

**THE TWO WAYS OF MEDITATION:  
CONCENTRATION AND INSIGHT MEDITATION PRACTICES**

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Meditation practices are common to all religious faith traditions. The term meditation has many different meanings, but in general refers to any practice that heightens one's capacity for or awareness of reality, truth, the transcendent, Being, or the divine Mystery immanent in and/or transcendent of creation. Within most Christian formation traditions, meditation refers to those forms of prayer that actively focus one on or passively open one to the content of our faith or the divine mysteries to which that content points. Meditation, for Christians, is a form of prayer aimed at recollecting oneself, body and spirit, mind and heart, memory, intellect and will upon God or the things of God. This process might proceed by focusing, reading, reflecting, reciting, speaking, thinking, chanting, moving, centering, opening, etc. It might use phantasy, imagination, and anticipation together with memory, intellect and will, in structured or unstructured ways, moving or resting, interiorly or exteriorly, deliberately or spontaneously through the prayer practice or meditation.

It can be argued that there are two foundational methods of meditation, and that one or the other, or ideally, both together are found in most forms of meditation. These two methods are called by various names such as: a) concentration, tranquility, or recollection, and b) awareness, mindfulness, or insight. (These names all stress specific aspects of the two more general ways of meditating.)

Both of these methods, working together, are necessary for the consonant unfolding of any meditation practice. Concentration without insight can lead to deep self-absorption and at the extreme to a pseudomystical state of "undifferentiated unity" as complete (seemingly ecstatic) absorption (possibly nothing more than a regression into the unconscious). Insight without some degree of concentration and inner tranquility cannot succeed, but will end in fragmented awareness, distraction, and an anxious, conflicted heart.

Concentration, in many ways, is a discipline that turns one's attention toward a religious object. Methods of concentration serve to "re-collect" one's faculties, both sensory and spiritual, by drawing them in and focusing them on some created form--concept, image, understanding, or

affect--including sacred words, sacred rituals, sacred images, holy sentiments, or revealed truths, that is, any created form understood to mediate the transcendent. Concentration is, therefore, important in any prayer or prayerful activity.

One benefit of this focusing practice is that it tends to produce an experience of absorption in the object of meditation, resulting in a quietening and stilling of autonomic arousal (why sometimes it is so hard to stay awake!). Heartbeat, respiration, and galvanic skin response all tend to decrease. Also, the restless, wandering mind tends to slow down as recollection increases. EEG studies indicate that brain-wave patterns in meditators show a marked shift from the Beta wave pattern (active, waking consciousness) to the slower Alpha wave (appears when one is relaxed with eyes closed or in daydreaming with eyes open or closed) or even to sustained Theta waves (usually appear only on the verge of falling asleep, but advanced meditators can maintain Theta waves while awake and alert). There is a real danger, however, if this method is used in isolation from insight. Regardless of the religious content of the meditation, one can become attached to the ecstatic (or enstatic) experience and relish absorption for itself alone. Meditation could degenerate into a purely self-centered preoccupation with absorption, a mere functional “transcendence” that mistakes expansion of the autarkic pride-form (Adrian van Kaam’s term for the ego or selfish self) for mystical union. This is a false theosis or pseudo-divinization of the self.

Nevertheless, the peace, quiet and tranquility that come with active recollection are necessary conditions for the cultivation of mindfulness and insight, as is the heightened power of concentrative focus which, if it does not completely still intrusive thoughts, at least learns to see thought for what it is--always changing and impermanent. One learns not to be attached to any of one's ever changing states of consciousness, including thoughts, affections and imaginative images.

The active, focusing method(s) of meditation need the passive, opening method(s) of awareness, mindfulness and insight to be complete. As prayer grows deeper, one must surrender the emphasis upon one's own effort and activity so as to discover the action of God always moving, healing, forgiving, loving, uniting. One must move from the perspective of aggressive looking to that of open seeing--of seeing reality-as-it-is--free from attachment, detachment, projection, and rejection. One must pass beyond the creature (the image, the symbol, the thought, the affect) in order to open to the presence of God dwelling everywhere in all things, holding all in Loving-Being. One

must surrender consolation and absorption (and also desolation) in order to dwell in the wisdom that the Christian mystics call dark faith and the annihilation of the "living flame of love" (see St. John of the Cross).

Awareness knows no center, for God is All in all, yet beyond all. Mindfulness is presence to Reality in faith, knowing that God works in all things, at all times, in all places despite the reality of human brokenness and sinfulness. Insight sees the divine truth revealed in the sacrament of each moment, transfiguring all in love. Concentration is the ground from which one steps into the spacious mind of insight, understanding that wisdom in faith pervades all. The gift of faith transforms the heart into a flame of transcendent passion, offering as a sacrifice the sinful flesh of selfish pride upon the cross of redeeming love.

In this way, awareness and mindfulness create an openness for what the mystics call infused contemplation. They build on concentration so as to make possible a vision of the infinite space, the great void between one's thoughts, words, images and affections. This emptying out, this being made ready for faith, hope and love is all that one can do oneself under the power of grace and inspiration. The activity of God finds room to work in our passive, open waiting and listening. Out of active meditation, one surrenders to doing "nothing" at all. One moves from active mode to receptive mode of consciousness, from doing to simply being-in-love. Meditation gives way to infused prayer, that is, to a prayer and recollection not acquired by any activity of one's own, but a prayer and recollection experienced in love, divinely given, delightfully imparted to the one who is open to receiving it.

The gift of mystical prayer, which is infused contemplation in the strict sense, will come silently and often secretly, hidden from the one who receives it. This is the gift of humility that keeps the process of sanctification hidden, especially from oneself. Whereas active recollection seeks to possess something of things divine, passive recollection gives itself over to the deepest dispossession concerning all things--the goods of earth and of heaven--being satisfied with nothing at all, but only with the supreme Subject of its love, the Most Blessed Trinity itself. The issue is not whether one knows one is having infused contemplation, but whether one is inflamed with love for God and one's neighbor. Here consolation and desolation are one, each transfiguring the other in a joyful, delighted heart.

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### Concentration

focuses attention on object of meditation  
emphasizes concentration, focus  
tends to be introverted

focuses on the created word (often repetitive)  
inner directed movement

grounded in the natural & egoic  
looking  
centering  
effort  
active recollection

moves to one-pointedness  
calms mind and heart  
increases absorption  
can be highly ecstatic/enstatic

consolations may increase  
active night of the senses  
longs for union with God

used alone: is a dead-end  
makes possible awareness/insight

danger: trapped in the natural satisfaction of an  
experience of "undifferentiated unity"

### Insight

is mindful of, present to Reality, inner & outer  
emphasizes awareness, presence  
is introverted & extroverted, seeks a balance  
of the interior & exterior

opens to the Uncreated Word (the Logos)  
inner/outer openness is sought (though at any  
point, one pole may dominate)

opens to the transcendent  
seeing  
being  
no effort

a "passive" recollection (although perhaps not  
yet Teresa's supernatural recollection)

moves to deeper insight, wisdom  
sees Reality as it is  
deepens insight, understanding, faith  
can open one to transcendent peace, purity of  
heart (*hesychia*)

consolation and desolation become one  
active night of the spirit  
knows union with God already offered (opens  
one to union with God & communion  
with the body of Christ)

cannot be used alone very successfully  
makes possible contemplation & incarnation  
loving action, equanimity, agape