps the best explanation of why **kenosis**, or self-emptying, through meditation helps us to have this attitude modeled by Jesus — and thus why it is just as relevant for Christians as for anyone else — is in *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

The method of **Centering Prayer** is taken from this 14th Century Catholic source. While its Middle English is challenging, this mystical

classic, written by a cloistered English monk, offers the patient reader rich guidance - the reasons to meditate, the pitfalls to watch out for, and techniques to aid in its effectiveness.

Here’s how it explains the reason for a Christian to practice silent meditation:

*“For of all other creatures and their works,
yea, and of the works of God’s self, may a man
through grace have full-head of knowing, and
well he can think of them; but of God Himself
can no man think. And therefore I would leave
all that thing that I can think, and choose to my
love that thing that I cannot think. For why: He
may well be loved, but not thought. And
therefore, although it be good sometimes to
think of the kindness and the worthiness of God
in special, and although it be a light and a part
of contemplation: nevertheless yet in this work
it shall be cast down and covered with a cloud
of forgetting.”*

In other words, you can know God only through loving God. Thinking about things of the world is fine; thinking about God can even “be a light and a part of contemplation,” but to fully open yourself to loving God, you must set thinking aside and just sit in loving contemplation.

The real benefits of meditation

So much focus in our culture is placed on problem-solving, fixing things,

looking for answers and explanations. But just as with holistic medicine, often the focus of spiritual work should be not on attacking problems, but instead on cultivating well-being. I find in working with people that breaking this expectation of quick answers or relief and



shifting toward a daily practice of spiritual maintenance is difficult but immensely rewarding. Central to this is daily prayer and meditation. While spending time in the presence of God, often anxieties, fears, anger and old hurts simply dissolve in the Light. (Of course, if there's a chemical psychiatric issue, by all means address it.)

If your happiness is dependent on things being a certain way, you will be unhappy a lot of the time. This is a basic spiritual truth found in most mystical traditions. The key benefit of regular meditation is that we become less controlling — a remapping (rebirth) of response patterns towards radical acceptance and non-attachment. We become less desirous of playing God, of trying to bend the world to our will. We become less “grasping.” Detachment isn't passivity and weakness; we take actions, but we surrender our expectations, we let go of demands. We let go.

If you don't already have a regular meditation practice, I encourage you to try it. Meditate for 20 minutes every day for the next 40 days and see for yourself.



*The Author : Phil Fox Rose
Phil Fox Rose writes the
What Works personal
spirituality column at
Busted Halo. He's the
Asst. Coordinator of
Contemplative Outreach in
New York City and leads
the Centering Prayer group
at St. Ignatius on the
Upper East Side.
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*The Chapel of the Visitation
Mittagong*

A new business was opening and one of the owner's friends wanted to send him flowers for the occasion.

They arrived at the new business site and the owner read the card..... "Rest in Peace."



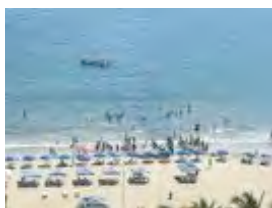
The owner was angry and called the florist to complain.

After he had told the florist of the obvious mistake and how angry he was, the florist replied,

"Sir, I'm really sorry for the mistake, but rather than getting angry, you should imagine this: somewhere, there is a funeral taking place today, and they have flowers with a note saying,... 'Congratulations on your new location!'"

A father was on the beach with his children when the four-year son ran up to him, grabbed him by the hand, and led him to the shore where a seagull lay dead in the sand..."Daddy, what happened to him?"the son asked. "He died and went to heaven," the dad replied.

The boy thought for a moment and then said: "Did God throw him back down?"



Paddy was in New York ..

He was patiently waiting and watching the traffic cop on a busy street crossing. The cop stopped the flow of traffic and shouted, 'Okay, pedestrians.' Then he'd allow the traffic to pass.

He'd done this several times, and Paddy still stood on the sidewalk.



After the cop had shouted, 'Pedestrians!' for the tenth time, Paddy went over to him and said, 'Is it not about time ye let the Catholics across?'

In the men's room at work, the boss placed a sign directly above the sink. It had a single word on it: "*Think!*"



The next day, when he went to the men's room, he looked at the sign, and right below it, immediately above the soap dispenser, someone had carefully lettered another sign which read, "*Thoap!*"

- * I wondered why the baseball kept getting bigger. Then it hit me.
- * Atheism is a non-prophet organization.
- * The soldier who survived mustard gas and pepper spray is now a seasoned veteran.
- * No matter how much you push the envelope, it'll still be stationery.
- * The butcher backed into the meat grinder and got a little behind in his work.



Mary,
you welcomed Jesus,
you carried him,
gave,
presented,
sought.

For Him you were
a woman of faith
a courageous woman
a bosom that welcomed and
protected,
time,
intelligence,
a mother,
an educator,
the first disciple,
open to his mystery,
open to his cross,
both member and mother of
the Church.

You made Him
your centre,
your treasure,
the life of your life,
the beloved Son,
the absolute Lord,
God, in our fragile flesh.



• Our deceased and their families...

- * **Br Gerard Williams**, Hamilton community, Sydney Province
- * **Sr Rosalie Hanley**, Sion Sister from the Box Hill community, Melbourne. Aunt of Br Bernie Riley.
- * **Fr Gaetano Crocetti & Fr Bernie Dwyer**, retired priests of the Bunbury Diocese.
- * **Tom Lambert**, former Principal of Sacred Heart Middle School, Mitchell Park, S.A.
- * **John Poole**, brother-in-law of Br Noel Hickey.
- * **Leah McDevitt**, formerly of Kilmore, as Parish Housekeeper, and Coolamon. Great friend of the Brothers at Assumption College.
- * **Christian Teese**, Year 7 student at Catholic College, Sale. Died suddenly of a brain tumour.
- * **Mrs Brenda Thomas**, mother of Br Tony Patterson.

• For those who are unwell ...

- * **Br Kevin Hogan**, Netley community, S.A.
- * **Noel Granger**, cousin of Br Kevin Langley, Bendigo. Undergoing chemotherapy.
- * **Bernard Ryan**, former teacher in Forbes, Wangaratta and Kilmore.
- * **Sam Buhagiar**, Newman College Year 12 student who recently suffered a severe spinal injury.

• And also for ...

- * The success of the gathering of the **Oceania Regional Council**



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