

STEP 11: DOING NOTHING

What exactly is meditation? The AA literature seems to offer at least two responses to this question. The Big Book, in its treatment of Step 11 -- contrary to what most people believe -- gives no real answer. Indeed, the Big Book assumes that we are actually meditating long before we get to the Eleventh Step. If you look at page 69, you will see that the Big Book recommends using meditation to determine how to handle specific matters involving sex: "In meditation, we ask God what we should do" But a careful reading of the paragraph suggests that the recovering alcoholic is already using meditation for issues other than these. The previous sentence reads, "We treat sex as we would any other problem." The implication, then, is that we are already routinely practicing meditation as a means of asking God what we should do at least as early as our working of Step 4.

By the time the Big Book arrives at Step 11, therefore, it assumes we are practicing prayer and meditation routinely. Modestly, it says that "we believe we can make some definite and valuable suggestions," and goes on to recommend nightly and morning reviews of our day, and living our lives on the basis of intuition and inspiration. Significantly, it talks on page 87 about our "morning meditation." Again, the implication is that meditation is an established practice -- established well before we reach Step 11.

The *12 and 12*, by contrast, offers an actual approach to meditation. It uses the so-called Prayer of St. Francis and invites us to consider it line by line. In the end, it suggests, meditation "is essentially an individual adventure, something which each one of us works out in his own way."

The *12 and 12* makes one other important point. It says, "There is a direct linkage among self-examination, meditation, and prayer." In other words, Steps 10 and 11 are very closely related to one another. We have already seen that we can actually make a meditative practice out of Step 10 itself, using it moment by moment throughout the day to practice ongoing awareness -- something close to what the Buddhists call *vipassana* meditation.

Taking all this information together, therefore, we can make the following observations. We will not get very far if we try to practice Step 11 meditation without an ongoing practice of Step 10. We will find that meditation is "an individual adventure" -- that, regardless of whether we are practicing alone or with others, we will gradually work out an approach to meditation which works for us. And we also learn that, as people in recovery, we can practice and should be practicing meditation routinely long before we arrive at Step 11.

So -- having said all of this -- what is meditation? Specifically, what is Step 11 meditation?

There is plenty of extra-Program material to read on this topic, and both the Big Book and the *12 and 12* suggest that we should read it. They also suggest that, if the particular faith we may belong to has a tradition of meditation, we should explore it. When we start to read this literature -- and we usually start to read it when we are first coming to meditation, so we tend to be vulnerable to the opinions of so-called "experts" -- we can be troubled to find that many writers say there is only one real way to meditate: their way. It turns out that meditation is a process, even a ritual, to which these authors individually have the unique key. If we do not meditate in exactly the way each of them tells us to, then we are going to be in trouble. Which would not be a problem, if only they were united in their definitive answers. But, alas! -- they are not. It turns out that you can only meditate properly if you are a Christian, or a Buddhist, or a particular kind of Buddhist, or Hindu, or Sufi. It turns out that you can only meditate if you have a teacher ... or no teacher at all. It turns out that if you do not meditate the way this author tells you you should meditate, you are not only going to meditate ineffectually -- you are going to do yourself positive spiritual damage. And all these authors are evidently convinced of the accuracy of their recommendations, and -- by implication -- the falseness of everybody else's.

As recovering addicts, perhaps we should go back to first principles as far as the practice of Step 11 meditation is concerned. In fact, let us look at what we have learned from our practice of Step 10, and see if that is helpful with regard to our practice of Step 11 meditation.

The conclusion we reached in our study of Step 10 was that its main purpose is to make us aware that in each and every situation we encounter, *we know neither what we should do nor how to obtain the power to do it*. In an odd sense, the results of working Step 10 are peculiarly negative. We examine our thoughts and feelings, we determine what it is that we want to do, even while realizing that doing what we want would probably damage ourselves and other people. We come to see that if we attempt to refrain from doing what it is that we want to do, using self-will, we will inevitably fail. And yet -- as we involve ourselves in this very practice of accepting that we are powerless even to determine what is right, never mind finding the power to do it -- we find that we are miraculously given the knowledge of what to do and the power to do it. And this is something we can -- or should -- experience moment by moment. Moment by moment we are aware of what we are thinking and what we are feeling. Moment by moment we accept that we do not know what we should do. Moment by moment we are powerless to

do what we should do, even if we *were* aware of what that was. And yet -- miraculously -- moment by moment we seem to be told what to do and to be given the power to carry that out. This is the "linkage" between Steps 10 and 11 that the *Twelve and Twelve* talks about. Through moment-by-moment inspiration and intuition, Something other than ourselves directs us and gives us the power that we simply cannot summon up on our own.

So much for the moment-by-moment practice of Step 11. But this very process which we have discovered in our study of Step 10 and summarized above also points directly to what the practice of meditation -- that meditation which we practice alone or in the company of other people at a specific time of the day -- should probably involve.

Nothing. Doing nothing.

Now, there are not many of the supposedly "definitive" books on meditation mentioned above that suggest that meditation should consist of doing nothing. Quite the reverse, in fact: the vast majority of them suggest exactly what we should do when we meditate. We should count the breaths. We should recite a mantra. We should put some sort of guided meditation on our music system and follow that. We should exercise our imaginations. We should wrestle with a "koan" -- a Buddhist practice. But rarely will our reading recommend that we do nothing.

There are two questions at least to consider here. The first is why we should be suggesting that meditation should consist of doing nothing. The second is, if meditation ought to consist of doing nothing, why does most literature on meditation seem to imply that meditation should consist in doing *something*?

Let's start with the first question. Why should meditation consist of doing nothing?

Well, the answer follows on quite logically from the summary of Step 10 practice we looked at earlier in this essay. We saw that Step 10 consists at its heart in our acknowledgment of our complete helplessness in the face of our thoughts and feelings, our inability to determine what we should do and to find the power to do it. And yet we find, as we practice Step 10 moment by moment to the best of our ability, that we *are* able to determine what we should do, and we *are* given the power to do it, as our practice of Step 10 merges imperceptibly with our practice of Step 11. We find that Something, a Power greater than ourselves, tells us what to do and gives us the power to do it, moment by moment.

What did we ourselves do to gain that insight, that power?

The answer, of course, is *nothing*.

Those of us familiar with the AA Big Book may be eerily reminded here of its treatment of the results with respect to alcohol of working Step 9. Here is what it says:

"And we have ceased fighting anything or anyone, even alcohol. For by this time sanity will have returned. We will seldom be interested in liquor. If tempted, we recoil from it as from a hot flame. We react sanely and normally, and we will find that this has happened automatically. We will see that our new attitude toward liquor has been given us without any thought or effort on our part. It just comes! That is the miracle of it. We are not fighting it, neither are we avoiding temptation. We feel as though we had been placed in a position of neutrality safe and protected. We have not even sworn off. Instead, the problem has been removed. It does not exist for us. We are neither cocky nor are we afraid. That is how we react so long as we keep in fit spiritual condition."

Now try re-reading the passage, substituting the words "our will" for liquor. Isn't that exactly what happens in our practice of Step 10, insofar as we find ourselves able to practice it moment by moment? Don't we find that, when we practice Step 10, and allow the power of Step 11 into our lives, that the insight as to what we should do and the power to do it "just comes"?

And that is why we suggest that, in meditation, we should seek to do *nothing*. When we do nothing in meditation, we are modeling the only appropriate response we can make to God as we understand God with respect to our supposed "problems." We do *nothing*. We sit or kneel in silence, in inactivity, before our Higher Power. We sit or kneel in our acknowledged powerlessness. We "wait on God," as the Bible puts it. We do not pretend, even for a moment, that we can somehow make this gesture more effective by performing some activity while we meditate. To do so would be to believe, at least in some small measure, that we are capable of doing something ourselves to increase the all-powerfulness of God.

Well, so much for theory -- what about the realities of doing nothing while meditating? Why do so few writers on meditation suggest doing nothing?

The basic reason, of course, is that doing nothing for any period of time at all turns out to be very difficult. Even in the East, which has a rich meditative tradition, it's regarded as difficult. For us in the West, used to doing this and doing that in order to "achieve" something, it's almost impossible. And so we

are recommended to do certain things. Our advice here, for what it is worth, is that doing something that is as close to nothing as possible may turn out to be the most effective. Counting the breaths, or merely watching the breaths, may be the activity of choice. But any simple, repetitive activity may suffice.

When we establish a practice of meditation at regular times of the day, we find to our surprise that "doing nothing" starts sooner or later to happen all by itself. It may take weeks, months, even years for this to happen, and when it does happen it may do so only briefly. But when it does occur, it can be striking. Of course, we try to "grab hold" of it immediately, and attempt to "do nothing" by doing it ... and of course that cannot work.

Nor should it even be a goal. We must always start meditation from where we are, not where we think we should be -- we have no choice but to start from where we are, and anyway, where we think we should be will probably prove, as we cultivate our practice, to have been just another attempt on our part to direct our own lives towards what we think should be the goal. Whatever method we may use for meditation, we do not use it in order to keep using just that method for ever. We use it because we must start somewhere. We use it because we seek for God to guide our meditation, as God will, if only we are open to God. We cannot learn to do nothing ourselves -- we are powerless even to do that. We must allow God to teach us, through the very meditation practice itself.

At least three great religious traditions value doing nothing in meditation. In some branches of Buddhism, it is known as *shikantaza* -- "just sitting." And it appears also in the Christian and Jewish faiths: *Be still and know that I am God* (Ps. 46:10). Not *count the breaths and know that I am God* or *listen to meditation music and know that I am God*. Just be still.

Do nothing.