



ONE BREATH AT A TIME



A Skeptic's Guide to Christian Meditation

J. DANA TRENT



ONE BREATH AT A TIME: A SKEPTIC'S GUIDE TO CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

Copyright © 2019 by J. Dana Trent

All rights reserved.

This advanced reader copy is for marketing purposes only and is not intended for distribution or resale. For more information on this book, visit the Upper Room Books® website: books.upperroom.org.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without permission except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews. For information, write Upper Room Books®, 1908 Grand Avenue, Nashville, TN 37212.

Upper Room®, Upper Room Books®, and design logos are trademarks owned by The Upper Room®, Nashville, Tennessee. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations not otherwise marked are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

To connect with the author, visit jdanatrent.com, or find her on the following social media platforms: Twitter (@jdanatrent), Instagram (@jdanatrent), and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/jdanatrent.author>).

Printed in the United States of America

For Joanna, who planted the seed, and
Heather, who watered it.



CONTENTS

Chapter One
Head Clutter: Reluctant Beginnings

Chapter Two
Jesus Meditates? The Scripture and Theology of Meditation

Chapter Three
Calming the Chaos of Body and Mind: Meditating in Modernity

Chapter Four
Brass Tacks: The How of Meditation

Chapter Five
Forty-Day Journey: Practice, Not Perfection

Chapter Six
The Skeptic's Journey: What I Learned

Chapter Seven
The Reader's Journey: What Did You Learn?

Appendix
Notes





Chapter One



HEAD CLUTTER

Reluctant Beginners

We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners.

—Thomas Merton

“You should try meditation.”

This is familiar advice, doled out by loved ones, friends, colleagues, and, worst of all, doctors. They make meditation seem so accessible with their casual, friendly suggestion. But with my diagnosis of chronic migraine—a condition that leaves me feeling as though I have a pick-axe in alternating eyeballs fifteen days out of each month—the suggestion to meditate is akin to unsolicited wisdom from the well-meaning folks who might also say, “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV.” When I show up for lunch meetings on cloudy days unable to remove my sunglasses, prescriptions unfurl. Instead of responding to my pain with, “How awful. I’m so sorry,” my lunchmates propose a barrage of suggestions because they know it will be “just the thing” (be it an over-the-counter drug, essential oil, yoga pose, or supplement) to cure me forever. Moreover, they assume that this is the first time I’ve heard their idea.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” I respond politely, even though I’ve already downed my allotted five migraine prescriptions and a half bottle of anti-inflammatories, doused myself in lavender oil, swallowed two tablespoons of Sriracha in lemon salt water, twisted myself into unspeakable yoga pretzels, and squeezed my acupressure points—all before 6:00 a.m. I understand where friends and colleagues are coming from when they offer said treatments—I’m an ENFJ who leads with Type 2 on the Enneagram, meaning I am the *helper* of all helpers.



But when my therapist said, “You should try meditation,” six days after my mother died unexpectedly, I was enraged.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” I said, instead of ripping her head off. I was hardly able to calm my mind enough to form sentences, let alone *meditate*. I’d been glued to a hospital or hospice bed nonstop for two weeks. I hadn’t slept; my cortisol levels were sky-high, my body bloated, my brain speeding like a car at the Indy 500. How could I be still and breathe? Still, I reminded myself that she meant well; everyone does.

I had been telling my therapist about my recurring medical trauma nightmares that began when my mother was admitted to a North Carolina intensive care unit for perforated diverticulitis. On that day, I had been recording an audiobook in Nashville, 500 miles from my dying mother. My editor and I wrapped up quickly; the entire publishing staff enveloped me in prayer and got me to airport where I begged ticket counter personnel to let me standby on the next flight going anywhere near Raleigh. Minutes before they closed the gate door, the airline obliged, sending me to Charlotte. Along the way, I awkwardly blubbered and sobbed behind sunglasses while pressed between two uncomfortable businessmen in the bulkhead, playing a loop of thirty-six years of life with my mom in my mind.

I finally arrived in Raleigh and my husband, Fred, raced me to the hospital. My doctor-brother, Ron, had supervised more than forty-eight hours of nonstop care for Mom. As her healthcare power of attorney, he advised her doctors and surgeons on her wishes, translated CT scan findings and medical jargon for me, and parsed all the possible outcomes. For the next two weeks, Ron, Fred, and I remained with Mom, anticipating her every need like she was our very own sick and fragile infant, unable to articulate her pain or go to the bathroom without us.

After my mother’s death, the nightmares got worse. I’d sit up in bed at 2:00 a.m. and ask Fred, “Where’s my mom?”

“She’s gone,” he’d say, as he pulled me close.

The dreams were my brain’s PTSD carryover from the hyper-alert posture of constant worry and exhaustion, where medical rooms make days and nights indistinguishable, and guilt reigns. *Are we doing enough for her?* I asked myself constantly.

My therapist assured me the nightmares would dissipate, but they were part of a normal, post-trauma response I didn’t yet understand. “You need to stop the automatic thinking,” she encouraged. “You should try a guided meditation practice,” she added, and threw out names of apps I had heard of. I resented this remedy, likening it to the migraine “cures” hurled at me in the past. But this time it was worse—because she was right.

The next morning, I began the world's most pitiful six-day meditation practice.

A Beginner's Mind

Sitting atop a gray *zafu*—a fancy meditation cushion my husband bought long before my mom died—I downloaded the meditation app everyone gushes over. I tried it—three long minutes each day for six terrible days—focusing on my breath, noticing my thoughts like cars in traffic, and withholding judgment, blah, blah, blah.

I couldn't get past the narrator's voice. He was better suited to playing a gritty Marvel Comics villain than to guiding me on meditating through my chaotic, grief-fueled mind. Had I been in a rational state, his voice might not have irritated me. Its pitch and cadence merely made him an easy scapegoat for me to cement myself in stubbornness, skeptical of my ability to sustain a meditation practice while drowning in grief. But it was also the *intrusion* of his voice—his commands belting from my iPhone's speaker, the strange cognitive dissonance of technology beckoning me to the gate of the mystical, peaceful realm for which I yearned. How could I settle my traumatized mind enough to tiptoe closer to God while the very device that buzzed incessantly during Mom's illness sat right beside me, *adding* to the cacophony of noise in my head? The smartphone meditation app felt like a magnetized iron rod, pulling to it every random, useless, rusty nail in my brain.

Each app session looked the same:

Breathe, Dana. Focus. Inhale; exhale. Inhale 1, 2, 3, 4.

Ignore his voice. It's not that bad. OK—it's that bad. Who thought this narrator was a good idea? Had he lost his job as a villain in the James Bond franchise? Did Fred and I see the last James Bond movie? Something about spectre? What is a spectre? Queen Elizabeth's walking stick? Adele sang that theme song, right? Or was it Sam Smith?

Breathe, Dana, breathe. Focus. Ignore his voice. Inhale 1, 2, 3, 4.

Where is this guy's pink slip? Couldn't they have cast a velvety-voiced human? James Earl Jones would have been perfect. Oh! Sally Kellerman from the M.A.S.H. movie. I forgot about her. It could have been the Jones-Kellerman meditation duo.

Breathe, Dana, breathe. Focus on the breath.

What was Kellerman's voice-over commercial in the 80s? Ketchup? No, no—it was Hidden Valley Ranch salad dressing! Poured lusciously over iceberg lettuce. Now I'm craving croutons. Can you make croutons at home? How do you get them not to turn out like the square ones at cheap salad bars?

Breathe, Dana, breathe. Focus on the breath. Inhaling 1, 2, 3, 4. Exhaling 4, 3, 2, 1.

My hamstrings are so tight. I need do more yoga. No, ballet! They stretch a lot. Was Patrick Swayze a classically trained ballerina? Would that have made him a ballerino? Sweet Jesus, that man could dance. "Now I've had the time of my life." Ready for the lift? Best dance scene ever.

Breathe, Dana, breathe. Focus on the breath. Inhaling 1, 2, 3, 4. Exhaling 4, 3, 2, 1.

Dear Lord, save me from this agony.

Agony. Aging. Agent. Agriculture. Agoraphobia. Agnus Dei—ahh that's more appropriate.

Breathe, Dana, breathe. Focus on the breath. Inhaling 1, 2, 3, 4. Exhaling 4, 3, 2, 1.

Agnus Dei: Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. Lambs—they're so adorable soft-looking, though I've never actually touched one. But they jump on the beds in those mattress ads with such glee—or are those sheep? What's the difference?

Breathe, Dana, breathe. Focus on the breath. Inhaling 1, 2, 3, 4. Exhaling 4, 3, 2, 1.

Lambs! Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world. Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world.

Sins. Savior. Salvation. Silence. Lambs.

Silence of the Lambs! Ah—no! No, no, no! Don't go there. That was a terrible movie. I'll never get those horrifying 138 minutes of my life back. The only saving grace was that I discovered that Tom Petty song: "She was an American girl."

Breathe, Dana, breathe. Focus on the breath. Inhaling—1, 2, 3, 4 . . . exhaling 4, 3, 2, 1.

Tom Petty. Gone to soon. I hope James Earl Jones and Sally Kellerman are still kicking so they can re-record this meditation app. They'd make billions. Hearts would melt; wars would cease. We could get this guy back his real job on the set of The Avengers. We'd play Tom Petty at his going away party, everyone smiling as we cut the big sheet cake with blue icing that says, "Don't come around here no more."

Ding.

Finally, those three agonizing minutes were up, and Mr. Villain and I had accomplished nothing.

I'm not skeptical about the entirety of spiritual practices—just the ones in which I'm supposed to sit completely still *with my phone beside me* to calm my traumatized mind and listen for God. I can pray and journal until the end times—my brain spinning plates like an over-achieving carnival worker. But I've always doubted my ability to sustain a sitting-still, ears-open meditation practice, which is different from praying and writing. How do people use these apps without launching into a silent monologue in which a very bored God is the

sole audience member? How do I sit and actually listen, instead of hopping from topic to topic and prattling away in my mind? And, most importantly, how do I do it *every day*?

Teachers Make the Worst Students

Because I was (perhaps mistakenly) admitted to a top-tier divinity school and am married to a Hindu who's a former monastic and has kept a steady meditation practice for nearly twenty years, I've picked up a few contemplative practice bread crumbs. I've taken courses and read books on meditation and spiritual practices. I've even *taught* meditation.

As a former hospital chaplain, I learned quickly how to create, hold, and lead people through a sacred space. That skill, paired with the accumulated techniques I'd gleaned throughout the years, afforded me enough competency to *lead* meditation to groups—from Millennials to senior adults. But consistently *practicing* meditation is another story.

Teaching and holding space for others to engage in spiritual practice affords me a luxury I'm addicted to: control. I'm the alert instructor, the helper—eyes open, brain engaged, proceeding from one step to the next, reading directions and leading eager meditators in and out of sessions, all while watching the timer. I'm not the one who's trying to be still or focus or be contemplative. I'm the one who's done the research, read all the books, made the lesson plan. I'm the one *in charge*, and people *need* me to be in charge. This is a teacher's true nature: We're bossy helpers who loved to be needed, which sometimes makes us lousy students.

But this teacher could no longer deny that she needed some good old-fashioned homework—no apps, no tricks, just *practice*. Day after day, week after week, God had sent those pesky messengers—from my therapist to the gritty-voiced app narrator—to deliver the syllabus for the class I was skeptical that I could pass: Sit-down-and-practice-meditation-101.

Prayer vs. Meditation

I love to talk. In my profession, this is a necessity; in meditation—not so much. In the classroom, I'm the professor who establishes the daily learning objective, then energetically bounces between lecturing and guiding discussion via the Socratic method. I ask students questions to stimulate their critical thinking; they discover and connect underlying ideas in order to apply them to an assessment and life. This requires a lot of emcee extroversion and speedy verbal processing. But as much as I love to talk, I needed to practice *listening*—specifically to God.



I grew up among evangelical Baptists with robust extemporaneous prayer lives, the kind where folks can (and will) talk *to* God anytime, anywhere, aloud or silently, for any length of time. I was raised to chit-chat with the Divine for hours. My prayer meetings with God were then followed with journaling pages of notes, listing God’s tasks. As an adolescent, I also kept a “Prayer Box”—a Belk’s department store jewelry box I painted yellow and labeled with a Sharpie. It held slips of paper with the priorities I’d chosen for God—just so God was clear on what needed to be accomplished *right now*.

In as much as I was good at bossing God around, Sunday school and youth group also taught me how to “balance” my prayer life with a more well-rounded sacred “conversation” that wasn’t just about requests. I learned the ACTS prayer by heart (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication), as well as the TRIP (Thanksgiving, Repent, Intercession, Purpose) and PARTS (Praise, Ask, Repent, Thank, Share) methods. But with me *still* doing the talking—whether it was praise, gratitude, confession, or “Help me!”—I wasn’t listening.

My prayer sessions were full of words and goals, not Psalm 46:10: “Be still and know that I am God!” I wasn’t heeding God’s “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12, NKJV.) Even if I had I shut up long enough to catch a message from God, it would have to be like 1 Kings 19:11-13, only God would need to arrive in *all the loud ways*: the shouting of a strong wind, the earthquake, and fire—*all at once*—for me to notice. There is nothing wrong with a fervent prayer life, but for those of us who can’t quit flapping our gums, we miss *hearing* God—whom scripture tells us arrives in the quiet stillness.

Meditation, I learned, is often *wordless prayer*. This intentional and quiet (or very little internal dialogue) practice helps us focus our attention on God—and *listen* for God’s “still small voice”—so that we may experience God’s revelations. In contrast with prayer, meditation uses fewer words (or none) so that our spiritual and mental effort is concentrated on quieting the mind’s chaos to *hear* what God has to say.

Practice Doesn’t Make Perfect—But It Sure Does Help

My therapist was right. I needed to halt my brain and body’s automatic response to my mother’s sudden illness and death to begin my journey of healing. I needed to cut off my mind’s engine and pull the parking brake. But—in accordance with my teacherly ways—I knew I had to write my *own* curriculum. No apps; no tech—just a good old-fashioned lesson plan. I had to forge my own meditation path, one that would work for me—the restless, bossy woman



who doesn't like to sit still, be quiet, and listen to God. And I certainly didn't need the added distraction of an app.

But beginnings are hard; I didn't want to start from zero—none of us does. Thomas Merton—the wise monastic and Catholic priest who dedicated his life to spiritual practice—reminds us: We will never be anything but beginners. Once I embraced being a meditation student—not a teacher—and, therefore, a beginner, I found something refreshing about being a novice. I could simply make *progress*—which is the job of all students—and no one (including myself) should or could expect faultlessness. I crafted a meditation plan that worked for me—based on a beginner's curious mind and *wabi sabi*, the ancient Japanese practice of imperfection. Children instinctually understand the wisdom of being a novice. Before they hit puberty and become self-conscious, they will try *anything* for the mere intrigue of it, without worrying about getting it “right.” Adults need this reminder: Meditation is a *practice*—not an exercise in perfection.

After thirty-six years of deep Christian faith and fervent prayer, my most sincere effort for *listening* to the Triune God was birthed from an urgent need. But I also realized it came from a place of hunger, of yearning to go deeper. No matter the inciting incident, we have to travel our own fledgling trails. Our meditation practice—just like our unique relationships with God—is unlike anyone else's. We are all beginners—and always will be.

How to Use This Book

This book provides you with the framework and structure to be a beginner. I designed it like a lesson plan, providing a safe learning environment for you to explore various meditation tools in a non-intimidating way. This book draws on and is inspired by scripture, Christ's practice, ancient and modern approaches to meditation—from Eastern traditions to early Christian monastics to Christian mystics—and, finally, twentieth-century Centering Prayer. I've gleaned wisdom from all these threads and woven them into an accessible forty-day practice for folks like me, who are skeptical they can actually be still and listen to God.

By sharing my own reasoning (and reluctance) for trying meditation, I hope you feel encouraged to consider why you felt drawn to this book. Why do you want to embark on this journey? Does your brain feel cluttered and loud? Are you physically and mentally stuck in overdrive, living in a 24/7 culture of go, buy, do? What purpose or intention do you bring to your meditation practice? Are you hoping to listen for and discern God's voice? Take a moment and consider what is propelling your interest, curiosity, or need.

Chapters two and three make the case for meditation, differentiating it from prayer, but also providing a strong foundation on the role of scripture, theology, church history, science, and technology in meditation. As with other spiritual practices that I've begun (like sabbath), I've learned that the *why* of something sustains the *how*. Why meditate—why not just pray? These chapters unpack that question and are centered on Jesus' meditation practice, as well as empirical, data-driven evidence for establishing a meditation practice in our nonstop 24/7 world. Chapter four outlines in detail the five modalities (types of meditation) for your toolbox.

In chapter five, you begin your own forty-day meditation practice, remembering that meditation is a journey, not a destination. Strive for progress, not perfection. Your forty-day journey can take place any time during the year—even during liturgical seasons like Lent and Advent. Chapter five leads you through the wilderness, mirroring Jesus' forty-day journey, offering eight days of practice per meditation type. Each daily practice contains a freedom statement, an opening and closing ritual, brief directions for the practice, as well as prompts adapted from the Ignatian Examen for optional journaling. The order of each modality is purposeful, helping you build your knowledge and confidence, so use the outlined sequence—at least your first time through the book. Even if you encounter a modality you don't like or find helpful, pay attention to why it feels prickly. Record your reflections in the daily Examen. What gets measured gets managed; the struggles (like my wrestling for six days with the meditation app) are useful in understanding your spiritual growth.

Chapter six explores my own journey through this resource, which I had completed multiple times before this book ever reached your hands. In that chapter, I describe what happened to me as I embraced a meditation practice, beginning with my trauma nightmares and hesitations, outlining my challenges, wins, and setbacks, and, finally, sharing where I am now. This chapter serves as a reminder there is a real, striving, and struggling human behind this book, who is walking alongside you on this journey. You are not alone; you and I are beginners together.

Chapter seven gives you the opportunity to reflect on your own forty-day journey. This chapter includes questions for you, scenarios you may have run into, and suggestions to assist you in continuing your meditation practice. This book is meant to be used repeatedly, and you may choose to write your thoughts directly in the book or in a separate journal to document your progress. Finally, the appendix provides an at-a-glance list of useful meditation resources, including quotes, scripture passages, and a resource list for the research compiled in this book, as well as additional books to guide your practice.

Group Settings

This book can easily be used in group settings. When using it with others, however, encourage members to take turns teaching and leading the group. Otherwise, it's easy to fall into the trap I'd been stuck in for years—being the teacher instead of being the student. Here are some ways to utilize this book effectively with others:

Family. I encourage you to use this book as a family and/or with your spouse if that will help you stay accountable to the practice. In fact, this book could be used intergenerationally—with children or older adults—as a way to listen for God and cope with modern-day stresses. For the youngest members of your family, you may need to simplify some concepts, but don't hesitate to involve children. Through teaching and leading many workshops on sabbath and meditation, I've observed that children enjoy learning different spiritual practices and are often more receptive than adults. Children have much to teach us.

Each daily practice can be done as a family, but encourage your family members to keep the silence during the actual practice so that they don't distract one another. Pick a time of day that works for everyone and doesn't cause unnecessary stress and agree on a time limit for your meditation. The leader should remind the family members of the modality for that day. Set the timer and practice silently—keep the time especially short if involving little ones. Afterward, feel free to complete your Ignatian Examen as a group or write your responses privately and determine if you want to share.

Faith-Based, Congregational Small Group. Because a forty-day journey comprises this book, it can be used during liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, Eastertide, or Ordinary Time). Or it can be used in ways that are conducive to cultural and societal calendars—New Year's resolutions, a summer spiritual practice series, or a kick-off to the academic year. Below is a sample outline that includes ample time to discuss the chapters and two weeks of practice. Or the group can simply meet the first week to introduce the practice and discuss chapters one through four and meet each subsequent week to check-in on the praxis portion. I encourage you to schedule a debriefing session after the forty days to discuss what you have learned.

OPTION ONE

Week 1: Opening/Invitation to Book (Read chapter one before the first meeting.)

Week 2: Theology of Meditation; Meditation for the 24/7 World (Discuss chapters two and three.)

Week 3: Introduction to the Forty-Day Toolkit (Discuss chapter four; consider your curiosities and anticipations for the journey.)

Week 4: Practice Modality One (Breath Meditation). Check in with your group. How did the week go? Share and discuss the Ignatian Examen and prepare for Modality Two (Centering Meditation).

Week 5: Your Journey (Discuss chapters six and seven.) What happened in your fourteen days of practice (Breath and Centering Meditation)? What challenged you? What energized you?

Optional Week 6: Continue to practice, debrief, and discuss.

OPTION TWO

Week 1: Briefly discuss chapters one through four (members will have read those chapters before coming to the first meeting), and Modality One (Breath Meditation) check-in. How did it go? What challenged/energized you?

Week 2: Modality Two (Centering Meditation) check-in. How did it go? What challenged/energized you?

Week 3: Modality Three (*Lectio Divina* Meditation) check-in. How did it go? What challenged/energized you?

Week 4: Modality Four (Loving-Kindness Meditation) check-in. How did it go? What challenged/energized you?

Week 5: Modality Five (Devotional Meditation) check-in. How did it go? What challenged/energized you? Also, briefly discuss remaining chapters and your own plan for moving forward with a mediation practice (see Chapter Seven: The Reader's Journey for specifics).

Book Club (Faith-Based or Not). Most book clubs read a book and then meet to discuss it. You can certainly use this traditional method, but be sure to give your club enough time to complete the forty-day journey. Or you could divide the book (and your meetings) in two: Meet first to discuss chapters one through four. For your next meeting (after at least forty days), meet to discuss how the practice went, as well as chapters six and seven. Your group may choose to read another book in between in order to give everyone time to get through the forty-day portion. A good companion book to this one is *For Sabbath's Sake: Embracing Your Need for Rest, Worship, and Community* (Upper Room Books, 2017).

Before You Begin

Before you begin this book—whether on your own or with your family, your Sunday school class, small group, or book club, ponder these questions and write your responses in your book or in a journal.

1. What led you to choose this book? What was your motivation for wanting to explore meditation? If this book was chosen for you by someone else, why do you think God brought this practice into your life at this time?

2. Consider the stressors in your life. What makes your mind, body, and spirit feel cluttered, disconnected, and overwhelmed? Imagine how practicing silence and listening for God might help.

3. Does being still and listening to God come naturally to you? Why or why not?

4. Name any resistance you feel to beginning this practice (skepticism, uncertainty, doubt, reluctance, frustration, resentment, and so on).

5. Describe your curiosity about meditation.

6. Name your intention for beginning this practice. How might your relationship with God, yourself (your body, mind, and spirit), and others deepen, grow, and benefit from this practice?

Tips for Beginning and Maintaining Your Meditation Practice

1. Everyone can meditate—especially Christians. Upon hearing my Hindu and Buddhist friends discuss their dedicated meditation practices, I was the first to say, “I’d much rather be talking and praying” or “Christians don’t typically do that.” But these statements are not true. I *can* sit still and be quiet for at least three minutes, even if it’s a struggle—and so can you. Historically, the earliest Christians practiced various forms of meditation. In scripture, Jesus did too by venturing to a quiet place by himself and listening for God’s will.

God created the breath that moves in and out of your body. Christian meditation is about using this life force to calm the mind and embrace silence to fill yourself with the awareness of God’s presence. This book will lead you through meditating *on* God, God’s scripture, and God’s revelation of God’s self. Meditation not only helps you listen for God to deepen your spiritual life and connect with God, yourself, and others but also has scientifically proven benefits for coping with stress and optimizing health. (You’ll read more about the scriptural and physiological benefits of meditation in chapters two and three.)

2. Plan a time and place for your practice *ahead* of time. Choose a time and place that is consistently quiet (and all yours if you are practicing by yourself). I’ve found that the time of day (or night) is more important than the space because available space often can vary. Is your meditation time first thing in the morning? Is it on your coffee break, lunch break, or just before bed? I have a dear friend who practices in the carpool line for fifteen minutes while she waits to pick her child up from school. Is it during the bus or train ride before you go into work or return home? Schedule a time for meditation on your daily calendar. Set your phone alarm or an inexpensive battery-operated alarm clock (if you want to go lower-tech like me) to remind yourself of your daily commitment.

You can also use that same device or a similar one (like a kitchen timer) to time your meditation practice, beginning with no more than three minutes. Because I prefer not to have any tempting smartphone around me, I use the timer on the stove in the morning. Start small—trust me, three minutes is *plenty* in the beginning. When you’re ready, increase the time to five, ten, fifteen minutes, or beyond. By starting small, however, you are setting yourself up for success. Protect those minutes—even when you don’t feel like it. Consider them a date with God—something you would be remiss to bail on completely. Once you find your rhythm, those three minutes will give you the space to start, continue, or end your day with an awareness of God’s presence.

3. Practice each meditation technique, even if you encounter one you don’t like. The Ignatian Examen will help you collect spiritual data about *why* you struggled with a particular

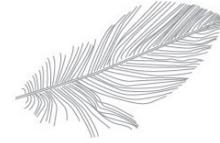
modality and what you might learn from it. I find that examining what's difficult is just as important as celebrating what came easily. God is present no matter what—amid the joy and the frustrations. Once you've completed the entire cycle of forty days—and are thereby familiar with each practice—you may pick and choose regarding what works best for you. After the meditation app fiasco, I wanted to chuck breath meditation all together, but I got rid of the app and started at the beginning (with the breath) and learned that this life force is the foundation for the other meditation techniques.

4. Grace yourself. This book is designed to give you a variety of tools with just enough accountability and structure to help you succeed. But grace yourself. There will be days when you have trouble making time for your practice. There will be days when your meditation session feels clunky and awkward. Don't give up. Start fresh the next day. Offer yourself grace in those tough moments, and you'll find that this grace helps you return to the practice. Be gentle with yourself. Above all, embrace the beauty of being a beginner.





Modality One



BREATH MEDITATION

Breath meditation is a good beginner's meditation tool for several reasons: (1) our breath is always with us, (2) it provides a foundation for the other modalities, and (3) it reminds us of the life force within us and the creator of that life. “The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 33:4). The psalmist writes, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of [God’s] mouth” (Ps. 33:6). Everything in creation has been made by God and has been given life by the breath of God—including humans. (See Genesis 2:7.) Our breath—our life source—comes from God within us, all day, every day. But we don’t think about our breath—until something goes wrong and we cannot breathe. Becoming aware of this life force, which comes from God, is the first step in any meditation practice. Slowing, deepening, and smoothing our breathing helps us notice this very gift of air and God within us.

Breath meditation is the simplest—and yet most complex—of all the modalities. Let’s walk through the steps together:

1. Sit comfortably, either in a chair or in a cross-legged position on the floor. If you need to stand because of pain or limb stiffness, it’s OK, though sitting is preferred because it allows for deeper relaxation and lowering of your blood pressure and pulse. If you must stand, ensure that you can maintain your balance if you choose to close your eyes. Otherwise, find a comfortable seated position. Sit up tall, allowing your shoulders to sink low from your ears. Rest your palms on your thighs. If you are sleepy, turn your palms up toward the sky; otherwise, palms down.

2. Breathe deeply and slowly. Close your eyes and focus on your breath. Notice your inhalations through the nose and your exhalations through the mouth. How do you feel as you inhale? Light or heavy? Deep or shallow? Slow or fast? Smooth or staccato? How do you feel as you exhale?



3. As you continue your awareness of the breath, try to breathe deeply, slowly, and smoothly with each inhale and exhale. Count to four as you inhale and exhale—in, 2, 3, 4 and out, 2, 3, 4. Do not hold your breath; simply seek a breathing pattern that is deeper, slower, and smoother.

4. Continue breathing deeply, slowly, and smoothly. Notice how you feel. Aim to make the texture of your breathing as smooth as possible. As you inhale, imagine God's light and love filling your body—from your head to your toes. As you exhale, imagine letting go of all that is not God—fear, stress, anxiety, pride, ego, anger, bitterness, resentment. As you continue this process, imagine yourself bathed in and illuminated by God's light and love.

5. When your mind wanders or distraction comes knocking, release all judgment and worry. Gently return your focus to your breath. A wandering or distracted mind is completely natural. If this happens once, ten times, 100 times, or 10,000 times, imagine it as an opportunity—not a problem—to invite yourself back to your breath and to God.

6. Continue your deep, slow, smooth breathing until the timer goes off. Inhale God's light; exhale stress.

7. When the timer finishes, slowly open your eyes and bring yourself back to awareness through gentle movements in your body. Record your experience using the questions from the Ignatian Examen.



Day One

BREATH MEDITATION

Freedom Statement

“Today, I begin my journey drawing nearer to the Divine. I release all judgment and acknowledge that the spiritual life is a practice—not an exercise in perfection.”

Opening Ritual: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10).

Be still, and know that I am God. | Be still and know. | Be still. | Be.

Invitation to Practice

Engage in three minutes of breath meditation. Become aware of your breath with each inhalation and exhalation. Breathe slowly and deeply until your breathing becomes smooth. When you feel distracted, gently return your attention to your breath.

Closing Ritual: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10).

Be. | Be still. | Be still and know. | Be still, and know that I am God.

Invitation to Daily Examen

God-with-Us. How did you feel God’s presence during this practice, if at all?

Gratitude. Offer thanks to God for giving you the breath of life. Give thanks for the ways in which you felt God’s presence before, during, and after your meditation.

Growth. What was challenging about today’s meditation?

Hope. Look toward tomorrow’s meditation. What do you hope for?

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Connect with Dana in the following ways:

Twitter: @jdanatrent

Instagram: @jdanatrent

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/jdanatrent.author/>

What did you like most about this sample chapter? What surprised you?

What has been your own experience with meditation?

Share using the hashtag #OneBreathataTime.