

Abiding in the Stillands: Christ-centered Meditation in a Stress-Filled World

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Dear Friends, this is not a Final Draft. It is a preparation document for the Webcast. Please study it if you are interested, and then please email me any questions you may have, prior to the Webcast on Thursday, Oct. 23rd at 7:00 p.m. We will address several of your questions in the live webcast. A final draft of this document, with enhanced citations, will be provided later.

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Webcast Objective

This particular meditation practice *transcends sectarian lines*. In other words, it takes into account the applications, aspirations, and philosophical principles from several meditation/religious disciplines—including Christianity. *There are many forms and expressions of meditation practice*. The “gold standard” however, *the most common and fundamental expression*, is to teach would-be-meditators to lightly concentrate on their breath as a means of letting go of their *grasping attachments*. The idea is to slow down the speed of one’s own mind, and then reflect and aspire to think and speak and act more skillfully, or in a happiness—producing way.

Similar to prayer, scripture study, and fasting, *meditation helps to prepare our hearts and minds for receiving light and truth. It doesn’t replace or create spirituality, it makes space for it*. When dedicated to the Savior, it is an *“always remember”* him experience. I like to think of it as a matter of taking the energy generated by a whole range of human emotions and experiences, and transforming that energy—*through prayerful meditation*—into more skillful thoughts, words, and deeds.

Introduction

In the closing lines of C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*--the majestic lion symbolizing Jesus Christ--Aslan--assures Peter, Edmund, and Lucy they will never have to return to the *Shadowlands*: “There was a real railway accident, said Aslan softly. Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the *Shadowlands*—dead.” (Lewis, 1994, 16:228) He then tells them that the endless “morning” or Heaven had finally dawned for them. For Lewis, *the Shadowlands represent the shallowness, the illusory, and the impermanent nature of earth life. Only those who “divorce” themselves from their prideful attachment to it can obtain Heaven or true happiness*:

If we insist on keeping Hell (or even Earth) we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell. But what, you ask, of earth? Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. *I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell: and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.*” (Lewis, 1973, XIII, IX)

In contrast to the darkness of the *Shadowlands* is the light of the *Stillands*—a metaphoric place or state of mind that engenders all things *mindful, peaceful, purifying, and eternal*. One might refer to this place as a *space of non-attachment or liberation from the reactivity of human nature and social conditioning*. That is to say, a state of *putting off the natural man* thus putting us in the position *to be influenced by the “enticings” of the Holy Spirit*. (Mosiah 3:19)

For one to clearly see the points of mortal attachments (obsessive, burdensome, and selfish attachments), he or she must *become increasingly mindful*. Meditative practice increases mindfulness and by association *widens the space for personal agency*, by engendering greater attentiveness to life’s exigencies (concerns, pressing needs, life happening), the available choices for responding to them, and a *sharpened awareness of our habitual patterns for managing what comes our way*. In other words, as the space for our agency is *preserved and expanded*, we can see more clearly *how to act skillfully, rather than to be acted upon arbitrarily*. It allows the power of the Atonement to be an

enabling influence for our thoughts, words, and deeds. As our space of agency grows, and the enabling power of the Atonement increases in us, **our unskillful reactivity diminishes**. We are then better equipped to **let go** of the heavy burden of cravings, obsessions, and attachments of the “carnal man.” (Moses 5:13) This putting off of the grasping natural man, allows us to align ourselves with “currents of divine influence.” (Scott, 1999, 87). **We thus learn to abide more often in the “Stillands” of virtue, goodness, peace, and unselfishness**. This is a place of child-like wonder and openness. **Conversely, the obsessive, dark, self-promoting, and mercurial nature of the Shadowlands is narrow and contracting**. As we make space for the enabling power of the Atonement to work in us, the Shadowlands begin to lose their appeal and grasp on us.

If we accept the premise that our happiness is determined by the quality and clarity of our understandings and the management of life’s experiences, and that these understandings are determined by the quality of our thoughts and feelings and by the presence of divine influence, **becoming more reflective and less reactive, more enlightened and compassionate, and less resentful and selfish is of profound importance**. Think of how many times you may have acted or spoken or thought or done something without careful reflection, and later realized that your perception of the “reality” of the situation was distorted, often leading to negative or unskillful actions. Think how often this happens in human interactions. **I believe our clouded human-nature perceptions are a great danger we face, and profoundly influence our happiness**. President Joseph F. Smith explains his view of this predicament:

For my part I do not fear the influence of our enemies from without, as **I fear that of those from within**. An open and avowed enemy, whom we may see and meet in an open field, is far less to be feared **than a lurking, deceitful, treacherous enemy hidden within us, such as are many of the weaknesses of our fallen human nature, which are too often allowed to go unchecked, beclouding our minds, leading away our affections from God and...truth....** (Smith, 1999, 341)

Given the fact that we as human beings “...see through a glass darkly,” (1 Cor 13:12) that we are known for “unsteadiness,” “foolish[ish],” being easily “lifted up in pride,” quick to “boast” and to stray from “wisdom’s paths,” (Helaman 12:1-7) **any practice that gives us greater access to the stabilizing power of Christ is joyfully welcomed**. Meditation is one such practice. It opens us up to receiving the comfort and safety and wisdom God’s presence provides. Consider these promises:

I will not leave you comfortless: **I will come to you**. (John 14:18) Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, **I will come in to him**, and will sup with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20) Draw near unto me and **I will draw near unto you**; seek me diligently and **ye shall find me....** (D&C 88:63) Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and **I will give you rest**. (Matt. 11:28)

What is Meditation?

Meditation isn’t some mystical practice used to produce zombie-like devotees who extinguish all their thoughts while in a trance-like state! **Meditation is akin to pondering with a listening and teachable state of mind. Sometimes referred to as mindfulness, meditation is the practice of making space for enlightenment or inspiration by managing our thoughts and emotions more skillfully**. As was mentioned above, **it doesn’t take the place of spirituality, it makes space for it. Meditation is a preparation or helpmate for receiving light and truth**.

The idea of meditation isn’t to ignore or eliminate thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc., **but rather to notice them without clinging or attaching to, or judging them**—almost like watching them on a movie screen, or across the way as if in an adjacent room.

When our thoughts and emotions begin to captivate us, we can pause and take some long, slow, and deep breaths. This can be done just about anywhere, but especially in quiet settings. Taking time out to breathe deeply helps train us to **respond to life’s exigencies more reflectively and meditatively, instead of habitually and reactively**. One mindfulness teacher describes meditation practice this way:

...Take it easy alertly, repose in wide-awakeness; rest in openness. Because we're so used to speeding a long on the expressway of doing, we can start with a bit of breathing practice as **a sort of deceleration lane, an off-ramp** to non-doing. Take a slow, full breath, hold it for a few moments, then let out a deep sigh, as if breathing out through all your pores, letting go of everything, all burdens and decisions, stress and distress: We can develop a new habit of **attentive tranquility**....(Sluyter, 2001, pp. 13-15)

Meditation Benefits

1. Meditation Invites Spirituality and Enlightenment.

President David O. McKay has taught us, "I think we pay too little attention to the value of meditation, a principle of devotion. **Meditation is one of the most secret, most sacred doors through which we pass into the presence of the Lord**" (McKay, 1967, pp. 80-82). In response to President McKay's counsel, President Harold B. Lee similarly urges us, "Let that be something to remember-you do likewise. **Take time to meditate**. Many times you will be wrestling with problems, the solution of which can be spiritually discerned. **Don't get so busy that you don't have time to meditate. Take the time**" (Lee, 2000, p. 175).

"The development of our spiritual nature should concern us most. **Spirituality is the highest acquisition of the soul**, the divine in man; 'the supreme, crowning gift that makes him king of all created things.' **It is spirituality alone which really gives one the best in life.**" (David O. McKay, Conference Report, October 1936, p. 103)

"**Spirituality is the consciousness of victory over self, and of communion with the Infinite.** Spirituality impels one to conquer difficulties and acquire more and more strength. To feel one's faculties unfolding and truth expanding the soul is **one of life's sublimest experiences.**" (David O. McKay, Gospel Ideals, p. 390)

2. Meditation is a Pathway to Greater Self-mastery.

Much of our suffering is caused by carrying around the heavy load of our own egocentrism. Elder Neal A. Maxwell has observed, "Such is the scope of putting off the **burdensome natural man** who is naturally selfish. (See Mosiah 3:19) **So much of our fatigue, brothers and sisters, in fact, comes from carrying that needless load**" (Maxwell, 1990, p. 14).

Meditation is essentially a practice of putting off the weight of fallen man. **It facilitates repentance because it is an exercise that runs counter to our entrenched habits.** We're chronically

"...indentured to fabricating projections, scenarios, opinions, and story lines that we use to hold our creation together. Meditation is about seeing through the contrived sense of 'me' as the enlightened aspects [of] the mind [and the Spirit] reveal themselves" (Mipham, 2003, pp. 93-94).

"**We are fallen beings, and are not aware how deeply the prejudices of our forefathers have been visited upon our minds.** When we think ourselves free from the bondage of our fathers, we then imagine that we become perfectly untrammelled, **and we are not at all aware how deeply these prejudices have entwined themselves around our hearts.** How diligent we should be to root them out, and get every feeling of our nature in the proper direction for that new state of society into which we have entered. We therefore ought to study and to seek diligently for that light which comes from heaven, **to look into our own hearts as we look into a mirror, that we may be enabled to see our foolish practices, [and] turn from them....**" (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 8, p. 312 - p. 313, Orson Pratt, September 16, 1860)

The Prophet Joseph Smith declared, ‘Mankind [is] naturally selfish, ambitious, and striving to excel one above another.’ (**The Words of Joseph Smith, comp. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, Religious Studies Center, 1980, p. 201**)

“**Some selfishness exists even in good people.** Jane Austen’s character Elizabeth mused, ‘I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle.’ (Pride and Prejudice, New York: Airmont Books, 1962, p. 58)

“Of this personal battle, the Lord has urged us to so live that we would ‘come off conqueror.’ (**D&C 10:5**) But we cannot ‘come off conqueror,’ except we first ‘put off’ the selfish, natural man!

The men and women of Christ **magnify their callings without magnifying themselves.** Whereas the natural man says ‘Worship me’ and ‘Give me thine power,’ the men and women of Christ seek to **exercise power by long-suffering and unfeigned love.** (See **Moses 1:12; Moses 4:3; D&C 121:41**)

Whereas the natural man vents his anger, the men and women of Christ are ‘not easily provoked.’ (**1 Cor. 13:5**) Whereas the natural man is filled with greed, the men and women of Christ ‘seeketh not [their] own.’ (**1 Cor. 13:5**) Whereas the natural man seldom denies himself worldly pleasures, the men and women of Christ **seek to bridle all their passions.** (See **Alma 38:12**) (Neal A. Maxwell, “Put Off the Natural Man, and Come Off Conqueror,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1990, 14)

“Let me ask you, as a favour, to bless yourselves and friends **by conquering and controlling yourselves....** [U]nless you **control the passions that pertain to fallen nature...** you will never arrive at that state of happiness, glory, joy, peace, and eternal felicity that you are anticipating. Then **learn to govern yourselves.**” (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 8, p. 116, Brigham Young, July 8, 1860)

“Let a wise man remove impurities from himself even as a silversmith removes impurities from the silver one after one, little by little, again and again.” **NIRVANA is reached by that man who wisely, heroically, trains himself. Find joy in watchfulness; guard well your mind. Uplift yourself from your lower self, even as an elephant draws himself out of a muddy swamp.**” (The Dhammapada, Translated by Juan Mascaro, p. 81)

In other words, Meditation helps us to clear some space for seeing more clearly because **it encourages us to let go of habitual reactive patterns that sustain our fallen nature.** This growing space expands our agency. **In this space of agency, we gain access to the power of the atonement to leaven all our thoughts, words, and deeds.**

Finally, many programs are offered for training the body through exercise, diet, and recreation, but what about training our minds? “With an untrained mind, we’ll live most days of our lives at the mercy of our moods” (Mipham, 2003, p. 19).

Meditation increases white matter neuroplasticity, **the part of the brain network responsible for self-regulation.** (Tanga, et. al, 2012, pp. 10570–10574; Tang, et. al, 2010, pp. 15649–15652)

3. Meditation Helps Increase our Compassion for Others.

Recent brain research on meditation has established that regular meditation strengthens the pre-frontal regions of the brain (Lazar et al., 2005, pp. 1893-1897), thus improving psychological functions associated with these regions, including **attention** (Carter et al., 2005, pp. 412-413), **compassion** (Lutz, et al., 2008, p. 1897), and **empathy** (Lazar, et al., 2005, pp. 1893-1897).

It’s true that in spite of all our efforts to be compassionate, including meditation, we sometimes fall short. **This is why developing loving-kindness compassion, or charity, is a long-term project.** It takes repeated effort:

...we just have to keep choosing kindness. There's always a range of actions of which we're capable. Above a certain threshold we can't be that saintly (yet), and below another threshold we can't be that vicious (anymore). The trick is to keep leaning, gently but steadily, toward the uppermost level of your range. That way you're always doing the best that can be done by the person you are today and pushing your upper threshold a little higher for tomorrow (Sluyter, 2001, pp. 38-39).

Living meditatively thus helps us cultivate a mental garden full of love, compassion, and wisdom, thus giving the “weeds of anger, jealousy, and self-[indulgence]...less and less room to grow. In peaceful abiding we become familiar with the ground of basic goodness. This is how we turn the mind into an ally” (Mipham, 2003, p. 34).

4. Meditation Improves our Physical and Emotional Health.

Meditation has been found to **decrease unhealthy levels of the stress-related hormone cortisol and to strengthen the immune system** (Tang, et al., 2007, pp. 17152-17156; Davidson, 2004, 1395-1411).

Research has also shown that meditation **helps a variety of medical conditions**, including high Blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, asthma, type II diabetes, PMS, post-operative recovery for open-heart surgery patients, and chronic pain (Walsh and Shapiro, 2006, pp. 227-239; 1989, pp. 111 117).

Further physical health benefits include **positive and permanent brain structure changes** such as increased gray matter in the insula, the hippocampus, and the prefrontal cortex, along with the reduction of cortical thinning due to aging (Holzel et al., 2008, pp. 55-61; Lazar et al., 2005, pp.1893-1897; Luders et al., 2009, pp. 672-678)

Research also verifies that mindfulness training provides **relief for numerous psychological conditions**, including insomnia, depression, anxiety, phobias, and eating disorders (Walsh et. al.,1989, pp. 227-239)

5. Meditation Improves Cognitive Functioning.

Meditation has been known to help middle-school students develop better work habits, and cooperation among others, leading to higher grades (Journal of Research and Development in Education, 2000). In another study, college students who were given meditation instruction experienced significant improvement in their perceptual and short-term memory performance over a two-week training period (Memory and Cognition, 1982). Other studies have confirmed that university students who meditate regularly experienced significantly greater IQ gains over a two-year period as compared to control subjects with no meditation instruction. *Personality*, 1991), *Perceptual*, 1986)

How Do You Meditate?

Having established the efficacy of meditation/mindfulness practice, ***I will now offer the Four “Bridle Meditations.” These four meditations act as anchors for meditation practice, with each meditation moving us toward Christ-centered mindfulness.***

1. Be Still

Take some **time out every day to be still**—close to the same time—to sit in silence in a quiet place and just breathe gently for 5-30 minutes. Sit with good posture (but not too stiff) in a comfortable chair, with hands and arms and legs unfolded, feet on the floor (the lotus position is traditional and stereotypical, but not essential, or in my case with legs that don't bend that way anymore, undesirable!).

Coming **early to sacrament meeting or to temple sessions** and sitting reverently is a meditative practice. For example, the time before sacrament meeting begins is reserved for **“prayerful meditation.”** (Handbook 2, *Administering the Church*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-Day Saints, 2010: 139). Keep your eyes open or closed, depending on the context and what is most relaxing for you.

As I said earlier, don't try to get rid of your thoughts, or "clear your mind," but rather, just **watch your thoughts/moods/feelings** like a movie. Let them come and go **without clinging judgment or attachment**. Our thoughts are like horses, small ponies, sometimes rodeo horses, or race horses, or, as big as draft horses. Don't saddle up the horses and ride them off. Don't feed them or try to rope them, **just let them come and go**. You can even label them as good, bad, or neutral, but just **don't cling** to them.

Focus on your breath—long, slow, deep, gentle. This is the first exercise is preparation for deepening your mindfulness. Try to avoid getting lost in your thoughts. When you start to drift from the present moment, come back to your breath. Stay there for as long as you can. **You are not trying to eliminate your "thoughting," but rather, your thinking about your thoughting!** Once you get fairly relaxed or settled down, you can lightly focus—not losing track of your breath—on the next two "Bridle Meditations," **remember and serve**.

2. Remember

A remembrance meditation directs your concentration **to all blessings, tender mercies, kindnesses of others, and simple joys in your life**. It is like an extended prayer of gratitude to Heavenly Father. Start out with, "Heavenly Father I am grateful for"...then just let the thoughts of gratitude flow naturally. They will often be given to you through the Spirit. Inventory your lifetime of blessings anyway you want to divide them up—this hour, this week, this month, a certain time period, a location, etc. You could also just focus on people who have been deliberately kind to you. Be sure to direct your gratitude first to the Lord, and then to the people involved—but don't lose focus on your breath. Also remember this great promise found in **Doctrine and Covenants section 78:17-19**.

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye are little children, and ye have not as yet understood how great blessings the Father hath in his own hands and prepared for you; And ye cannot bear all things now; nevertheless, be of good cheer, for I will lead you along. The kingdom is yours and the blessings thereof are yours, and the riches of eternity are yours. **And he who receiveth all things with thankfulness shall be made glorious; and the things of this earth shall be added unto him, even an hundred fold, yea, more.**"

Once you have settled your thoughts and have remembered (Remember), you are ready for the next "**Bridle Meditation**" of **Serve**.

3. Serve

This is a meditation wherein you ponder or meditate on **the welfare of others**. This is like an extended prayer on behalf of others **without losing track of your breath**. Just start out the meditation thinking, "Dear Heavenly Father, please bless..." and then let people come and go in your mind. Start first with the **beloved people** in your life. Then think of **the "neutrals"**. These are people you may not know, or, just nameless people who have served or helped you in some way—people in society that make things better for all of us. Finally, turn your meditative attention to what I call **the "angsters,"** or people who invite angst from us. Send love and best wishes to them—with the help of the Atonement—and ask Heavenly Father to bless them. **The miracle is that if we do this, the Lord will sometimes give us the desire and the words to offer in our minds during the meditation.**

The 4th "Bridle Meditation" is **Let Go**.

4. Let Go

Leading to this point you have breathed and settled (**Bridle 1**), pondered your blessings (**Bridle 2**), and mentally served others (**Bridle 3**). Now you are more prepared for just resting in your **awareness of awareness (Bridle 4)**. Your only "work" is to **not cling to your concentrations**. When you start to feel attachments, go back to your breath. **Rest, observe, let go**. Don't cling to anything or try to figure out

anything. ***Just rest in bare attention.*** Remember that you have dedicated this meditation to the Savior for ***making space for enlightenment***—that may come in the moment or later, ***depending on His will.***

These 4 ***“Bridle Meditations”*** help us to “Bridle all our Passions,” (Alma 38:12) and are ***strategies for making space for the Lord’s spirit to strengthen and enliven us.*** They help us to better center our thoughts ***in peaceful abiding.***

Meditation takes ***time and effort and extended practice.*** Like preparing to run a marathon, with enough training we improve our ***meditative conditioning.*** It only works if we do it however! Don’t get discouraged or think you aren’t doing it right. Even if our success is fleeting—like roping the wind, we are still being meditative just trying to be more mindful. Meditation is just like scripture study, prayer, repentance, service, temple attendance, exercise, a healthy diet, and getting enough rest, all of these practices contribute to our well-being only if we do them ***regularly and consistently.***

Conclusions

Unhealthy attachment to earth-life, or the Shadowlands, ***keeps us from experiencing the easier yoke and lighter burden of Christ.*** (Matt 11:29) Doing all things ***without*** wisdom and order, running ***faster*** than we have strength for, and always being in a state of ***distracted commotion,*** keeps us from sensing the Lord’s ***“gentle solicitation and sweet enticement,”*** (Hunter, 1989, p. 17) thus making our lives more stressful, burdensome, and even less healthy. ***Meditation is a doorway out of this predicament and an opportunity to abide in the rest and relief of the Stillands.*** It enables us to create more space between life happening and our responses to life happening. Within this space we’re able to respond to life’s exigencies more skillfully.