
How to Meditate

An extract from *Passage Meditation*

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Table of Contents

[Invitation to a Journey](#)

HOW TO MEDITATE

[About Eknath Easwaran](#)

Invitation to a Journey

Not long ago, a young forty-foot humpback whale on his way to Alaska became enticed by the lure of San Francisco. He veered off course into the bay, and once inside, instead of deciding he had made a wrong turn and retracing his wake, he chose to push on toward Sacramento. By the time I learned of his plight, he had worked his way into fresh waters and got trapped in the shallows of the Sacramento River Delta – a most uncongenial environment for any salt-water creature, but practically a bathtub for one used to thousands of miles of open sea.

Humphrey, as reporters dubbed him, immediately became a media sensation. Every day, news services carried updates on his predicament around the world, while hundreds of whale-lovers flocked to San Francisco to help the Coast Guard try to rescue him. But Humphrey just kept swimming up blind alleys.

Finally someone hit on the idea of luring him back to the sea by the call of recorded whale songs. Humphrey began leaping joyfully, splashing great sheets of water to the delight of spectators, and churned toward the open ocean at a good thirtymiles an hour. Traffic on the Golden Gate Bridge backed up in both directions as fans got out of their cars to crowd at the rails and cheer. They paid handsome fines, but as one woman told reporters, "It was worth every penny."

Something in all of us cheers when a captive creature breaks free. We are born for freedom, even if we don't understand what that means or how to find it. Somehow we sense that we are not meant to spend our lives in the shallows of pleasure and profit. We are made for vast spaces, to reach beyond boundaries until, as an English mystic put it, we are "clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars" – born with intimations of a potential much, much grander than anything we can dream of in the day-to-day world.

While Humphrey's story was unfolding in the daily news, we human viewers had the advantage of a higher dimension. We could look at maps, watch aerial views on TV, and see the scene whole: the narrow confines of the river delta, the broader bay, the narrow passage to the sea that Humphrey needed to find. To us it seemed so simple what to do. But Humphrey had no access to that higher view. All he could have known was that an interesting diversion had turned into a trap. It's easy to imagine his panic as he found himself alone and boxed in, with no sense of where to turn for help from a situation he could not understand.

That is how I felt when I discovered meditation: as if I had been spending my life cramped indoors and just discovered the real world. Imagine living in one little room all your life! You would forget what the outdoors was like. Gradually you would come to believe there is no such thing; only your room is real. That's why I identified with Humphrey escaping into the sea. Early every morning, while the rest of the world slept, I would open the door of consciousness in meditation, slip inside, and set about exploring the world within – a world I was making my own.

I like to imagine Humphrey free at last, charging out through the Golden Gate deaf to the cheers of earthbound creatures on the bridge above, into the open sea where he belonged. There's not much to the continental shelf in northern California, and whales swim fast. Within a few minutes he would have been in mile-deep waters again, with half a planet of open ocean to roam in as he pleased.

Then, free to go wherever he chose, he must instead have felt a silent command: "North. Go north. Go home." No details, no map, no companions, no guide, just a direction and a desire in response to an overriding imperative from within: go home.

It is very much like that on the journey of meditation too. Once you turn inward, the words of the passages urge you forward in response to a summons from the very depths of the heart. This need to return to the source of our being is nothing less than an evolutionary imperative – the drive to realize our full human potential. As Meister Eckhart says, "Whether you like it or not,

whether you know it or not, secretly Nature seeks and hunts and tries to ferret out the track in which God may be found." Something deep within us must find expression beyond the plane of pleasure and profit; that is our glory as human beings.

Only from a higher level than physical existence can we understand this deep need to find our purpose and our place in life. Because this dimension is as real as the physical – nearer to us even than the body, as the Sufis say – we cannot help living in two worlds, the material and the spiritual. To live fully means being at home in both these realms, and that requires a way to bring the deep wisdom of the heart into daily life.

There are many reasons today why one might choose to meditate – health, concentration, reduced anxiety, deeper relationships, security, serenity, the creative resources for making a lasting contribution with your life. Meditation can help you attain all these goals – or, rather, it provides the path; you will need to do the traveling yourself.

But the path leads much, much farther – as far as you want to go. It opens onto a journey that is literally without end, since its goal is only the beginning of a fully human life. The journey holds challenges enough for the most daring adventurer, wonders and treasures that would make Marco Polo's accounts of Cathay trivial by comparison. It is, without exaggeration, the adventure of a lifetime. I have written this book to be your guide.

MEDITATION ON A PASSAGE

I am going to suppose that your purpose in picking up this book is to learn to meditate; so I will begin straight away with some instructions.

I recommend beginning with the Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi. If you already know another passage, such as the Twenty-third Psalm, it will do nicely until you have learned this prayer. But over many years of teaching meditation, I have found that Saint Francis's words have an almost universal appeal. Through them pulses the spiritual wisdom this gentle friar drew upon when he undertook the most awesome task a human being is capable of – the total transformation of character, conduct, and consciousness. The prayer goes like this:

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.

I hope you will understand that the word "Lord" here does not refer to a white-bearded gentleman ruling from a throne somewhere between Neptune and Pluto. When I use words like "Lord" or "God," I mean the very ground of existence, the most profound thing we can conceive of. This supreme reality is not something outside us, something separate from us. It is within, at the core of our being – our real nature, nearer to us than our bodies, dearer to us than our lives.

If you prefer a passage from another tradition, here are some other popular choices I recommend:

The Whole World Is Your Own

I tell you one thing –
if you want peace of mind,
do not find fault with others.
Rather learn to see your own faults.
Learn to make the whole world your own.
No one is a stranger, my child;
this whole world is your own.
– *Sri Sarada Devi*

The Best

The best, like water,
Benefit all and do not compete.
They dwell in lowly spots that everyone else
scorns.
Putting others before themselves,
They find themselves in the foremost place
And come very near to the Tao.
In their dwelling, they love the earth;
In their heart, they love what is deep;
In personal relationships, they love kindness;
In their words, they love truth.
In the world, they love peace.
In personal affairs, they love what is right.
In action, they love choosing the right time.

It is because they do not compete with others
That they are beyond the reproach of the world.
–Lao Tzu

Let Nothing Upset You

Let nothing upset you;
Let nothing frighten you.
Everything is changing;
God alone is changeless.
Patience attains the goal.
Who has God lacks nothing;
God alone fills every need.
–Teresa of Avila

Radiant Is the World Soul

Radiant is the world soul,
Full of splendor and beauty,
Full of life,
Of souls hidden,
Of treasures of the holy spirit,
Of fountains of strength,
Of greatness and beauty.
Proudly I ascend
Toward the heights of the world soul
That gives life to the universe.
How majestic the vision –
Come, enjoy,
Come, find peace,
Embrace delight,
Taste and see that God is good.
Why spend your substance on what does not
nourish
And your labor on what cannot satisfy?
Listen to me, and you will enjoy what is good,
And find delight in what is truly precious.
–Abraham Isaac Kook

Having memorized the passage, be seated and softly close your eyes. We defeat the purpose of meditation if we look about, admiring the bird on the sill or watching people come and go. The eyes, ears, and other senses are rather like appliances with their cords plugged into the mind. During meditation, we try to pull out the plugs so we can concentrate more fully on the words of the passage. To disconnect the senses – to leave the world of sound behind, for instance – is difficult. We may even believe that it is not possible, that everything has been permanently installed. But the mystics testify that these cords can be disconnected and that when we do this, we experience a serenity beyond words.

So shut your eyes – without getting tense about it. Since the body should be relaxed, not strained, there is no need to be effortful. The best teacher for eye-closing I have seen is a baby ... tired lids gently sliding down on tired eyes.

Pace

Once you have memorized a passage, you are ready to go through it word by word, as slowly as you can. Why slowly? I think it is Meher Baba, a modern mystic of India, who explained:

A mind that is fast is sick.
A mind that is slow is sound.
A mind that is still is divine.

Think of a car tearing along at ninety miles per hour. The driver may feel exuberant, powerful, but a number of things can suddenly cause him to lose control. When he is moving at thirty miles per hour, his car handles easily; even if somebody else makes a dangerous maneuver, he can probably turn and avoid a collision. So too with the mind. When its desperate whirrings slow down, intentionality and good judgment appear, then love, and finally what the Bible calls "the peace that passes understanding." Let the words, therefore, proceed slowly. You can cluster the small helper words with a word of substance, like this:

Lord . . . make . . . me . . . an instrument . . . of thy . . . peace.

The space between words is a matter for each person to work out individually. They should be comfortably spaced with a little elbowroom between. If the words come too close together, you will not be slowing down the mind:

Lord.make.me.

If the words stand too far apart, they will not be working together:

Lord make

Here "make" has put in its contribution, but "me" simply won't get on with it. Before long some other word or image or idea rushes in to fill the vacuum, and the passage has been lost.

With some experimentation, you will find your own best pace. I remember that when I learned to drive many years ago, my instructor kept trying patiently to teach me to use the clutch. I was not a terribly apt pupil. After a number of chugging stops and dying engines, I asked him how I was ever going to master those pedals. He said, "You get a feeling for it." That is the way with the words too: you will know intuitively when not enough space lies between them and when there is too much.

Concentrate on one word at a time, and let the words slip one after another into your consciousness like pearls falling into a clear pond. Let them all drop inwards one at a time. Of course, we learn this skill gradually. For some time we drop a word and it floats on the surface, bumped around by distractions, irrelevant imagery, fantasies, worries, regrets, and negative emotions. At least we see just how far we are from being able to give the mind a simple order that it will carry out.

Later on, after assiduous practice, the words will fall inward; you will see them going in and hitting the very bottom. This takes time, though. Don't expect it to happen next week. Nothing really

worth having comes quickly and easily; if it did, I doubt that we would ever grow.

As you attend to each word dropping singly, significantly, into your consciousness, you will realize that there is no discrepancy between sound and meaning. When you concentrate on the sound of each word, you will also be concentrating on the meaning of the passage. Sound and sense are one.

Trying to visualize the words – imagining them in your mind's eye, or even typing them mentally as some people want to do – may help a little at the outset, but later on it will become an obstacle. We are working to shut down the senses temporarily, and visualization only binds us to the sensory level of consciousness.

Your body may even try to get into the act. I recall a lady who not only typed her passage mentally but danced her fingers quite unknowingly along an imaginary keyboard too. Another friend used to sway back and forth in meditation as if she were singing in a choir. So check yourself occasionally to see that you are not developing any superfluous body movements.

Distractions

As you go through the passage, do not follow any association of ideas. Just keep to the words. Despite your best efforts, you will find this extremely difficult. You will begin to realize what an accomplished trickster the mind is, to what lengths it will go to evade your sovereignty.

Let us say you reach the end of the first line: ". . . an instrument . . . of thy . . . peace." So far your mind has been fully on the passage and has not wandered at all. Excellent! But at the word *peace* the mind asks, "Who is the Prince of Peace?"

Well, it has raised a very spiritual question, and you say, "Jesus Christ."

"Do you know where the Prince of Peace was born?" the mind returns quickly.

"Yes, Bethlehem."

"Have you heard about Bethlehem Steel?"

And you're off. "Oh, yes. In fact, my father had shares in it."

"Oh, yeah," says the mind. "What happened?"

Now, you are supposed to be meditating on the words of Saint Francis, but you continue with this absurd dialogue. This is the sort of thing you really have to be on the lookout for. Don't let your mind wander from the words of the inspirational passage. If you want to ruminate on the stock exchange, get a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* and study it later. Under no circumstances should you try to answer questions or recall things during meditation. That is exactly what the mind wants; it tries to escape and become enmeshed in something – anything – else. The only strategy is to keep your concentration on the passage as much and as long as you can. It will be very difficult at times.

Suppose that the mind does get completely away from you. What should you do? In football, as you know, certain penalties are part of the game, and in meditation too a penalty should be applied when the mind becomes unruly. Be fair, and state the rules the first day. In plain language say, "I'm sorry, but if you run away from the passage, you will have to go back to the beginning and start again."

The mind will pale on hearing that, and for a while it will be hesitant to leave. It may stand up, look around, glance at you, perhaps meander over near the door. But you should not apply the penalty yet – the door is still closed; the mind has not gone out. As long as you are on the passage and have not forgotten about it completely, even if there is some division of attention, don't apply the penalty; just concentrate harder.

But when the door has opened, when the mind has jumped in its sports car and sped away, when you find yourself in a dress shop or a bookstore or at the beach, act promptly. Go up and tap the mind gently on the shoulder. It will probably cringe and say, "You're furious with me, aren't you?"

Still another trick, the rascal! It actually wants you to become angry and start scolding, because then it won't have to return to the passage. Don't get impatient or rattled. Say with perfect courtesy, "This is a poor time to go browsing for a best-seller. Won't you kindly rejoin me in the room where we're meditating on the Prayer

of Saint Francis?" And gently take the mind back to the first line: "Lord, make me . . ." If the escape occurred during the second stanza, start at the beginning of that stanza. This is hard work, and the mind will get the point.

When we take our dog Muka for a walk along a country road, he sometimes sees a cow and dashes ahead to upset her. To prevent this, we call him back. Further on he sees another cow and starts to trot forward ever so slightly, hoping we won't notice. Again, someone has to call out, "Muka!" He circles back. But after a little while his attention gets caught again, and he edges in front. This goes on ceaselessly.

Bringing the mind back when it strays is like that. But though you may have to do it many times, this is not a pointless activity, not a wasted effort. Saint Francis de Sales explains, "Even if you did nothing during the whole of your hour but bring your mind back and place it again in our Lord's presence, though it went away every time you brought it back, your hour would be very well employed."

Then, too – unlike Muka – your mind will learn. Today you may have to bring it back fifteen times, perhaps thirty. But in three years, you may bring it back only a few times; in six years, perhaps twice; in ten years, not at all.

Occasionally the mind may try the old recorder ruse. You are repeating correctly, "It is in giving that we receive," when a garbled version comes on: "It is in grabbing that we receive." If this happens, don't become agitated and try forcefully to turn off this unwelcome sound track. You may believe that you can do this with some effort, but actually you will only amplify the distracting voice. By dwelling on it, by struggling against it, you simply make it more powerful. The best course is to attend more to the true words of the prayer. The more attention you give them, the less you will be giving to the garbled version. When your attention rests completely on the passage, there can be no attention on anything else.

So when distractions come, just ignore them. When, for instance, you are acutely aware of noises around you while

meditating, concentrate harder on the words of the passage. For a while you may still hear the cars passing by, but the day will come when you hear them no longer. When I first moved to Berkeley, I lived in an ancient apartment house on a busy street. My friends said I would never be able to meditate there – “Nothing but ambulances, helicopters, and rock bands,” they told me. I sat down for meditation at twilight, and for five minutes I heard it all. After that, I might just as well have been in a remote corner of the Gobi Desert.

The Passage

You may wonder why I recommend an inspirational passage for meditation. First, it is training in concentration. Most of our mental powers are so widely dispersed that they are relatively ineffective. When I was a boy, I used to hold a lens over paper until the sun's rays gathered to an intense focus and set the paper aflame. In meditation, we gradually focus the mind so that when we meet a difficulty, we can cut right through the nonessentials.

Second, we begin to resemble and actually become whatever we give our attention to. People who think and dream about money have minds pervaded by dimes and dollars, shares and properties, profit and loss. Everything they see, everything they do, is colored by this concern. Similarly with those who dwell on power, revenge, pleasure, or fame. For this reason the Buddha opened his Dhammapada with the magnificent line, “All that we are is the result of what we have thought.” And today, despite our technology and science, people are most insecure because they persist in thinking about and going after things that have no capacity to give them security.

An inspirational passage turns our thoughts to what is permanent, to those things that put a final end to insecurity. In meditation, the passage becomes imprinted on our consciousness. As we drive it deeper and deeper, the words come to life within us, transforming all our thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds.

For this reason, please don't try to improve upon the words of the prayer or change them in any way. Just as they stand, they embody the spiritual wisdom of Saint Francis. When Ali Baba wanted to enter the cave of the forty thieves, he had to have the right password. He could yell out, “Open, brown rice” or “Open, shredded wheat” forever, but nothing was going to happen until he said, “Open, sesame.” Meditate on Saint Francis's own words, and you will find that you begin to resonate with the spirit of self-forgetfulness and love that the words contain.

Using the same passage over and over is fine at the outset, but in time, the words may seem stale. You may find yourself repeating them mechanically, without sensitivity to their meaning. I suggest you memorize new pieces from the traditions of Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam so you will have a varied repertoire. As you commit a new passage to memory, it is good to spend some time reflecting on the meaning of the words and their practical application to your life. But please don't do this while you are actually meditating.

In selecting a passage, be sure it really inspires. Don't let yourself be carried away by literary beauty or novelty. Wordsworth and Shelley may have been splendid poets, but for passages on which to remake your life, I suggest you draw only on the scriptures and the great mystics of the world. And avoid choosing passages that are negative, that take a harsh and deprecatory view of the body, of our past mistakes, or of life in the world. We want to draw forth our positive side, our higher Self, and the passages should move you to become steadfast, compassionate, and wise.

Keeping a notebook of pieces to memorize may help. Later on, after you have learned to concentrate well and need a greater challenge, try a longer work. I find the Katha Upanishad, for instance, perfect for meditation. It is lengthy and complex; you have to be alert to use it. When it goes smoothly, you will feel you are traveling down one lane of a six-lane highway, such an expert driver that you hardly have to move a hand.

Once I went with an old friend to a meeting in the hills. The road twisted continuously, and his driving impressed me. On hairpin turns in India I have seen drivers lunge and clasp the wheel tightly, their faces grimly set. But my friend took each curve with an easy spin of the wheel, letting it swing back on its own.

"That's amazing," I said. "How in the world did you ever manage to learn that?"

He answered tersely, "Machines obey me."

This is a good analogy with the mind that is disciplined in meditation. When we are fully concentrated on the passage, the mind obeys us. It will make the exact turn necessary. We know the road, the curves, the precipices, and where we felt intimidated before, now there is the satisfaction of mastery.

Time

The best time for meditation is early in the morning. In a tropical country like India, "early" has to be very early – sometimes three o'clock in traditional ashrams. But in a milder climate, I would say between five and six is a reasonable hour to begin, depending on your schedule. Starting the day early enables you to take a short walk or do some exercises, meditate, and have a leisurely breakfast with your family or friends. It sets a relaxing mood for the rest of the day.

The dawn brings freshness, renewal. Birds and other creatures know this; we, "the crown of creation," do not seem to. I have met a few students who were very late risers indeed. I teased one of them by saying, "Have you ever seen a sunrise?" He smiled sheepishly. "Never. But a friend of mine once did."

At first, true, there may be conflict about leaving your bed as the first rays of the sun peep in, especially when the weather is chilly. I have a simple suggestion for young people: give one mighty leap, right out of bed! Don't think – just act. To become more alert, you might try a headstand or shoulder stand, or a few exercises. Older people, of course, can creep out of bed more slowly. But they too should be up as early as reasonable, at least by six o'clock.

I have found a great aid to rising early: settling into bed early. I am not saying sundown or eight o'clock, but ten seems to me a reasonable and healthful time to go to bed – very much the middle path, which avoids extremes.

Whenever I forgot to perform an errand for my grandmother, she would ask, "Have you ever forgotten your breakfast?" No, I had to confess, I hadn't, nor had anybody else I knew. Strike a bargain with yourself – no meditation, no breakfast – and you won't forget to meditate.

It helps, too, to have your meditation at the same time every morning. It will become a reflex. At five-thirty you will feel a tugging at your sleeve, a reminder to get up and begin your meditation.

For those beginning to meditate, half an hour is the requisite period. Less than that will not be enough; more than that may be hazardous. I want to stress it. Please do not, in a burst of enthusiasm, increase your meditation to an hour or longer, because such a practice exposes you to dangers.

What dangers? Most people do not have much concentration; while they are still learning to meditate, they will remain on the surface level of consciousness. But a few have an inborn capacity to plunge deeply inward. And once you break through the surface level, you are in an uncharted world. It is like a desert, but instead of sand there are latent psychological tendencies, terribly powerful forces. There you stand in that vast desert without a compass. You have tapped forces before you are prepared to handle them, and your daily life can be adversely affected.

So please stick to half an hour in the morning and do not increase the time without the advice of an experienced teacher. I do not encourage those who meditate with me to increase the period of meditation until I have inquired into their patterns of daily living and made sure that they practice the other seven steps in this program. If you want to meditate more, have half an hour at night before going to bed.