

A Beginners Guide to Experiential Spirituality



Produced by Magdalene Circle (www.magdalene-circle.org) in Austin Texas.

Introduction

Welcome to Magdalene Circle of Austin, TX. More important than that, welcome to experiential spirituality.

Experiential spirituality may be very different from what you're used to, and that's fine. The main difference is most religions are about what you do (orthopraxic) or what you believe (orthodoxic). We're about what we've experienced: both external and internal.

Internal experience can be a difficult concept to understand. While most religions include the concept of prayer, few focus on deliberately creating spiritual experiences. Since we do focus on creating such experiences, here are some beginner's exercises that may help:

Section 1: Basic Meditation

When most people hear the word meditation they think of passive meditation. Popular culture is filled with images of people retreating into mountains and sitting cross-legged for hours on end. While that is a valid method, neither a change in location nor hours in an uncomfortable position are required. Rather, it's as easy as resting. But it's resting with a purpose. If you do fall asleep, that only means that at that moment you needed the sleep more than the meditation, and try again when you feel more rested.

Motionlessness: Begin by sitting or laying in a comfortable position. You may find it easier to sit in a straight-backed chair, a recliner, or even lay on the floor or on a bed. Pillows may help, particularly under backs or injured limbs. The important thing is that you find a comfortable position you can stay in for a while. At this point, simply practice not moving anything, including your tongue. If possible, close your eyes so that blinking is not required. Feel free to think about anything at this point, from happy memories to to-do list, as you are only learning to be physically still. Wait until you can do this for 5 minutes before you move on and 10 is even better.

Breathing: Once you have reached a level of comfort simply being still, focus on making your breathing deeper and longer, without creating any strain. The feeling should be one of relaxation. You may wish to hold the breath on the inhale or even on the exhale, too. The most common pattern is to slowly, relaxingly breathe in for a count of four, hold it for a count of four, and breathe out for a count of four. Once you're used to that, add a four count between exhale and inhale. At this point, your mind should be on the breathing itself. Far from boring, this can be intensely relaxing and rewarding. Often, people report that this is where they began to "meet themselves." 15 minutes is a good amount of time for this practice, but only when you can enjoy all 15 minutes

Not Thinking: Called in Japanese "Zazen," or "no-mind," this is a misunderstood practice. In truth, your goal is to continue your practice and empty the mind of all thoughts, even of breathing. To do this is very difficult, but the practice itself isn't. Perfection is not required, and certainly not from the beginning. The number one problem that new practitioners have is that they want to yell at themselves when they have a thought. But yelling at yourself -is- a thought. If your thoughts wander, just gently remind yourself what you are doing and return to striving to find your silence. Try not to have a goal in mind, just enjoy the peace.

Section 2: Advanced Meditation

Once you have learned to relax your mind as well as your body. You'll move on to focusing on things on purpose. This is appropriately called "Concentration," and it can be a very rewarding experience.

This is also called “Primordial Meditation” in our tradition.

Object Concentration: Continue your motionless and breathing exercises, but fix your gaze on an object, a picture, a spot on the wall, or anything else you may wish to focus on. If your thoughts wander, just bring them back to the object you are contemplating. Be open, though, that you may have a thought come unbidden that is worthwhile and valuable. That is a very positive result. Or you may just find yourself relaxed and refreshed, which is just as positive a result.

Sound Concentration: Some people are more focused on sound, or may have issues with their own internal dialogue proving to be particularly distracting. If so, the repetition on a simple phrase may be calming and rewarding. Select a phrase, usually 8 syllables or less, and simply repeat it to yourself until you don't have to think about it. The phrase does not necessarily matter, beyond how it makes you feel when you begin. Feel free to consult one of our members if you specifically desire one from our practice.

Image Concentration: Similar to Sound Concentration, strongly visual people may wish to practice holding an image in their mind while they meditate. It is usually more rewarding to hold a very simple image, like a black square, for a longer period of time than a complex image for a shorter period of time. Again, feel free to select your own image or inquire if there are any ones in common usage in our tradition that might interest you.

Narrative Concentration, or Guided Meditation: In this practice, another person (or a tape) will first lead you through a relaxation process, and then they will describe events to you as you follow along. You don't have to have done the previous exercises to enjoy this, but the previous exercises can help make the experience richer and more involved.

Visions: On occasion, you may see or experience things while you meditate. These can seem real, unreal, rewarding, uplifting, joyous, or disturbing. You may especially notice vivid or meaningful dreams, particularly if you meditate immediately before bed. Feel free to hold these in your heart or share them with us as you feel is best for you.

Active meditation: Some people take more time to learn passive meditation than others. In traditional Buddhist practice, those people are handed a broom and told to sweep the steps of the meditation hall, but to only focus on sweeping those steps. Far from punishment, this is every bit as valid and powerful a form of meditation as any other. Even if you are enjoying passive meditation, it's worth learning active meditation, as time spent washing dishes or any other “chores” can become an opportunity for spiritual growth, so don't let your active meditating siblings hog that opportunity! The Kabbalah calls this “Gathering the Sparks,” and says it is particularly effective while eating.

Section 3: Conclusions:

These exercises are not the be all and end all of your spiritual experience. They may work for you, or they may not. The sole purpose of this text has been to offer you some suggestions for getting used to the type of activities that are done here, and giving you simple practices to do on your own time.

These are greatly simplified, but still beneficial. If anything feels uncomfortable, stop. There is nothing in this text that is required, “official,” or endorsed. Whenever you find an exercise you like better. Do it instead.

From the beginning this text has been about giving you positive spiritual experiences. If the exercises

are not helping, feel free to toss it in the trash and contact any of our members directly. The important part of Experiential Religion is experiences, and they should ultimately be good ones.