

Lesson One: How to Meditate

Aim: To introduce children to the simplicity of meditation. This first lesson is designed as an opening presentation to get the children started on the meditation path. It treats of meditation as a general, widespread, secular practice – there is no mention of God.

Learning Outcomes: Children will know how to be still and silent in meditation and will have experienced it in practice. They will appreciate that thoughts will inevitably arise and will know how to return to repeating their word as an aid to letting go of their thoughts.

Key Elements of Lesson 1:

1. Meditation is about being still – in body and in mind.
2. What does it mean to be still in body?
3. What does it mean to be still in mind?
4. To still our thoughts, we focus on something else; we will use a word, Maranatha (or an alternative).
5. Glitter Jar as a metaphor for a busy mind (*optional*).
6. Meditation Instructions
7. We meditate because meditation is good for us (refer to ‘settled’ glitter jar)

1. *Today we are going to learn something new; we are going to learn how to meditate. I wonder has anyone done it before?* [If so, engage gently with the child or children about their experience without going into very much detail.]

We will start our meditation shortly. We will do it first and then we’ll talk about why it’s good for you. It is very different to what you normally do in class because what we are going to do is to be very still and quiet. We are going to do nothing but meditate.

I invite you all to try to be very still in body and mind. Meditation is really good for you because it gives you a break from working all the time; it gives us a break from that feeling that we are always busy, always doing something. It’s really nice to take a break. So shall we do that in a moment?

When we meditate we try to be still in our body and still in our mind. But what does that mean?

2. ***What does it mean if you are still in your body?*** [Wait for the children to raise their hands and respond – treat each contribution with genuine appreciation. Then ask for examples of what it means if we are not still in our body and, again treat each contribution with great respect. Then demonstrate. Begin, for example, by sitting straight and still but lightly tapping your foot on the floor and ask if that is being still in body! Then sit still, but wiggle your fingers all the time or fiddle with your watch or a piece of jewellery and ask if that is being still in body! This discussion will clarify for the children, in a friendly way, what it means to be still in body.] *Is it easy to be still in your body? Let's try it for 30 seconds. We will try to be very still and not move a muscle. Let's close our eyes, if you are comfortable with that, and see if we can hear anything moving. Let's try it for 30 seconds until I invite to open your eyes again.*

[**Afterwards**, compliment the children on how they meditated and on the silence that helped everyone to meditate. Ask them if it was easy or hard to do. After a brief chat, conclude by noting that most people find it fairly easy to be still in body. But assure them that if they found it hard, not to worry – it will get easier.]

3. ***OK. Let's try something now that's a bit harder. Let's see if we can be still in our minds!*** *What does that mean, to be still in our minds? Let's close our eyes, if you are OK with that, and see what happens if we try to be still in our mind. Let's try it for 30 seconds until I invite you to open your eyes again.*

How was that? Was it hard or easy? I see that some found it easy, but most people find it hard to still their mind. [Talk with them a little about their experience noting that adults too generally find it very difficult to still the mind.]

It's hard, isn't it. It's very hard to stop thinking! Ideas just keep popping into your head. Have you ever brought a dog for a walk? Did you notice that they keep stopping to sniff every plant and flower? Our minds are a bit like that, always looking for something new to think about. Some people call it Monkey Mind ... because thoughts are like a monkey jumping from branch to branch ... Can anyone suggest how we might try to stop our mind from wandering so much? What could we do to help keep our minds more still? [Some children may volunteer an answer. If they do, treat each response with great respect and tease out its potential for stilling the mind.] There are different things we could do, but one of the best is to focus our minds on something else.

4. ***Here's a trick to stop your mind from jumping about.*** *We will give it something else to do. We won't think about anything ... we'll just repeat a single word over and over again ... and whenever we find we are thinking, we'll go back to the word. We'll use a word you've never used before ...* [This word comes from the Christian tradition but you can choose a word from any tradition. If teaching in a faith-based school, please choose a word from that faith tradition or if teaching meditation to children in a wholly secular context choose a neutral word or phrase such as 'Peace to All.']

Maranatha *is a big word but we will say it as if it is four small words: Ma ... Ra ... Na ... Tha...* [Write the word on a whiteboard or a flipchart so they can see it.] *Will you say that with me, nice and slowly Ma ... Ra ... Na ... Tha. When we meditate we will say it silently without speaking or moving our lips ... just in our heads. You can say it at whatever pace suits you, just not too fast ... One young boy told me recently he likes to say it at the speed of the ticking of a clock ...MaRa... ..Na... ..Tha. It's a strange word, isn't it? And that is good. We don't know what it means (although I'll tell you later) and that means it doesn't make us think about anything. So that helps. Imagine if I asked you to use the word 'Sausages,' why might that not be a good idea? [Engage with the children exploring how a word like sausages makes us think of food and may even have us hearing the sizzle of sausages frying in the pan. It brings thoughts in to our minds and that's exactly what we don't want to do when we meditate.] In a moment I will put on a CD and we can all listen carefully and follow the instructions. [The Meditation with Children Project in Ireland has prepared a CD for introducing meditation to children. The tracks from the CD are available from their website.] Alternatively, say that you will give them simple instructions in a moment.*

5. [If you have easy access to a glitter jar or can make one yourself, then it may be helpful to introduce one at this stage but it is by no means necessary.] *Before we meditate, can I ask if you have seen a glitter jar before? It contains lots of loose glitter in a liquid. What will happen when I shake the jar? [As always, treat their responses with respect.] Let's try it. What do you think will happen in the glitter jar while we meditate? OK, let's put the jar down and we will come back to it after meditation. [Place the jar out of sight so it won't be a distraction to the children during meditation.]*

Important Note: In naming the meditation project in the schools we called it the Meditation *with* Children project and that, of course, is the ideal. Parents introducing the practice to children should, of course, meditate with them. The teacher must be seen to honour the meditation practice BUT the teacher is still responsible for all of the children in their care and cannot, therefore, close their eyes and meditate with their eyes closed. The teacher has a responsibility to ensure the safety of all of the children during every meditation period, so they must remain fully alert to their responsibilities. However, it is equally important that the teacher honours the practice by remaining quiet and still, just like the children. Any unnecessary movement will be distracting and will make it difficult for the children to truly settle in to the practice.

Three Helpful Hints: In many schools nowadays, children sit four to six around a table, facing one another across it.

- Many teachers find it helpful to ask the children to pull their chair back a little from the table – so they won't fidget with anything on it. In fact some teachers take care to leave each table bare for meditation.
- Many also ask the children to turn their chairs around so everybody is facing the top of the class. This has the advantage that if any child opens their eyes during meditation, they won't find another child staring back at them!
- When people meditate from a faith-based perspective, they often light a candle (battery operated, for safety) on the teacher's table or a special small table, to represent the presence of the Divine and to remind themselves about their intention to be still and silent in God's presence. That can be introduced at a later stage if you wish to do so, after Lesson 3. But you might also do it now, without alluding to its religious symbolism. For example we often light candles for special occasions e.g. if we are having a family meal or celebrating a birthday. When you go into a restaurant you will often find that each table has a candle and some flowers to mark the fact that those eating together are taking time out to relax and share some time together. For the same reason, you could have a small bunch of flowers on the table also, if you wish. But neither is strictly necessary.

6. **[Before beginning the meditation, say a word to the children about your role during it. For example:]** *While we are meditating I remain responsible for every child in this class and for making sure that each one of you can meditate quietly,*

safely and happily. So while I will say the word in my mind, I will have to keep my eyes open. But I will sit here quietly and, like you, I won't do anything to disturb the quiet. If someone is fidgeting or moving or making a small noise and doesn't know it, I will just tap you gently on the shoulder to remind you to be still and quiet. Is that OK? Right, Let's begin... (Or let's listen to the CD and do what it says ...) [Alternatively, you may choose to do the introduction yourself; the wording from the CD is reproduced below]

Now, children, we are going to meditate together.

We begin by closing our eyes and placing our feet firmly on the floor

Check that you are sitting up straight in your chair with your hands on your lap or your knees

Become aware of the sounds in the room,/then let them go ...

Become aware of the sounds outside, then let them go....

Become aware of any thoughts arising in your mind, then let them go ...

Happy thoughts or sad thoughts, kind thoughts or angry thoughts,

Calm thoughts or worried thoughts ... just for now, let them go.

Imagine placing them on a leaf in a stream and now allow the leaf to float down the stream, carrying your thoughts with them ... let them drift away...

[In a Christian school you might add: *Christians believe that when you meditate you open your heart to God who fills you with his Love.. You will now hear a few lines of the song, 'Into the Quiet'*]

*When the meditation bell rings three time, begin to recite your word. Say **Ma-ra-na-tha** as if it were four short words. Say it silently in your mind so no one else will hear a thing.*

*Say it slowly and lovingly/ **Ma-ra-na-tha**.*

*When thoughts pop into your head, become aware of them, acknowledge them but don't entertain them; just smile and let them drift away, and return gently to your word, **Ma-ra-na-tha**.*

Keep doing this until the meditation bell rings again at the end of the meditation. Notice how the gong reverberates. Listen to the final gong until you can hear it no longer and then open your eyes again.

7. After meditation explain briefly to the children why people meditate:

Meditation is really good for you ... *There are lots of reasons why meditation is good for you.*

[If you introduced the glitter jar you can refer to it here: *The glitter jar may give us one idea why? Do you remember that we shook the glitter jar before we started meditating? Let's look and see what has happened? When we shook the jar, it became all swirly, with the stars flying about in all directions. Our minds can get like that too when we have too much going on. The glitter racing swirling around the jar is a little bit like our thoughts racing in our heads. We sometimes say that our minds are racing. Imagine each piece of glitter is a thought when we are under pressure, they all get jumbled up together so we can't even think straight. But while we were meditating the jar calmed down; all the glitter settled and the liquid became clear and calm. The glitter stopped swirling around and the jar became clear again. When the jar sits still, everything calms down. It's the same with us.]*

When we sit, still in body and mind, everything calms down – our body and our thoughts - and, after meditation, we are able to think more clearly. We will talk more about why meditation is good for us the next day. In the meantime, we will practice our meditation every day or every few days. And when we are more used to it we will come back and talk about how it helps us.