

GOD, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I know my True Self, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you does please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always.
Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

- Thomas Merton (1915 – 1968)
Trappist Monk

a Jewish story about prayer

When the founder of Hasidic Judaism, the great Rabbi Israel Shem Tov, saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Maggid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, "I do not know how to light the fire. I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient, and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient."

And it was sufficient.

For God made man because he loves stories.

Lord, take me where You want me to go;
Let me meet who You want me to meet;
Tell me what You want me to say, and
Keep me out of Your way.

- Father Mychal F. Judge, OFM
*Former chaplain to the New York City Fire Department, killed on
September 11, 2001 in the World Trade Center disaster.*

God, fill me with your loving spirit and let it flow through me into the
lives of others.

- Don P., Member of Alcoholics Anonymous

Religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell; spirituality is for
those who have been there.

- Ross V., Member of Alcoholics Anonymous

One of the main functions of formalized religion is to protect people
against a direct experience of God.

- Dr. Carl Gustav Jung

A priest of the Greek Orthodox Church, Father Thomas Hopko, tells of a monk he met on Mount Athos.

He was in a very bad state, very dark, very bitter, very angry. When asked what was the matter, he said, "Look at me; I've been here for thirty-eight years, and I have not yet attained pure prayer." And this other fellow on the pilgrimage was saying how sad he thought this was.

Another man present said, "It's a sad story all right, but the sadness consists in the fact that after thirty-eight years in a monastery he's still interested in pure prayer."

The image both troubles and consoles: the befuddled, bitter monk, unable to see that his futile quest for "pure prayer" is precisely the cause of his deepest anguish, and the observer recognizing not only the reality of the sadness but its source—the impossible ideal of perfection.

- Ernest Kurtz, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, pg 42

a Zen Buddhist story about non-judgmental observing...

There was an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit. "Such bad luck," they said sympathetically.

"Maybe," the farmer replied. The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful," the neighbors exclaimed.

"Maybe," replied the old man. The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune. "Maybe," answered the farmer. The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. "Maybe," said the farmer.

a Christian story about prayer

A bishop's ship had anchored at a remote island. Since he only had one day there, the bishop was determined to use the time profitably.

He strolled along the seashore and came across three fishermen, mending their nets. In broken English, they explained to him that their village had been converted to Christianity by missionaries centuries before. "We Christians!" they proudly proclaimed. The bishop was impressed. But, in talking some more, he discovered that they had never even heard of the Lord's Prayer. The bishop was shocked. "What, then, do you SAY when you pray?"

"We lift eyes to heaven and say, **'We are three, you are three, have mercy on us.'**"

The bishop was appalled. This would never do. In fact, it sounded almost...heretical. So the bishop spent the whole day teaching them the Lord's Prayer. And, even though the fishermen were slow learners, they were finally able to struggle through it before the bishop sailed away the next day.

Months later, the bishop's ship happened to pass by that same island. The bishop paced the deck, recalling with pleasure the three men who were now able to pray, thanks to his patient efforts. But while he was lost in his thoughts, he happened to look up, noticing a spot of light to the east. The light kept approaching the ship and, as the bishop gazed in wonder, he saw three figures walking on the water. The captain, too, was amazed and he stopped the boat so everyone could see. When they got within speaking distance, the bishop recognized the three fishermen.

"Bishop!" they exclaimed. "We see your boat go by the island, so we come to see you." "What do you want?" asked the awestruck bishop. "Bishop," they said. "We are very sorry. We forget lovely prayer. We say, 'Our Father, in heaven, holy be your name....' Then we forget. Please tell us prayer again."

With a quiet voice, the bishop answered, "Go back to your homes, my friends. And each time you pray, say,

'We are three, you are three, have mercy on us.'

Establishing a Daily Meditation Instructions for A Simple Breath Meditation

from A Path With Heart by Jack Kornfield

First select a suitable space for your regular meditation. It can be wherever you can sit easily with minimal disturbances: a corner of your bedroom or any other quiet spot in your home. Place a meditation cushion or chair there for your use. Arrange what is around so that you are reminded of your meditative purpose, so that it feels like a sacred and peaceful space. You may wish to make a simple altar with a flower or sacred image, or place your favorite spiritual books there for a few moments of inspiring reading. Let yourself enjoy creating this space for yourself.

Then select a regular time for practice that suits your schedule and temperament. If you are a morning person, experiment with a sitting before breakfast. If evening fits your temperament or schedule better, try that first. Begin with sitting ten or twenty minutes at a time. Later you can sit longer or more frequently. Daily meditation can become like bathing or tooth brushing. It can bring a regular cleansing and calming to your heart and mind.

Find a posture on the chair or cushion in which you can easily sit erect without being rigid. Let your body be firmly planted on the earth, your hands resting easily, your heart soft, your eyes closed gently. At first feel your body and consciously soften any obvious tension. Let go of any habitual thoughts or plans. Bring your attention to feel the sensations of your breathing. Take a few deep breaths to sense where you can feel the breath most easily, as coolness or tingling in the nostrils or throat, as movement of the chest or rise and fall of the belly. Then let your breath be natural. Feel the sensations of your natural breathing very carefully, relaxing into each breath as you feel it, noticing how the soft sensations of breathing come and go with the changing breath.

After a few breaths your mind will probably wander. When you notice this, no matter how long or short a time you have been away, simply come back to the next breath. Before you return, you can mindfully acknowledge where you have gone with a soft word in the back of your mind, such as “thinking,” “wandering,” “hearing,” “itching.” After softly and silently naming to yourself where your attention has been, gently and directly return to feel the next breath. Later on in your meditation you will be able to work with the places your mind wanders to, but for initial training, one word of acknowledgement and a simple return to the breath is best.

As you sit, let the breath change rhythms naturally, allowing it to be short, long, fast, slow, rough or easy. Calm yourself by relaxing into the breath. When your breath becomes soft, let your attention become gentle and careful, as soft as the breath itself.

Like training a puppy, gently bring yourself back a thousand times. Over weeks and months of this practice you will gradually learn to calm and center yourself using the breath. There will be many cycles in this process, stormy days alternating with clear days. Just stay with it. As you do, listening deeply, you will find the breath helping to connect and quiet your whole body and mind.