

# Teaching Children to Meditate

## Introduction

Is meditation a thing for children? In our previous session, we have answered this with a definite “Yes”. And so now we need to discuss how to go about this teaching. We can use the oft quoted words of the Canadian Catholic Schools Trustees Association (2011:6) to describe our rationale in preparing children in school for a contemplative way, thus taking up the strong suggestion of the Delors Report (1996:37) to include the pillar of ‘learning to be’ in our curriculum.

*We are committed in the Spirit of the great Catholic tradition to more than a mere demonstration of the tasks of living. We are dedicated to the mission of living. To live is to explore wonder and to give life is to restore the capacity for wonder. As men and women committed to the mission of the Church, we always remember our dignity. We are not technicians of survival. We are the guardians of life at the gates of wonder. Our curriculum must be the gateway to wonder.*

If we are to lead our learners through this gateway, we must first be conscious of a few assumptions we must accept if we are to effectively teach them meditation (Christie 2008:14).

- Recognise that each child is born as a spiritual being
- Be prepared to work with and alongside the child
- Listen to what the child has to offer
- Honour each child’s relationship with the divine
- Always try to make the experiences of meditation positive
- Never judge the child’s meditation

In this session we’ll first consider briefly some informal and formal aspects of teaching meditation and then look at the practicalities which include the preparation of children and materials, and the structure of the typical meditation session. We’ll conclude with some comments on the teacher and on the distinctive features of a successful implementation of meditation in the school setting.

## Formal and Informal Teaching

Meditation is often described as a lifelong spiritual journey. So where does the journey for the child begin? For some fortunate ones it can start in the womb. Madeleine Simon (2010:31) explains:

*Meditation during pregnancy is beneficial to both mother and child. For the mother it has a steadying influence, keeping mind and heart centred in the present, in the depths of her own being. Her unborn child is part of herself and participates in the calming effect of her meditation. At a deeper level, as the mother quietly focuses her whole person lovingly on God, she is preparing the way for a selfless, loving relationship between herself and her child.*

This experience can continue after birth, depending on the closeness of the relationship between mother and child. Madeleine Simon again (:33) advises us that

*touch can be a potent, wordless way of showing affection, and children, in these home years before school age is reached, have a great need of being held, cuddled, carried. Such physical contact with an adult who is meditating regularly is a real bonus because it brings a spiritual dimension to the intimacy between mother and child at a deep level, and completes the cycle of union.*

In addition to these effects, further ways in which the child is exposed to informal teaching is through the practices of parents. These may include a daily rhythm of meditation where “no

explanations are necessary, no verbal teaching given. This is part of the culture into which the child has been born and it is assimilated in the same way as the parents' language and way of life" (Simon 2010: 36). Or else as Ernie Christie suggests (2008:23), deliberate times are set aside daily where televisions, radios and digital screens are turned off so that the children can develop an ease with silence.

These informal occasions will certainly act as a remote preparation for the more formal introduction to children and young people of meditation as a conscious discipline. There has been mention of various forms of meditation in our Catholic school curriculum for at least the last 25 years, and students therefore might have had a passing acquaintance with the mantra-based meditation which is our focus here. However it has not, until recently encouraged and embraced by a few schools, become a regular or even daily practice, and certainly not a systemic feature as in the case of the Townsville Diocese.

So let us now consider some of the steps we need to take to introduce and support meditation in our Catholic schools.

## **Preparation for Teaching**

Readying a school for the implementation of meditation is more than a day's work. Indeed it can take years for the right conditions to be present in the school so that the seed sown can germinate and develop into a robust plant. The time span is unpredictable and different schools are like the soil types in the well-known parable of the sower (Matthew 13). Nevertheless there is a broad process that is recommended (Christie 2008:43).

An essential start is to get the support of the community. In the case of the school, this will mean information sessions for staff, parents and possibly governors. It will be an occasion to clarify the concept and to dispel misperceptions. Once there is a measure of support, a group of interested teachers can be invited to receive initial training and then to trial the practice in their classrooms.

Getting to the point of a trial practice will require a number of things from the teacher. Depending on the age of the learners in question, the teacher will need to approach the practice in a stepwise fashion, introducing the elements such as stillness, posture, breathing, silence, prayer word (mantra) and distractions one by one.

Some verbal explanation of these facets will be necessary, but a number of exercises advocated by Jeannie Battagin (2012:20, 55-56) will help to bring some of these lessons home. She describes relaxation and body awareness exercises, awareness of breathing and guided visualisations as useful for preparing children for the actual meditation session.

Another innovative way of drawing participants into a state of stillness and silence is idea of 'stations of contemplation', a set of created by the Young Christian Meditators of Sydney for their 'silent' reflection centre at World Youth Day 2008. An example is the Station of Uninvited thoughts. A poster reads "Did you know that on average we have 60,000 thoughts each day? How long can you go without thinking?" An adapted clock with a blank face and only a second hand is on a wall or table. Participants are asked to observe the activity of their mind for a period of 60 seconds. The stations will be listed below under available resources.

The readiness and receptivity of children and young people will differ with age and stage of faith development. Ernie Christie (2008:55-56) offers some useful pointers in this regard.

- Younger children in Foundation Phase (Gr R-3) have vivid imaginations and their ability to focus will be enhanced by the use story, rhyme, music and song in preparing for meditation.
- Older primary school children (Gr 4-7) thrive in a trusting and supportive environment, and enjoy being actively involved in the preparation for meditation. They will ask more questions at this stage and the teacher will need to be able to guide them to a greater understanding of the benefits of meditation.

- Teenagers often tend to be rebellious, and even agnostic as they struggle to forge their sense of religious identity, but will often recognise the value of meditation and be willing to engage deeply with related concepts.

As important as this kind of preparation is the creation of a suitable environment. At times it may be possible to take a class to a specially prepared space such as a prayer room or chapel, but more often, especially if meditation is a regular practice, the teacher will have to make do in the classroom setting. A small table or desk or a rug on the floor can become a focal point on which are placed a lighted candle, an icon, a chime and special items that the children may be invited to bring. Playing suitable soft music as the space is being prepared or the children are settling themselves may enhance the atmosphere.

Ernie Christie (2008:45 – slightly rephrased here) provides a teacher checklist of tasks prior to the meditation session to ensure a smooth process.

- Have the children been prepared for the experience adequately?
- What time of the day have you chosen for the meditation experience? Why?
- How will you position the students for the meditation?
- Will you have signs on the outside of your classroom door, such as “Meditation in progress. Silence please”?
- Do you phone the office and ask that calls not be put through for the period of meditation?
- Do you use a candle or other focus item to help gain the attention of the students?
- What will you use to signal the beginning and end of the meditation time?
- What lead-in routine will you put in place?
- Will you ask students to remove their shoes?
- Where will you position yourself to lead the meditation?
- At the end of the meditation time what will you do to debrief the students?

## The Meditation Session

The actual meditation session has three parts – the lead-in, the meditation time, and the lead-out or debriefing. Let us look at each of these in turn.

### LEAD-IN

For younger learners, and depending on the frequency of the exercise, it will be necessary for a time to repeat the instructions on how to meditate. Appropriate music can be played as a signal for learners to enter the quiet time, but music should not be played during the meditation itself. A short prayer or reading of a scripture passage could also be used. Especially for younger children, Jeannie Battagin (2012) uses a story as lead-in, linking it to some way in which meditation enriches life and using carefully chosen objects at the centrepiece or focus as illustrative symbols.

### MEDITATION

The beginning and end of the meditation period is signalled by striking a gong or meditation chime three times. If the teacher is him/herself meditating with the children (and it is advisable to model the practice), the question of timing can become a dilemma. The use of a timer on a cell phone could be substituted. However, children usually enjoy having the opportunity to sound the gong or chime at least at the beginning of the meditation.

As a rule of thumb, the length of the meditation can be related to a child’s chronological age. So the teacher will aim for a 5-minute period for five year olds leading up to about 15 minutes for older teenagers. But at whatever age meditation is being introduced, the desired timespan will be arrived at gradually.

Distracting behaviour during meditation can be an issue. Jeannie Battagin advises that, in this respect, we must be committed to a gentle, yet firm approach. “Rather than using punitive measures to enforce compliance within the group,” she says, “it is more conducive to find creative ways to

work with ongoing and/or individual situations,” and she offers a number of useful suggestions (2012:110).

### LEAD-OUT

By way of leading out of the meditation, again music, prayer or reading can be used, finding a balance between regularity and novelty. Jeannie Battagin (2012:20) uses a simple ending ritual. Participants say the following words together standing in a circle: I honour the place of love and light, peace and truth that is inside you and inside me – Namaste. All then bow towards the centre of the circle, essentially honouring the presence of God within each person present.

For older students, a shortened version of a prayer commonly used by the World Community may be an effective way of closing the session.

May this group be a true spiritual home for the seeker,  
a friend for the lonely, a guide for the confused.  
May those who pray here be strengthened by the Holy Spirit  
to serve all who come, and to receive them as Christ Himself.  
In the silence of this room may all the suffering, violence, and confusion of the world  
encounter the Power that will console, renew and uplift the human spirit.  
We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. AMEN."

[Video: Teaching Children to Meditate (14:33)]

## Meditation Programmes in Schools

What makes for a successful implementation of meditation in a school? Christie & Day (Green 2011:38-41) offer some guidance from their wide experience.

- They mention first the need for resources. This may sound surprising, given that meditation is a simple practice that can be carried out anywhere, anytime and without anything in particular. But resources, like picture frames, help to bring out the silence and stillness into sharper relief. They also create interest and give the teacher confidence. Available resources will be illustrated in the closing section of this talk.
- Christian meditation is recommended as a foundation for the prayer life of the school, and indeed In the Townsville case, it has been introduced as a systemic practice. It should not be seen in isolation however from other forms of prayer, such as *lectio divina*, praying with icons, or vocal prayer, whether formal or spontaneous, private or in community. Laurence Freeman talks about meditation as the hub of the prayer wheel, and other forms as the spokes that make contact with the person’s everyday realities (WCCM 2012).
- Teacher formation is crucial and there should be plenty of opportunity and encouragement for teachers to attend workshops, courses and retreats. Because of large distances between Catholic schools in our country, the Catholic Institute of Education (CIE) is experimenting with a distance version of the six-week’s course offered by WCCM, School of Meditation.
- Formation of older students can also have a great impact, especially when they are invited to come up with their own programme for introducing meditation to younger ones. Jeannie Battagin (2012:97-101) describes how she enabled a class of Grade 7 students to introduce meditation to Grade 1 children. Part of her rationale was that a deeper understanding of and commitment to meditation would develop in the older learners.
- Schools need support, both initially from the local bishop and clergy, from the wider school community and from the teaching staff of the school. Reinvigorating the spiritual life of teachers often translates into experiences offered to students. Ongoing support needs to be provided by service bodies within Catholic education especially for leading ‘designated’ teachers who will inspire and energise others.

From their experience in the United Kingdom, Charles and Patricia Posnett (Green 2011:56) present a threefold profile which is typical of a school where Christian meditation has been introduced most easily:

- A strong belief in the value of Christian meditation – usually led by the head teacher – not only as a way of educating the whole child, but also as a life-skill.
- A willingness on the part of the teachers to involve themselves personally in learning how to meditate and an enthusiasm in passing the gift on to the children.
- A realisation that this is not just a technique which may enable the child to be calmer and more attentive in an increasingly busy world, but a way of providing a true ‘Bridge to God’, by enabling children to know themselves better and thus to know God better.

## Resources

To conclude, I would like to introduce you to various resources that are available for teaching children and leading them in meditation.

### CATHOLIC INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

The prayer cards and bookmarks, samples of which you have received, are simple tools for lead-ins and for teachers to have the process handy in shorthand for reference.

The set of 16 posters which are displayed here are reprinted on order with permission from Catholic Education, Townsville.

The meditation chimes, made by a local craftsman in Johannesburg, are available here. They are constructed of a solid polished aluminium bar mounted on a meranti base.

A booklet by Laurence Freeman – Christian Meditation – your daily practice is also available.

### WORLD COMMUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

- A wide range of books, DVDs, CDs, downloadable talks and transcripts are available through the following websites:

[www.wccm.org](http://www.wccm.org)

[www.contemplative-life.org](http://www.contemplative-life.org)

[www.meditatiostore.com](http://www.meditatiostore.com)

[www.theschoolofmeditation.org](http://www.theschoolofmeditation.org)

[www.cominghome.org.au](http://www.cominghome.org.au)

- Six-week’s introductory course

<http://www.theschoolofmeditation.org/content/materials-introducing-meditation#six-week-introductory-course>

- Introductory lessons

<http://www.christianmeditation.ie/?q=Resources>

- Stations of Contemplation

[http://www.cominghome.org.au/uploads/rsfil/000320\\_ffcd.pdf](http://www.cominghome.org.au/uploads/rsfil/000320_ffcd.pdf)

- My Happy Heart (Gregory Ryan)

## References

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