Twelve-Step Meditation
in the A.A. Big Book and the 12 & 12

Glenn F. Chesnut

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PART ONE

Meditation in traditional spirituality

“Meditation” in traditional western Christianity had always meant reading a text, commonly from a meditational book or pamphlet (like *The Upper Room* or *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* in A.A.), and then musing thoughtfully upon how the text helps me to understand my own life and problems, and my relationship to God.

See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* for the traditional Catholic understanding. Meditation is:

- Mental prayer in discursive form. It is the type of mental prayer appropriate to beginners and as such accounted its lowest stage; and it is commonly contrasted with Contemplation. Its method is the devout reflection on a chosen (often Biblical) theme, with a view to deepening spiritual insight and stimulating the will and affections. Among the many methods of meditation advocated by modern schools of spirituality, that expounded by St. Ignatius of Loyola in the *Spiritual Exercises* ... is widely used.

Sister Ignatia used St. Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* during her early spiritual formation, and would often give little books composed of excerpts from that work to A.A. people who went through her program at St. Thomas Hospital. In the American Catholic Church of that period, the basic principles of St. Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* were taught to most seminary students as part of their spiritual formation. So Ralph Pfau — Father John Doe, the first Roman Catholic priest to get sober in A.A. — assumed that same traditional Ignatian concept of meditation when he talked about it in his *Golden Books*. Father Ralph was one of the four most-read early A.A. authors, so his ideas are extremely important for the understanding of what early A.A. people meant by meditation. Meditation means taking a written text from a meditational book or
prayer book and reading through it and thinking carefully about how it applies to me. Does this point out particular character defects which I have, that I need to do more work on? Does it help me to understand my own spiritual goals better? Does it tell me specific things about the nature of God’s love and help which I need to do a better job of remembering and applying to my own relationship to God?

It is important to note that “meditation” is a thoughtful process, not the blanking out of all conscious thought. (Trying to shut off all our conscious thoughts was called “contemplation” instead in traditional western terminology — see St. Bonaventura’s *The Mind’s Path to God*, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross for more on the subject of western techniques for contemplation).

In A.A. circles however, “meditation” also took on some of the characteristics of what the Oxford Group called “having a morning quiet time.” So A.A. members might in fact, not only read and think about what the reading for the day said in their meditational book, but also spend a short time blanking out all their conscious thoughts and just remaining still and quiet in God’s presence, while waiting for God’s guidance to give them instructions for the day.

Richmond Walker’s *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* gives the best introduction to what the concept of meditation meant in early A.A. He refers to the period of quiet time as “entering the divine silence” and recommends it as a way to restore our spirit of peace and calm, and as a way to obtain the power of the divine grace for changing our lives.

In the Big Book, Bill W.’s short section on meditation (at the place where he is talking about the eleventh step) gives instructions for quiet time and seeking guidance. By the time he wrote the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Bill W. had become convinced that too many A.A. members were getting into trouble by assuming that their own craziest thoughts were in fact “God’s guidance,” so we can see him giving additional warnings there, and trying to steer A.A. members away from misusing the idea of divine guidance. Every thought that pops into an alcoholic’s head during morning meditation is not God’s voice telling me what God himself wants me to do.
Modern A.A. confusion about the meaning of the term “meditation” arose during the 1960’s and 1970’s, and we’ve never totally recovered from this. In the 1950’s a guru in India named Maharishi Mahesh Yogi began teaching what he called Transcendental Meditation, based on a technique going back to Shankara. We recite a mantra (a simple word like “Om”) over and over in our minds as we attempt to remove all conscious thoughts from our minds, and attempt to merge ourselves into the impersonal divine reality which is all that truly exists (this material world is an illusion in that kind of Hindu philosophy, and even our feeling of being individuals is an illusion).

In the 1960’s and 1970’s this kind of Transcendental Meditation was popularized in the United States by a number of prominent entertainers and other public figures, above all the rock music group called the Beatles. In addition, during that period, the famous professional football player Joe Namath also preached Transcendental Meditation, along with the music group called the Beach Boys, comedian Andy Kaufman, and stage magician Doug Henning. Clint Eastwood, famous for shooting people without qualms in so many of his movies, also started preaching the virtues of transcendental meditation! ("Go on punk, make my day," as Eastwood famously said in the role of Dirty Harry in the 1983 film Sudden Impact.)

As a result, to this day newcomers to A.A. read the eleventh step, and immediately come to the false conclusion that they are expected to sit crosslegged and start chanting “Om.” In traditional western terminology, this is “contemplation,” not meditation. Hindu and Buddhist techniques are perfectly O.K. for A.A. people who want to use them. Many A.A. members today come from one of those Asian traditions. And attempting to practice Transcendental Meditation while listening to Beatles’ records does not do anyone any real harm.

The eleventh step

But if we ask the historical question of what the earliest A.A. people did, and we look at what the eleventh step actually says, it is not telling us to try to shut off all conscious thought while we try to become “one with All,” but to do something very different. Let us look at the wording of the eleventh step:

Sought through prayer and meditation [a] to improve our CONSCIOUS contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for [b] knowledge of His will for us and [c] the power to carry that out.

Summed up, this means:

[a] Thinking about spiritual texts to help us develop our God consciousness.

c] Having a brief quiet time, because when we finish our prayer and meditation, we will find that during this quiet time, God’s grace has quietly entered our souls, so that we will have new power and strength (God’s power and strength dwelling in our souls) enabling us to do that which we could never do before.

**Twenty-Four Hours a Day**

The fine print sections at the bottom of each page in Richmond Walker’s *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* tell us how to do all three of those things, and do them very effectively. That is the reason why Rich was the second most-read early A.A. author, second only to Bill Wilson himself. To my own mind, this is one of the ten best books on spirituality (East or West, from any century) which has ever been written. People who read that book every morning make more spiritual progress, far more quickly, than with any other meditational work I have ever run across. If you go though the fine print sections of *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* carefully, you can see the whole theory and practice of meditation laid out in great detail.

Beyond that (and reading what Bill W. had to say, of course) the best way of understanding what meditation meant to early A.A. people is to go back to the Oxford Group literature and see what they had to say about quiet time and guidance. Roman Catholic priests and nuns who were supporters of the early A.A. movement, like Father Ed Dowling and Sister Ignatia, would recommend that one also look at St. Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* for further guidance on the subject of meditation.

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**PART TWO**

**The Big Book**

In the Big Book, meditation involves (1) reading and thinking about passages from a meditational book or a written prayer, and (2) seeking guidance for our day in the way the Oxford Group had taught.

1. Reading meditational books
    and written prayers

For this first part, reading and thinking about written material from meditational books and prayer books, we can see what the Big Book says on p. 87:
If we belong to a religious denomination which requires a definite morning devotion, we attend to that.... If not members of religious bodies, we sometimes select and memorize a few set prayers which emphasize the principles we have been discussing. There are many helpful books also. Suggestions about these may be obtained from one’s priest, minister, or rabbi. Be quick to see where religious people are right. Make use of what they offer.

Sister Ignatia recommended two meditational books for alcoholics who went through her program at St. Thomas Hospital. One of them, a selection of excerpts from St. Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, has already been mentioned. This little booklet has unfortunately long been out of print, and I would not recommend that A.A. people try going through the full set of Ignatian spiritual exercises — this takes the help of a trained spiritual director, because some of these exercises can be psychologically dangerous if attempted by untrained people. The other book she gave to alcoholics was Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*, which is widely available in a number of modern English translations. It has been for centuries one of the most widely used Christian meditational books.

During the latter 1930’s and most of the 1940’s however, most A.A. people (including Dr. Bob and his wife Anne) used a booklet called *The Upper Room*, which was published in Nashville by the Southern Methodists. This was an evangelical group which, although Protestant, had a strongly Catholic orientation (they had bishops who ruled with an iron hand, sang the mass to medieval chants, preached salvation by faith but also made it clear that “faith without works is dead,” stressed the importance of the kind of spirituality of the heart taught by the great Catholic spiritual writers, and so on), so this little meditational book was used by a large number of Roman Catholics at that time, as well as Protestants from a wide variety of different denominations. Each day’s meditation had Bible verses, several sentences talking about some aspect of the spiritual life for us to meditate on, and one-sentence prayers.

Studying *The Upper Room* and the Southern Methodists of the 1930’s (including the writings of John Wesley, the great evangelical theologian who had founded the Methodist movement in the 1730’s, which still lay at the center of Southern Methodist thought) is as important as studying the Oxford Group, for understanding any number of words and phrases and spiritual concepts used in the Big Book. It will make the Big Book come alive in passage after passage.

A.A. people nevertheless wanted a morning meditational book written just for them, which talked explicitly about program principles. So an A.A. member named Richmond Walker wrote a meditational book just for A.A. people in 1948, called *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, and it quickly became the standard meditational book for early A.A. The author had gotten sober in Boston in May 1942, only a year after the first A.A. group had been started in that city. By 1948, Rich was living in Daytona Beach, Florida, and had prepared a set of daily meditations for himself written on little cards which he carried in his coat pocket. The A.A. group in Daytona Beach persuaded him to turn it into book form, which they published under their sponsorship. Rich phrased the fundamental meditative ideas in terms of “universal spiritual principles” instead of making them heavily
Christian, talking about basic principles that make sense to Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and anybody who believes in a heavenly higher power. “Love” means “love,” “unselfishness” means “unselfishness,” and “gaining our strength from a higher power” means “gaining our strength from a higher power,” in all religious traditions.

Some A.A. members complain that when they read a page from a meditational book in the morning, “within five minutes, I’ve forgotten what I just read.” This is irrelevant. When we first get up in the morning, the route to our subconscious minds is extremely open, and what we read will in fact have gotten down to our subconscious minds, which is where we want to get it. As a result of that, during the course of day, whenever we are troubled or have to make a decision, that good spiritual advice which is lodged down in our subconscious minds will be prompting us subconsciously, and will help lead us to calm ourselves and making the right decision. Proof of this is easy to obtain. If we read a good meditational book every morning for a number of weeks, and then get “too busy” to do it one morning, we will find ourselves becoming increasingly more frazzled and unable to cope smoothly with life as the day goes on. The good news is that, when we finally realize it, we can make ourselves take time to do five minutes or so of quiet meditation and get ourselves back on track again.

2. Seeking guidance as part of our morning quiet time

On pp. 86-87 of the Big Book, Bill Wilson talked about this part of the A.A. morning meditation, which was based on Oxford Group practice.

In thinking about our day we may face indecision. We may not be able to determine which course to take. Here we ask God for inspiration, an intuitive thought or a decision. We relax and take it easy. We don’t struggle. We are often surprised how the right answers come after we have tried this for a while. What used to be the hunch or the occasional inspiration gradually becomes a working part of the mind.

Bill Wilson was referring here to the second part of the eleventh step, where we are instructed to pray “for knowledge of His will for us.” This was from the beginning one of the three major parts of the A.A. morning meditation.
PART THREE

Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions

1. Reading meditational books
   and written prayers

In the chapter on the eleventh step in the 12 & 12, Bill starts out the same way he did in the Big Book, by talking about using meditational books and written prayers to meditate on (p. 98):

How ... shall we meditate? The actual experience of meditation and prayer across the centuries is, of course, immense. The world’s libraries and places of worship are a treasure trove for all seekers. It is to be hoped that every A.A. who has a religious connection which emphasizes meditation will return to the practice of that devotion as never before.

Bill Wilson begins by pointing out that there are all sorts of good books which can be read for meditational purposes. Anglicans for example (we call them Episcopalians in the United States) have the Book of Common Prayer, which has morning and evening meditations where, among other things, we end up reading the whole book of Psalms from the Old Testament over the course of every month, reading about three psalms in the morning and three in the evening, on the average (some psalms are longer than others). There are Jewish prayer books, all sorts of devotional books in Christian book stores which have been written by Protestant pastors, and every Roman Catholic Church will have prayer cards giving different kinds of useful prayers to recite, in addition to the prayers of the rosary and the Stations of the Cross. Father Ralph Pfau (the A.A. member who wrote the *Golden Books*) had a great admiration for the writings of St. Therese of Lisieux (the Little Flower), which are filled with a simple piety which is especially useful to A.A. people. Some of the people in California A.A. have found that the writings of the medieval Christian author Meister Eckhart are very helpful to them in concentrating their minds on God’s presence all around us. There are many A.A. people who still read every morning from *God Calling* by Two Listeners, the book which lies behind the small print sections in *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*. This book is still one of the six or eight best sellers in Christian bookstores.

Bill Wilson gives what is called the St. Francis Prayer, which we can read on page 99 of the 12 & 12, as one good example of the way that a written text can be used to provide topics for meditation. He explains how to use this kind of written meditational material on pages 99-100:

As beginners in meditation, we ... reread this prayer several times very slowly, savoring every word and trying to take in the deep meaning of each phrase and idea. It will help if we can drop all resistance to what [the prayer] says. For in meditation, debate has no place. We rest quietly with the thoughts of someone who knows, so that we may experience and learn.
We think about specific phrases. When we read the part of the prayer which speaks of bringing love to situations where there is hatred, we need to think about any hatred which we have stored up in our hearts about something specific which is going on in our lives at that point, or about other people who are treating us hatefully at that particular point, and then pray that God will replace any hatred in our hearts with love instead. When we come to the part of the prayer which speaks of “discord” in our lives (people quarreling and attacking one another), we read how the prayer instructs us to act in such a way as to bring harmony to this situation instead. So we need to ask ourselves at this point, how could we change our own behavior in this situation to restore peace? How can we stop being part of the problem and become part of the solution? And so on, through the entire prayer.

Bill Wilson says that we need to take “a good look at where we stand now, and a further look at what might happen in our lives were we able to move closer to the ideal we have been trying to glimpse” (12 & 12 p. 101). Modern psychologists are only just now beginning to recognize how effective this technique can be for changing our lives in positive directions. Visualizing ourselves as already possessing our goals, and savoring how good it will feel when we arrive there, is an important part of this method of meditation.

The most important thing to remember, however, is that meditation of this sort needs to be very practical and tailored to what is actually going on in our everyday lives. We meditate, not by just reading the written words, but by thinking carefully about what these words say about the way I ought to be dealing with the problems of my own everyday life, getting as specific as possible.

2. Using guided imagery

Bill W. then introduces a new technique in the 12 & 12, on page 100, where he suggests using guided imagery and visualization to help calm ourselves down when we are upset, angry, and anxious. This was not part of traditional western spirituality, but modern psychologists have now come to realize how effective this is, and frequently recommend this as a good way to re-center ourselves.

As though lying upon a sunlit beach, let us relax and breathe deeply of the spiritual atmosphere with which the grace of this prayer surrounds us. Let us become willing to partake and be strengthened and lifted up by the sheer spiritual power, beauty, and love of which these magnificent words are the carriers. Let us look now upon the sea and ponder what its mystery is; and let us lift up our eyes to the far horizon, beyond which we shall seek all those wonders still unseen.

Bill W. suggests here that we visualize ourselves lying on a peaceful sunny beach. To make this technique work best, we need to employ as many of our five senses as we can while we imagine ourselves in this restful scene. So we need to think not only about what we can see in this imaginary scene, but also things like the sound of the waves peacefully lapping on the shore and the sound of the birds in the distance. We need to
imagine how the sun feels on our skin, and how the breeze feels as it blows against our faces. And anything else we can bring in that will touch on one of our senses — like the smell of the sunbaked sand and the scent of the orange blossoms from the little orange trees planted by the beach (or however we ourselves wish to imagine this scene) — will help us to relax and be drawn into the peace of this scene.

If we wish to use this technique, there are a variety of different kinds of scenes which we could experiment with, to see which ones calm us down the most quickly. One person may imagine standing in a sunlit clearing in a deep forest and breathing in the smell of the evergreen trees, another may visualize standing on a high mountain peak and looking out on the vast panorama stretching down below, another may think about floating down a peaceful stream on a little boat and smelling the fragrance of the wildflowers growing in profusion along the bank, while another may find peace in the image of a little cabin, sitting on a comfortable overstuffed chair in front of a flickering fireplace. The more details we can add to the scene, the better it will work. One person in the A.A. program imagines herself sitting on the couch in her sponsor’s living room, which is the one place where she feels safe and loved.

3. The dangers of trying to obtain guidance from God in the wrong kind of way

By the time Bill Wilson wrote *Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions* in 1952, thirteen years had passed since the writing of the Big Book. The new A.A. movement had been totally separated from the Oxford Group for a long time, and Bill had come to the conclusion that the Oxford Group concept of guidance could get some alcoholics into trouble. The ideas that pop up into an alcoholic’s head are not necessarily messages from God. On the contrary, the first idea to appear in an alcoholic mind is all too apt to be an expression of the alcoholic’s egotism, resentment, fear, and desire to play the stage director and over-control other people.

Henrietta Seiberling, the Oxford Group member in Akron who had arranged the first meeting between Bill W. and Dr. Bob, regularly heard words being spoken inside her head which she believed were the voice of God speaking directly to her, just like the two Oxford Group women who wrote *God Calling* by Two Listeners. God can in fact cause us to hear his words being spoken inside our heads, but simply hearing words being spoken inside our heads does not in any way guarantee that these are the words of God. Christian spiritual teachers from all periods of history have regularly warned about the way that dark forces can enter our minds, disguised as an angel of light. In Henrietta’s case, she became convinced at one point that Bill Wilson was “the devil incarnate,” and was going around writing letters and contacting A.A. people, and trying to get them to drive Bill out of the movement. I cannot help but think that this unpleasant period may have especially helped push Bill Wilson in the direction of downplaying the idea of guidance in the *Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions*. Having a prominent person going around telling people that God told her that you are the devil can quickly make you chary about the whole idea of people listening to inner voices!
So when he wrote the 12 & 12, Bill W. took pains to point out the hazards that could arise from seeking God’s guidance, and not being careful enough to distinguish between God and the delusions of our own minds (12 & 12 p. 103-104):

We have seen A.A.’s ask with much earnestness and faith for God’s guidance on matters ranging all the way from a shattering domestic or financial crisis to correcting a minor personal fault, like tardiness. Quite often, however, the thoughts that seem to come from God are not answers at all. They proved to be well-intentioned unconscious rationalizations .... To any questioning or criticism of his actions he instantly proffers his reliance upon prayer for guidance in all matters great or small. He may have forgotten the possibility that his own wishful thinking and the human tendency to rationalize have distorted his so-called guidance.

Under the illusion that the ideas arising out of his own worst character defects are infallible commands coming straight from God’s lips, he will “create great havoc without in the least intending it.” And we can do even greater harm and create even greater chaos when we start forming “ideas as to what we think God’s will is for other people” (12 & 12 p. 104).

When I, in my own arrogance and conceit, begin believing that God is telling me in great detail how YOU ought to be running your life, I am falling back into the greatest temptation for all alcoholics: I am once more setting myself up as the stage director, and believing that it is my job to tell all the other actors and actresses how to perform their parts (Big Book pp. 60-61). St. Augustine in his City of God called this the libido dominandi, the lust to dominate and manipulate and control other people, and saw it as a character defect extending to human society in all its forms, from the circle of power-mad people surrounding the throne of a crazed Roman emperor to the members of a barbarian German warband coming across the border and sacking and looting Roman cities.

Shakespeare was certainly right in saying that “all the world’s a stage,” but when I fall into the grips of the libido dominandi, I have once more fallen into the delusion that God has personally assigned me the role of being “chief drama critic” (Big Book 3rd ed. page 449, 4th ed. page 417).
4. How to seek guidance from God in the right way

Through all of his writings, Bill W. pointed out to us again and again that the most important part of every prayer to God are the words “Thy will be done.” And the greatest threat to my own spiritual life will come from my own pride and arrogance, and the temptation to take over and start trying to play God myself. So in the 12 & 12 (page 104) Bill W. concludes his discussion of the idea of divine guidance by saying:

We discover that we ... receive guidance for our lives to just about the extent that we stop making demands upon God to give it to us on order and on our terms.

CONCLUSION

Summing up everything we have learned from the Big Book, the 12 & 12, and the other early A.A. literature, we can say that a period of morning meditation (in the way that it is talked about in the eleventh step) involves the following things:

1. Meditation means most of all reading from a meditational book or written prayer in a careful and thoughtful manner, and thinking about how these words can help us to live better lives, in very specific and concrete ways.

2. The eleventh step says that we do this in part “to improve our conscious contact with God as we understand Him,” that is, so that we can learn how to go through every day of our lives being continually aware of God’s presence with us and around us in everything that we do. So we need to be aware of God’s presence while we are meditating, and practice at this, so that we can carry this awareness with us throughout the rest of the day.

3. We need to include a period of quiet time* in our morning prayer and meditation. We may choose to calm our minds by visualizing ourselves in a quiet and restful scene inside our own imaginations (as Bill Wilson suggests), or we could make use of other methods for achieving the same goal. Some people in the twelve step program take their morning cup of coffee and go out and sit in their gardens, or go down to a nearby stream or lake, and sit and quietly absorb the beauty and rest in that scene.

The psychologist Edmund Jacobson wrote a book in 1929 called Progressive Relaxation which described a method of calming the mind by working through the various muscles of the body and tensing and relaxing each one — as we all know, when the mind is under stress, the body tends to
tense up, and Jacobson found that we could reverse this process by untensing the body in order to calm
the mind.**

Reciting a mantra*** (as is done in Transcendental Meditation) will also work, along with
concentrating on my breathe going in and out, and other methods (both eastern and western) for
removing the normal flow of upsetting conscious thoughts from my mind — but these kinds of eastern
spiritual techniques are one and only one kind of way to do this. The object of the quiet time is just to
spend a few minutes being quiet and peaceful and relaxed, instead of thinking nonstop about
everything under the sun, where any method at all that works for us is the right method for us.

4. Remembering all the precautions which Bill W. listed, we nevertheless also need to seek guidance
from God about the things we need to do during the day ahead. We need to ask ourselves, not what we
want to do, but what we know God wants us to do, and plan our day accordingly. Our object is to
walk on the sunny side of the street throughout the day, instead of walking on the dark side of the
street (the side of the street where we used to walk, where everyone is lying, stealing, cheating,
manipulating, feeling sorry for themselves, trying to control other people, drinking, drugging, and
fighting with everyone around them).

5. We will find that during our period of quiet time, God’s grace has quietly entered our souls, so that
we will have new power and strength (God’s power and strength coming to dwell in our souls) which
we enable us to do that which we could never do before. We will not be conscious of this happening
while we are engaged in this quiet time, but we will notice its powerful effect on us throughout the rest
of the day. This does not mean that we will never be troubled during the day, but we will find
ourselves winning the struggle against pride, resentment, fear, and anxiety, over and over again, in
situations where those temptations always defeated us before. We will find the proof, in our own lives,
that this kind of meditation works. As we continue doing this every morning for weeks and months
and years, we will find ourselves growing incredibly at the spiritual level. Our entire lives will be
transformed.

Meditating the way the early A.A. people taught us is a much richer and more powerful way of making
spiritual progress and gaining true happiness and freedom than anything we find in Transcendental Meditation
(and other similar Asian contemplative techniques) when these eastern techniques are practiced alone.
Transcendental Meditation and other similar eastern techniques for contemplation can be embodied within our
morning A.A. meditations if we wish, but any method of calming the mind and temporarily quieting the endless
stream of thoughts coursing through our minds will have the same effect, including Bill W.’s suggestion of
using guided imagery, or Jacobson’s method of progressive relaxation.

And the important thing to remember, is that quieting and calming the mind is only one small part of the
morning meditation, and that it is not being done just for itself, but because it enables me to make better use of
God’s guidance and grace. As long as my mind is too disturbed, I will be blocking God’s spirit from entering
my soul and granting me his almighty power. I am not trying to engage in self-hypnosis, but trying to open myself up to the Living God, and trying to allow God to educate me (through his servants who have written the prayers and meditations) about how I may serve him best. Above all, meditation is part of the process of learning how to put aside my old character defects and shortcomings, so that I can learn how to think properly about the world and God and my life once again.

*The purpose of the quiet time*  God is always there with me, and God’s grace and power are always available to me, through every hour of every day. The divine grace and power come to me sometimes at the conscious level, but perhaps even more often at the unconscious level. When God’s grace is coming to me in a way which I cannot consciously feel at the time, I can nevertheless know that I am in fact receiving his grace by the way in which I am coping with things which I could never handle before, and by the way that I am making intuitive decisions with a wisdom which I never had before (Big Book p. 84, “We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us”).

When my mind is in too much turmoil, however, it acts like static on a radio, and this “mental noise” blocks me both from praying as effectively as I otherwise could, and from receiving God’s grace as powerfully as I otherwise could. This mental static may be coming from angry or resentful or self-pitying or fearful or guilty thoughts churning around in my head nonstop, or it may be coming simply from my mind being filled with planning and analyzing and scheming. Yes, I need to plan in advance and analyze issues and pay attention to the possible consequences of my actions, but not all the time. I also need to leave time for God every once in a while. And this is particularly so when my mind begins racing too much.

The purpose of the morning quiet time (and brief quiet times at other points through the day) is to shut off all these racing thoughts for long enough to open my eyes and ears — both at the conscious level and at the unconscious level — to what God is saying and doing. The purpose of these quiet times is to rest my mind for a while, and fall into a quiet mental state where I can immerse myself in a heartfelt gratitude and appreciation for all that God has done and is doing for me.

This means that I can use any method I choose to quiet my mind and turn off my continually churning and racing thoughts for a few minutes. The only thing that matters is that I use some method which works for me. It does not matter whether I use techniques taken from Asian religions like Transcendental Meditation, or imaging techniques like Bill W. suggested in the *Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions*, or sitting outside in my garden while I have my morning cup of coffee and listen to the birds sing, or Jacobson’s method of progressive relaxation, or anything else that works for me.
But also remember that although the twelve step program recommends that a few minutes of quiet time be included in our morning period of prayer and meditation, the quiet time itself is not “meditation” in the traditional sense. The quiet time is a form of prayer which is called “contemplation” in western spirituality and mysticism. Meditation in the proper sense refers only to the part where we are reading and thinking about a written prayer or what is written on the page for the day in a meditational book.

**Jacobson’s method of progressive relaxation**  The psychologist Edmund Jacobson developed this relaxation method in 1929. It is extremely effective, and ought to be more widely known. When our minds become tense, the muscles of our bodies tend to become tense as a reaction. Jacobson’s method is based on the principle that the reverse is also true. If we can get all the muscles of our bodies to relax, our minds will start to become quiet and relaxed and peaceful, no matter how upset we have been.

We have to work on each major set of muscles in the body one by one, and we have to teach our minds how to single out individual muscles so we can turn the relaxation process into manageable portions. Part of Jacobson’s technique was based on his observation that if I can train my mind to tense one muscle in my body, and only that one muscle, my mind will then have learned the specific mind-nerve linkage necessary to concentrate completely on that one particular muscle and relax it instead.

Jacobson’s original set of relaxation exercises was very long and complicated. In fact a much simpler version of his method will produce amazingly effective results. If we wish, we can have someone read the instructions for this progressive set of relaxation exercises into a type recorder, with some quiet and relaxing music playing softly as a background, or we can simply memorize the sequence. We sit in a comfortable chair or lie down on something comfortable, and then begin the relaxation process.

In terms of timing, we need to breathe slowly, perhaps at around six times or so per minute — our object is to take our tense and anxious minds and slow them down — and we need to time the tensing and relaxing of each muscle group to our slow and gentle breathing in and out. Beginning with our right ankles, we breathe in slowly and then tense our right ankles upwards. As we breathe out, we let that muscle relax totally. When we are first learning, it may be necessary to lift our ankles up an inch or two. After we have become more proficient, we will be able to use just a slight and outwardly imperceptible tensing of that muscle. We go through a number of the major muscles in our body in the following order:

1. My right ankle.
3. My right thigh.
4. My left ankle.
5. My left calf muscle.
6. My left thigh.
7. I constrict the muscles of my abdomen.
8. I constrict the muscles in my buttocks and crotch.

9. My right wrist.
10. My right forearm.
11. My right upper arm.
12. My left wrist.
13. My left forearm.
14. My left upper arm.

15. The muscles running from my right shoulder and up the right side of my neck.
16. The muscles running from my left shoulder and up the left side of my neck.

17. I clench my jaw muscles.
18. I open my jaws and tense my muscles the other way.
19. I clench my eyes closed tightly.
20. I open my eyes and tense my muscles the other way.

If I notice any pains or tenseness elsewhere in my body, I can then do the same thing on these areas. If I have a headache, for example, it is always worthwhile seeing if I can figure out some muscle to tense in my scalp or neck which will make the pain sharper and more intense. Often, when we have what we regard as a “headache,” the ache is being produced by a tense muscle somewhere in our scalps or in our necks (not all headaches are produced in this way, but many are). Once having identified the muscle whose tenseness is causing the discomfort, I can then work at relaxing that particular muscle, which will in turn make the headache go away.

If I cannot tie a particular pain in my body to a particular muscle, I can sometimes relieve the pain if I visualize myself in my mind as though I were making a tight fist (focusing on the pain and using the mental image of the clenched fist to represent the source of the pain), and then (in my imagination) I can relax the fist and let go.

After I have relaxed my entire body in this way, I can then recite a mantra if necessary to stay relaxed and quiet my mind, so that my mind will not be filled with busy thoughts. If thoughts of something enter my mind, I simply keep on reciting the mantra, and let the intrusive thoughts drift out of my mind, like little insects or twittering birds being blown out of view by a gentle wind.
***Reciting a mantra*** The mind abhors a vacuum, so the best way to keep it empty of disruptive thoughts is frequently that of giving the mind something simple and repetitive to fill it instead. One of the simplest mantras is to say (inside my head) “one” as I exhale, and then the next time “two,” and then the next time “three.” The next time I exhale, I go back to “one” and begin the series all over again: 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3 ....

I can also use a single word or phrase as a mantra, repeating that word or phrase inside my head each time I exhale, and feeling the stress and tension leaving my mind and body as I repeat it. It can be a single word like “quiet” or “peace.” It can be a phrase like “easy does it” or “let it all go” (short for Let Go and Let God).

Emmet Fox, in his technique for calming our minds which he refers to as the Golden Key, gives us some other phrases which we could use as mantras:

- God is wisdom
- There is no power but God
- God is truth
- I am the child of God
- God is inconceivable love
- The perfect peace of God
- God is present everywhere
- God is love
- God has infinite power
- God is guiding me now
- God knows everything
- God is with me

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**Emmet Fox, The Golden Key**

Scientific prayer will enable you to get yourself or anyone else, out of any difficulty. It is the golden key to harmony and happiness.

To those who have no acquaintance with the mightiest power in existence, this may appear to be a rash claim, but it needs only a fair trial to prove that, without a shadow of doubt, it is a just one. You need take no one’s word for it, and you should not. Simply try it for yourself.

God is omnipotent, and we are God’s image and likeness and have dominion over all things. This is the inspired teaching, and it is intended to be taken literally, at its face value. The ability to draw on this power is not the special prerogative of the mystic or the saint, as is so often supposed, or even of the highly trained practitioner. Everyone has this ability. Whoever you are, wherever you may be, the golden key to harmony is in your hand now. This is because in scientific prayer it is God who works, and not you, and so your particular limitations or weaknesses are of no account in the process. You are only the channel through which the divine action takes place, and your treatment will be just the getting of yourself out of the way.

Beginners often get startling results the first time, for all that is essential is to have an open mind and sufficient faith to try the experiment. Apart from that, you may hold any views on religion, or none.
As for the actual method of working, like all fundamental things, it is simplicity itself. All you have to do is this: stop thinking about the difficulty, whatever it is, and think about God instead. This is the complete rule, and if only you will do this, the trouble, whatever it is, will disappear. It makes no difference what kind of trouble it is. It may be a big thing or a little thing: it may concern health, finance, a lawsuit, a quarrel, an accident, or anything else conceivable: but whatever it is, stop thinking about it and think of God instead — that is all you have to do.

It could not be simpler, could it? God could scarcely have made it simpler, and yet it never fails to work when given a fair trial.

Do not try to form a picture of God, which is impossible. Work by rehearsing anything or everything that you know about God. God is wisdom, truth, inconceivable love. God is present everywhere, has infinite power, knows everything, and so on. It matters not how well you may think you understand these things: go over them repeatedly.

But you must stop thinking of the trouble, whatever it is. The rule is, to think about God. If you are thinking about your difficulty, you are not thinking about God. To be continually glancing over your shoulder in order to see how matters are progressing is fatal, because it is thinking of the trouble, and you must think of God and nothing else. Your object is to drive the thought of the difficulty out of your consciousness, for a few moments at least, substituting for it the thought of God. This is the crux of the whole thing. If you can become so absorbed in this consideration of the spiritual world that you forget for a while about the difficulty, you will find that you are safely and comfortably out of your difficulty — that your demonstration is made.

In order to “golden key” a troublesome person or a difficult situation, think. “Now I am going to ‘golden key’ John, or Mary, or that threatened danger”: then proceed to drive all thought of John, or Mary, or the danger out of your mind, replacing it with the thought of God.

By working in this way about a person, you are not seeking to influence his conduct in any way, except that you prevent him from injuring or annoying you, and you do him nothing but good. Thereafter, he is certain to be in some degree a better, wiser, and more spiritual person, just because you have “golden keyed” him. A pending lawsuit or other difficulty would probably fade out harmlessly without coming to a crisis, justice being done to all parties concerned.

If you find that you can do this very quickly, you may repeat the operation several times a day with intervals between. Be sure, however, each time you have done it, that you drop all thought of the matter until the next time. This is important.

We have said that the golden key is simple, and so it is, but of course it is not always easy to turn. If you are very frightened or worried, at first it may be difficult to get your thoughts away from material things. But by constantly repeating a statement of absolute Truth, such as: There is no power but God; I am the child of God, filled and surrounded by the perfect peace of God; God is love; God is guiding me now; or, perhaps best and simplest of all, God is with me — however mechanical or trite it may seem — you will soon find that the
treatment has begun to “take,” and that your mind is clearing. Do not struggle violently; be quiet, but insistent. Each time you find your attention wandering, switch it back to God.

Do not try to think in advance what the solution to your difficulty will be. This is called “outlining” and will only delay the demonstration. Leave the question of ways and means to God. You want to get out of your difficulty; that is sufficient. You do your half, and God will never fail to do God’s.

“Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21).