

Many Ways to Meditate

A Sermon Shared at the Presbyterian Church of the Covenant
In Celebration of Veterans' Day, 2018
On November 11, 2018
By the Rev. Thomas C. Davis, Ph.D

Good morning, Covenant and interfaith friends! Thanks to all of you who came out this morning to honor veterans. I hope you will stay after service to enjoy some refreshments and meet others in our community who are doing fabulous work to help veterans come home and use their warrior wisdom for peacemaking. Wilmington is a small town, really, and yet often people in the same line of volunteer work don't know each other here. So I hope you'll take this opportunity to network.

In early July I gave a sermon from this pulpit about trauma care. I shared insights from Dr. Nadine Burke Harris's book, *The Deepest Well*, where she explains how adverse childhood experiences, ACEs, can lead to chronic diseases in adulthood, such as cancer, diabetes, and severe depression. At the end of her book she sets forth six ways that we can help people with a history of heavy stress to be more resilient. Returning veterans diagnosed with PTSD do well to follow these six recommendations of hers:

1. Get adequate sleep. Seven hours at a minimum is best.
2. Eat healthily.

Use caffeine and alcohol in moderation. 3. Get regular exercise, and don't overdo it! 4. Meditate. 5. Seek professional mental health care if you need it; and 6. Join a supportive community.

The one recommendation that seemed most challenging for this congregation was number 4: Meditate. I could be wrong, but it seems to me that not many Presbyterians meditate, at least not regularly. So I promised to address that subject in a later sermon, which brings us to today.

Welcome to this sermon entitled "Many Ways to Meditate."

Presbyterians turn to the Bible for guidance on how to live. So I began my sermon research by seeing how the words, meditate and meditation are used in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. I found that almost without exception they are used to refer to a practice of thinking, thinking about the meaning of words. For instance, in Psalm 1 we hear, "blessed is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law, day and night." Meditating on written law certainly involves very thoughtful reflection.

The activity of thinking takes place in the top and front of the brain, in the prefrontal cortex. That's the area of the brain that is very active when a person reads scripture and strives to understand how it applies to one's own life. There is another kind of meditation, though, almost an opposite kind in fact, because it strives to avoid thinking. "Be still," says another psalmist, "Be still and know that I am God." The Quakers who practice silent group meditation are fond of that verse. William Penn, a Quaker convert, urged his followers not to think, but just be still and wait for the God's spirit to fill the empty vessels of their minds.

Ah, but how does one quiet the noisy clatter at the top and front of the brain, the "monkey brain" as some call it? Simply by willing it to shut up? That doesn't work. As one of my meditation instructors said, "What you resist persists." Rather, a preferred natural means is to breathe deeply and slowly, paying attention just to the intake and outflow of breath. Now, how does this still the mind?

Well, we begin to understand by coming to realize that the body and the mind are intimately related, so that a change in one affects changes in the other. Except for self-flagellation and fasting western religions have paid

very little attention to the body. But Eastern traditions, such as asana yoga, start with the body to achieve benefits for both the mind and body.

Veterans returning from war are finding great benefit for calming the mind by using various disciplines of the body. Chief among them is the simple practice of deep and slow breathing. An organization called the Welcome Troops Home Project is offering this training free to veterans and their spouses. Alice and I have taken the instruction and have been practicing daily. Among veterans it's called Power Breath. Civilian practitioners call it "sky breathing."

Let me digress for a bit to explain how this helps returning warriors. I'm a combat veteran and speak from personal experience. When you live in a war zone your whole body is on alert, guarding you against being killed. All the time you're awake your body and mind are revved up and ready to fight. Your prefrontal cortex has enough to keep it busy just trying to outwit the enemy. It's the bottom and back of your brain that has your back, so to speak. This part of the brain controls all the unconscious functions necessary for staying alive. It keeps your heart beating. It regulates your blood sugar. It regulates your breathing rate and pulse rate. All this happens automatically. It requires no conscious attention whatsoever,

thank goodness! The bottom and back of the brain changes your body chemistry, sending naturally produced substances into your bloodstream to ready you for fighting or fleeing. In the short term these substances, like cortisol, don't harm you. But if you keep living in a war zone they begin to break down your health. However, you don't know this because you are on autopilot. You have no way to turn off what's happening in the basement, because the top and front of the brain has no idea whatsoever of what's going on down there.

When the warrior comes home the autopilot is still racing along on its own, and the veteran can't figure out how to shut it off. Especially the anger part. You see, aggression is a natural response to a perceived threat. Anger was great in a firefight, but back home it's likely to get a veteran divorced or land him in jail. Aggression is part of a warrior's armor for self protection. Self protection is the autopilot's most important duty, and the autopilot in the basement of the brain can't be shut down by the control tower up above. The autopilot can't be commanded, you see. That's why talk therapy isn't very effective in helping veterans with post traumatic stress. The autopilot in the basement has to be reached by another means, through the body. This is where breathing training comes in. Remember,

regulating breathing is one of the essential functions of the bottom and back of the brain. However, the pace and the intensity of breathing can also be governed by the thinking mind, located in the prefrontal cortex. So you see, breath serves as a bridge between the unconscious mind and the conscious mind. Easterners figured this out a long time ago, and some westerners of a mystic strain did too.

By the way, you may be skeptical about the term, "unconscious mind." I'm not talking about Freud's subconscious. That's not what is meant by the unconscious mind. So, what is meant? Well, let me do my best to explain. My philosophy prof many years ago once spoke of non-thetic awareness, by which he meant an awareness without content. Huh? What in the world is that? Awareness without content? My hand went up. I needed an example. O.K., he said. You're walking in the woods and suddenly you notice that the crickets have stopped chirping. You must have been aware that they were chirping before they stopped. Otherwise you wouldn't have noticed their stopping. But you were not consciously aware of their chirping before. You must have been aware, but your awareness had no content. That's what he meant by non-thetic awareness. I think that's a good example of the operation of the unconscious mind. I don't know where in

the brain the unconscious mind resides. It may be related to intuition. It may be related to what some folks call a sixth sense. There are lots of unanswered questions regarding the subtleties of consciousness. At any rate, that state of mind, that alert but contentless awareness, is what deeper versions of breath training aim for.

Why aim for that you may wonder? Why should anyone want to experience an emptiness of mind, or to put it another way, the complete silencing of thinking? Well, it's a very valuable experience, actually, because it frees you, albeit temporarily, from anxiety about anything. For a moment at least your ego completely evaporates, and all the worries related to it. Even though it's very difficult to keep from thinking for very long, just reaching these brief moments of quiescence seems to have some long term benefits for one's mind and body. Some regular practitioners of deep breathing meditation report sounder sleep, increased calmness, alertness, and creativity. Cardiovascular vigor sometimes increases (I have experienced this myself, climbing hills while hiking), and blood pressure may also be reduced. One IVW veteran who meditates regularly says his doctor is about to take him off his blood pressure meds.

Perhaps the biggest benefit for veterans transitioning from war is that by practicing a few very simple deep breathing exercises, which oxygenate the whole body and expel toxins through deep exhalation, emotions that have been locked in the body for a long, long time can be released. My wife and I saw this on two occasions involving two different combat veterans.

Resting deeply after the exercises were over, each veteran cried, and neither could figure out why. "This is weird," each one said. "I can't figure out where that came from." They couldn't connect the emotional release to any particular memory. I suppose we might say that the release was related to something that happened in the unconscious mind. After the release the affect of each veteran was improved. Both were relaxed, easier in their own skins and in our company. They acknowledged that this experience was only the beginning of a long journey home. But after trying other treatments to no avail, including drugs, they were very grateful for this hopeful breakthrough.

I must annoy my instructors because I always want to know how meditation works. After witnessing these events I asked, "How do long trapped emotions get released simply by slower and deeper breathing? My instructor replied that he didn't know exactly, and probably no one knows

yet. Science is still looking for the answer. But maybe this will serve as an explanation for the present, he said: When we're not stressed, when we feel safe, our breathing is relaxed, and we are emotionally calm. However, when a threat to our safety is perceived, and this is usually picked up first by the unconscious mind, the chemistry of the brain and the whole body begins to change. We begin to breathe more rapidly and shallowly. Our digestion slows to allow more energy for fighting or fleeing. Our blood vessels constrict. Our muscles get tense, ready to spring into action. All this happens rapidly and automatically, before we have had time to think. Remember what I said earlier: the mind and the body are intimately and reciprocally related. Well, when these changes occur, so does our mood. We feel unsafe and very tense. If the danger passes, all these physiological benchmarks slowly revert to normal, and we feel safe and calm again. But if the danger persists, as in a war zone, the nervous system gets stuck in high gear.

Breathing meditation can help get it unstuck. How? Well, by deliberately breathing deeply and slowly one is able to bring about physiological changes. The blood vessels begin to open up. The muscles begin to relax. The pulse rate slows. By these changes the body is signaling to the mind:

It's O.K. now, control tower. We're safe now! And indeed, the thinking brain recognizes the significance of these bodily changes and feels the difference emotionally. Something like this could explain how deliberately altering our breathing can change our mental states. Sometimes such changes are felt as emotional releases. Thus, a vet cries after the breathing regimen is finished and he's resting; and he's completely mystified by what just happened.

I have a colleague, Sam Beard, who is a master fund raiser. He has benefited himself from mindfulness based stress reduction, another approach to deep breathing meditation. He's so enthusiastic about its benefits that he wants to make Delaware the first state to implement a widespread mindfulness meditation program. I heard that Sam's running into difficulties, though, promoting the idea among faith communities. Evidently some people of faith are wary of trying a new approach to healing. I guess to them it feels foreign, and perhaps subversive.

As a person of deep faith let me respond to such fears this way: First, the breathing meditation methods I'm familiar with, sky breathing and mindfulness based stress reduction, are not religious alternatives to well

established faith traditions. There is nothing religious about them, and my own experience convinces me that they do not endanger one's religious grounding at all.

Secondly, since some veterans have never bonded with a religious community, faith approaches to healing may not work for them. However, breathing meditation has truly saved some veterans from committing suicide who were not religiously inclined. I'm all for saving lives. Aren't you?

And lastly, I'd say this: If taking up breathing meditation yourself scares you, don't do it! The whole purpose of this training is to instill an assurance of safety, for it is out of safety that we all can flourish and feel deep joy. So, if breathing meditation makes you feel unsafe, don't do it! That would be against the whole purpose.

I must confess that I'm a neophyte in all I've spoken about today. Like Sam, I'm very enthusiastic about using breathing for healing. There are folks here today who know much more about this than I do, and I'm eager to keep learning. So, let's stay in touch. Thanks for coming! And breathe!