

Starting 11th Step Meditation Meetings and Groups

The 11th Step of Alcoholics Anonymous is part of the foundation of my recovery. Step Eleven states, "Sought through prayer and meditation to have a conscious contact with God and to pray for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry it out." It is my experience that the "prayer and meditation" is often just practiced as "prayer" for many in the 12 Step programs. Meditation seems to be weird, "out there", unable to understand how to do it, something that is glossed over, intimidating and misunderstood by many.

I had the gift of experiencing an 11th Step Meditation AA meeting early in sobriety that gave me the tools and encouragement to develop a practice of meditation that has brought me a deeper level of emotional sobriety in my recovery. The key word in that statement is "practice." Like riding a bike, or learning how to live sober, I needed guidance, tools and support as I journeyed along the spiritual path of meditation. Over the years, I have discovered my 12th Step mission is to become an encourager, explainer, and, a cheerleader for meditation in recovery. I understand the "attraction not promotion" tradition so I try to quietly raise awareness and encouragement while providing tools and education about the tremendous value and benefits meditation in recovery to attract those in all types of recovery to meditation. It is with this intention that I created the SpiritStep CD series and why I am writing this article – to share my experience, strength and hope of my 11th Step Meditation program.

11th Step meditation groups are an excellent way for experienced sober meditators to be of service to newcomers, and to those already in recovery, but new to meditation. Meditation groups provide a safe environment to learn and explore a variety of meditation tools and techniques, to experience the benefits and the power of group meditations and to encourage and support our individual daily struggles and practices of learning meditation.

There are a number of ways to begin an 11th Step meditation meeting in your area. There are 2 types of 11th Step meditation groups and approaches. The first are the traditional 12 Step meetings that follow the principles of the local Central Office and area groups. These 11th Step meditation meetings are growing in their popularity as meditation slowly moves to the mainstream of recovery. If you do not have an 11th Step meeting in your community we will offer some guidelines and suggestions on how to start a meeting. This will be a tremendous gift and asset to

the recovery community in your area and you may be surprised at the support it will receive.

The second type of group follows a meditation “class” or workshop format for newcomers in the local hospitals, recovery facilities, and jails. Newly sober members are sometimes more teachable and open to new experiences than those already in recovery for awhile. This is an excellent opportunity to give the gift of meditation, to offer an experience of discovering a higher power within, and to actually make a connection with that power, if only for a brief period, early in their sobriety. Although the 11th Step may be an advanced step, I believe that practicing meditation very early in sobriety will lay a good foundation for the first 3 Steps and help to develop more deeply that “conscious contact” when the member reaches the 11th Step in their program.

Starting an 11th Step Meditation Meeting

You can begin an 11th Step meditation meeting in your area to fit meditation into the recovery community, to qualify to be included in the local recovery meeting schedule and to adhere to the Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 Step Recovery Groups. New 12 Step recovery meetings are started all the time and the same steps can be followed in starting your 11th Step meditation meeting.

1. **Find others who are interested in meditation in recovery**, who already practice meditation and who are willing to be of service to support a new meeting.

2. **Search for a suitable location.** While we technically can learn to meditate anywhere, it is more desirable to find a location that is suitable to learning meditation with:

a. A quiet location without too much outside noise or possibility for distraction. Although we practice meditation techniques to detach from our thoughts and outside distractions, it is better not to add any additional distractions to the meeting.

b. Relaxing, comfortable seating if possible, but not required.

c. A spiritually centered location. Often a local church, temple, convent or monastery will provide a room to support your efforts. There is much to be said about the “energy” of a space. These types of locations will already come with a loving, serene, healing energy about them to add to the “quality” of the group.

d. Morning is always best for meditating, but mornings are hard to schedule meetings for a number of reasons except possibly Sunday mornings. Early evenings are suitable meeting times – 6:00 or 7:00 pm. The group will just need to be aware of and forgiving of those that will fall asleep during the



meditation at the end of a long day. It will be ok to quietly nudge them awake if they snore too loud!

3. Establish the meeting format. I have experienced and used a number of formats with 11th Step meditation meetings. Here is the format that has worked in an 11th Step Meditation Meeting here in Santa Barbara that has been active for a number of years:

- a. The Secretary chooses a leader for the Meeting. Generally, the leaders have had some experience with meditation and are given at least a week's notice that they will be leading to allow them time to consider what to share.
- b. The Leader begins the meeting with an established set of readings:
 - i. Introduction – describe the meeting format of readings, the leader's share, and a meditation period followed by an opportunity for the group members to share about the experience with meditation in their program.
 - ii. Readings: Big Book – Read the 11th Step section from the book Alcoholics Anonymous page 85–88. It is about the same length as the standard "How it Works" reading from traditional meetings. This reading helps to set the tone of the meeting and reinforces directly from our primary text the message of the 11th Step.
 - iii. Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions – We chose to create a shorter edited version of the text from pages 96-105 that included the sections about the 11th Step Prayer...otherwise known as the St. Francis Prayer.
 - iv. The leader then shares for 5-7 minutes on their experience of meditation in their recovery program. Often the leader would share their specific meditation experience, practice and techniques with the group. This is a great opportunity to experience a variety of types of meditation within the safety of a meeting. This approach follows in the spirit of the Big Book text on page 87, which suggests it is OK to receive input and guidance from outside sources in this matter of meditation and prayer. We had some good, and some very unique, meditations presented and they were received with an open-mindedness that we try to practice in our program.
 - v. Then, we begin the group meditation. This time period can be set by the meeting format in advance. I suggest 20-25 minutes as a standard length. The goal is for the meditation to be long enough for the experienced meditators to benefit, and yet, short enough for the beginners to sit through. Any shorter time period does not really give the mind enough time to really begin to settle down.



- vi. The leader may “guide” the meditation or just have a silent meditation. You may also use guided meditation CD’s or background music played from a portable player to accompany the meditation experience. The variety of meditations offers members a chance to explore which techniques and type of meditation best suits them and their concepts of Higher Power.
- vii. One person is designated as the time keeper and signals the end of the meditation period. You may use a bell, singing bowl or other tools to signal the ending of the meditation.
- viii. Open sharing following the meditation. You may then sit quietly and let people volunteer to share or to go around in the room giving members the option to pass if they choose. The sharing gives insight into where each person is on the 11th Step journey and provides an opportunity for the more experienced meditators to follow-up after the meeting with helpful encouragement and tips to how they dealt with any obstacles the beginner shared about during the meeting.
- ix. The meeting ends in the traditional format of holding hands in a circle with a prayer. It is interesting to me how often the 3rd step prayer is being used at this point.

You may wish to visit existing meditation groups that meet in your area to get a feel for how the different practices facilitate their groups. Each religion and spiritual practice today has a meditation aspect to it and groups are formed to support group and individual meditation. Several examples that you may wish to explore are:

- Christian – while many do not associate meditation with Christianity, Centering Prayer is a Christian meditation method based on the ancient mystical and contemplative teachings of the Church placing a strong emphasis on interior quiet and the experience of God's presence.
- New Thought churches such as Unity and Religious Science have meditation classes and services. The movement places great emphasis in positive thinking, affirmations, meditation, and prayer.
- Buddhist – "the teachings of the awakened one" offers a way of life, a practical philosophy that encompasses meditation as a way to put an end to the stress of existence. Many of the centers and temples offer meditation classes and weekly meditation groups.
- Hindu – one of the oldest of all the major religions of this world. Based on the Vedas, the sacred scriptures of India, Vedanta, a large sect of Hinduism affirms the oneness of existence, the divinity of the soul, and the harmony of religions. Early meditation in the West was brought to the US by Vedanta teachers in the early 1900's. There are classes and teaching available in their local temples.



- Muslim –Sufism is a mystical tradition of Islam. Sufism encompasses a diverse range of beliefs with a focus on meditation.
- Yoga Centers – although founded on Hindu teachings, these are often not considered as “religious centers.” These organizations sometimes encompass and teach meditation techniques in their curriculum.

These may help provide you insight into the types and variety of meditation practices and techniques that are available and growing as a resource to our recovery community. The variety offers a wide avenue of choices for meditators in recovery as they seek out to understand and to develop the knowledge and an image of their Higher Power.

Recovery Group Meditation Classes

I have also had the privilege to lead meditation groups in our local jail, recovery homes and hospital. These types of groups are a “captive” audience. This is an excellent way to plant the seeds of 11th Step meditation and to give newly sober members an experience of an inner connection to their higher power.

It has been my experience to develop these types of opportunities by:

1. Working with the in-house substance treatment program in the County Jail. This is wonderful program designed to tackle the root of incarceration – alcoholism and drug addiction. The in-house program provide the inmates, who have applied to be in this program, classes and studies on working the steps to stay sober and learning new life skills. The counselors are receptive to offering 11th Step meditation courses and, although initially skeptical, the inmates appreciate the chance to learn and practice meditation. There may be a similar program in your area that you can work with to provide this valuable service.
2. Teaching meditation in local recovery homes. These live-in facilities normally have mandatory house meetings each week. The House Managers are often open to offering an 11th Step meditation “class” during one of these mandatory meetings. I’ve had success in scheduling a “once a month” regular meeting. These facilities do not normally offer meditation as a part of their format and this format gives exposure to many of the residents that would not seek out meditation on their own. You may also promote your local 11th Step Meditation Meetings at this time.
3. Offering to lead group meditation in the In-patient Treatment Facilities or Hospitals. Many of the professional treatment centers are beginning to include meditation groups into their schedules which are a very positive sign. However, there is a wide variety of meditation experience levels among the counselors that are leading the groups. Also, there is a struggle to understand and decide what types of meditations and techniques to present to their patients. I have been



invited to occasionally lead the meditation groups in these facilities to offer a new perspective and a different experience to enhance the daily counselor led meditations. This is also an opportunity to plug your local 11th Step Meditation Meetings.

This beginning 11th Step meditation class format that has worked best for me is much like a meeting format except that I, as the "teacher, sharing my experience," always lead the class/meeting. The goal of the classes is to guide newcomers to effectively apply the first 3 steps internally and spiritually through meditation and to provide a broader foundation to build sustainable sobriety. This class format follows the meeting format which I described above with a "share" or lesson, and then a 20-25 minute guided meditation with the group.

I have developed a set of standardized meditation lessons through the SpiritStep program that relates meditation to each step, meditation techniques that will help experience the step within meditation, and a guided meditation to provide a spiritual workout to practice the techniques and the Step during meditation.

- a. SpiritStep One – We are powerless over our thoughts and emotions so we practice relaxation techniques and begin to learn to detach from thoughts in meditation
- b. SpiritStep Two – We feel separate and alone, this is our insanity, so we practice developing a sense of what our higher power is and how re-connect to our true selves, others, and our higher power.
- c. SpiritStep Three – We hold on to our thoughts, feelings and outside things so to overcome this we practice letting go, being aware of our "self will muscle" and understanding basic principles to follow our higher powers will. There is no greater exercise in surrendering to our Higher Power's will than to sit and meditate daily!

My experiences have shown that newcomers are often very scattered emotionally and mentally and can easily become frustrated with certain types of meditation. Since meditation is an exercise in prolonged concentration, I use affirmations as mantras throughout these beginning meditations. Examples are – "I relax and let go," and "I let go and let God." These, when used in rhythm with the breath, provide the new meditator with positive and suggestive phrases to focus on and to help begin to re-program inner thought patterns. The goal is a 15 to 20 minute meditation. This is often the first meditation experience that many participants will have.

You may find that the first several meditation classes in a facility seem uneasy or unsettled. It has been my experience that through consistent repetition of the group meditation environment that the energy shifts in the class and begins to settle down. There will be some of the attendees that have been to a few of the classes and are beginning to be able to stay centered enough to counteract the

The logo for SpiritStep, with "Spirit" in a light blue font and "Step" in a darker blue font, both in a sans-serif typeface.

anxious energy of the newest members to sobriety and to the class. In fact, in the jail program I taught a 12 week 12 Step Meditation course and in the beginning was often interrupted by the guards trying to display their authority and by the inmates that wanted no part of meditation but had to sit through the class. It was amazing to watch, how over the course the first 5-6 weeks, the energy really shifted....the guards were more respectful, the unruly inmates quieted down, and a good number of the inmates were really experiencing the benefits of meditation and practicing on their own. The power of 11th Step meditation is a tremendous experience to watch, and to share in, and we can help by bringing this message and practice to the front lines of sobriety through these types of meditation classes!

It is through these experiences that I developed the SpiritStep concept for the first CD SpiritStep One Beginning Meditation: Relax and Let Go. I found that new meditators and counselors, new to helping to bring meditation to their group, could benefit from a tool that would help relate learning to meditate with the 12 Steps, provide some basic meditation techniques, and that offered guided meditations to get started and give some gentle coaching throughout the meditation. Currently I am developing the SpiritStep Two CD and look forward to collaborating with other 12 Step meditators and counselors on how to more effectively expand the awareness and practice of 11th Step Meditation throughout the recovery community.

In my mind there is no greater benefit that I can provide my fellow travelers on the recovery journey and to humanity than to increase the number of people who have integrated meditation into their daily spiritual program. I welcome you to join my in this journey of epic proportions to save lives and to save the world, one meditation and one life at a time.

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SpiritStep

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