

How to Meditate with a Text

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What is a “Text”?

- The invention of the text, as distinct from a record of speech.
- The text, as distinct from this codex, book, reading, utterance, etc.
- The possibility of a “critical edition.”

Goals, Aims, Purposes: Why might we engage with a text?

- A few prospects:
 1. Collecting data, information, trivia. (*Shallow.*)
 2. Understanding/examining the artifact itself. (*Is this still too shallow?*)
 3. Thinking the author’s (or compiler’s) thoughts, together with him. (*Getting deeper.*)
 4. Connecting to the same (timeless) realities, which also inspired the author.
- Forming a bridge/chain:
 - From the higher realities (which cause/explain) ...
 - ... through ourselves ...
 - ... down to the extremities of materiality.

Modes of Composition & Expression

- A few varieties:
 - Photorealistic.
 - Literal, but not photorealistic.
 - The mythic.
 - “A false discourse shadowing forth the truth.”
 - The allegorical or symbolic.
- What kinds of texts lend themselves to a meditative approach? In what ways?
 - Complex argument in a “direct” mode.
 - A meaning that is veiled, indirect ...
 - ... because it cannot be expressed, or
 - ... because it must be discovered by each person, for himself.
- The “book of Nature”?

Stages of Meditative Reading

Lectio divina (“divine reading”), in European monastic traditions:

1. *Preparatio*.
 - Broadly: sufficient background, history, context.
 - Narrowly: selection of a text, in advance.
2. *Lectio*.
 - Read out loud, if at all possible.
 - Allow the text to flow *through* me, not merely *into* me.
3. *Meditatio*.
 - Careful examination, rumination. (Hugh’s analogy of chewing.)
 - By questions.
 - A dialogue (with myself, with the author, with the text). Thus, “discursive.”
 - By the method of exclusion.
 - What does this element/term exclude, such that ...
 - ... we get a definition/account that is neither too broad, nor too narrow ...
 - ... and, this very element makes a unique contribution?
 - Through the “event-makers.”
 - Agent.
 - Patient.
 - Instrument.
 - Source.
 - Beneficiary.
 - Location.
 - By a conceptual frame.
 - Ecological laws.
 - Aristotle’s categories.
 - Buddhist “Noble Truths.”
 - etc.
 - By application.
 - Methods of immersion.
 - (e.g., Neopagan “pathworkings” and “guided meditations,” also “discursive meditation” in the modern Catholic sense).
 - Where, in the order of reality, does the sensory belong?
 - Moving *through* the sensory (or the photorealistic), into other modes.
4. *Contemplatio*.

Levels of Interpretation

1. History.
 - “What, when, where, & by whom every deed has been done, from beginning to end.”
 - What about the mythic mode?
2. Allegory.
 - “Through what is done, something else in the past, present, or future is signified.”
3. Tropology.
 - “Through what is done, something which should be done is signified.”
- Hugh’s Christian/monotheist presumptions. What happens if we don’t share them?

Strategies & Tips

- Integrate, and make space for, this practice as part of a life of study and contemplation.
 - Within the structure of the day.
 - Beginning fresh, each week.
- Read aloud. (In English, and in the original language.)
- Write a journal. (Regularly, by hand.)

A “Full-on” Structure

1. An opening prayer/ritual.
2. Posture and relaxation.
3. Breathing.
4. The main event/focal point. (Here, *lectio* and *meditatio*.)
5. Space for contemplation.
6. Journalling.
7. A closing prayer/ritual.

Additional Readings & Resources

For Hugh of St. Victor, and the traditions of reading and meditation in which he was steeped, an excellent starting point is Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (University of Chicago Press, 1993; reprinted Marion Boyars, 2022). The first few chapters in particular are a solid overview to the principles we discussed in the workshop; the later chapters (on the radical changes in reading and literacy in the 12th century and beyond) are fascinating in their own right, but less directly relevant. Illich is remarkably courteous toward his reader in providing translations for his Latin quotations; if a passage or phrase is given only in Latin, do check the footnotes, and you'll almost certainly find what you need!

As one example of using a conceptual structure to guide your meditations, take a look at our Merlin philosophy walk, "From Ecology to Excellence," along with the supplementary resources on the archive pages.

For meditation and myth within the Platonic tradition, touching on some of the workshop themes and going well beyond them, I highly recommend Tim Addey, *The Unfolding Wings: The Way of Perfection in the Platonic Tradition* (2nd ed., The Prometheus Trust, 2011). The author gives some extensive advice on the theory and practice of meditation and contemplative work, along with a thoughtful chapter on the role of myth in the philosophic life.

We'll be discussing myth in much greater detail as the focus of a workshop in November. But if you're in a hurry, a few worthwhile sources include Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs in Homer's Odyssey*; and Proclus, Essay 6 of the *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, most of which is included by Thomas Taylor as an extensive introduction to Books 2 and 3 of his translation of the *Republic* itself. (There's also a modern translation of Proclus' commentary from Cambridge University Press, but in my opinion, Taylor's is far superior. The more recent translators go out of their way to emphasize points of possible unclarity or obscurity, while doing little to help resolve those difficulties. Taylor, on the other hand, treats Proclus respectfully, as a thoughtful and intelligent philosopher from whom we might actually want, and be able, to learn.) Both of these are widely available online, in the public domain; they're also reprinted in volumes II and IX, respectively, of the Thomas Taylor Series from the Prometheus Trust.

On the general theoretical perspectives, regarding metaphysical explanation and the work of philosophy, two worthwhile books are Eric D. Perl, *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition* (Brill, 2014) and Lloyd P. Gerson, *Platonism and Naturalism: The Possibility of Philosophy* (Cornell University Press, 2020). Both of these authors can be a bit challenging and combative in their approach, but their arguments are nonetheless worthy of careful consideration.

The other still-in-copyright translations used in the handout are: Epictetus, *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, translated by Robin Hard (Oxford World's Classics, 2014), and *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Carolyne Larrington (revised edition, Oxford World's Classics, 2014).

(By way of full disclosure, please note that for the books published by the Prometheus Trust, I'm the North American distributor for these titles, under Kindred Star Books. I recommend and sell them because I personally find them to be valuable. I'm also happy to provide free delivery and a modest discount for Merlin students in Helena who may be interested in them.)

Some Texts for Consideration

Text #1: Cleanthes, “Hymn to Zeus” (as quoted in Epictetus, *Handbook [Enchirideon]*, chapter 53).

Original Greek Text	trans. Robin Hard (2014)	trans. Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1890)
ἄγου δέ μ', ὦ Ζεῦ, καὶ σύ γ' ἡ Πεπρωμένη, ὅποι ποθ' ὑμῖν εἰμι διατεταγμένος; ὡς ἔψομαι γ' ἄοκνος; ἦν δέ γε μὴ θέλω, κακὸς γενόμενος, οὐδὲν ἦττον ἔψομαι.	Guide me, O Zeus, and thou, O Destiny, To wheresoever you have assigned me; I'll follow unwavering, or if my will fails, Base though I be, I'll follow nonetheless.	Conduct me, Zeus, and thou, O Destiny, Wherever your decrees have fixed my lot. I follow cheerfully; and, did I not, Wicked and wretched, I must follow still.

Cleanthes was the third head of the Stoa (i.e., the Stoic school of Hellenistic philosophy). He was the author of more than 100 books, but none of them survive intact; we have only fragments of his work, quoted in the works of other authors.

Text #2: *Havamal*, verse 138.

Original Old Norse Text	trans. Henry Adams Bellows (1936)	trans. Carlyne Larrington (2014)
Veit ek, at ek hekk vindga meiði á nætr allar níu, geiri undaðr ok gefinn Óðni, sjalfr sjalfum mér, á þeim meiði, er manngi veit hvers af rótum renn.	I ween that I hung on the windy tree, Hung there for nights full nine; With the spear I was wounded, and offered I was To Othin, myself to myself, On the tree that none may ever know What root beneath it runs.	I know that I hung on a windswept tree nine long nights, wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin, myself to myself, on that tree of which no man knows from where its roots run.

Forming part of the Poetic Edda, the Havamal (or “Sayings of the High One”) is frequently understood as a text giving advice, or a collection of proverbs. Given that overall context (advice about friendship, how to behave in public, how to succeed or fail in wooing a lover, etc.), this passage may seem a bit out of place. That apparent incongruity can encourage us to look more closely, in meditation...

Text #3: Hugh of St. Victor, *Sermon 21* (PL 177, 937A-C).

Is it possible to say that man has spiritual members? Indeed, the virtues. And just as one is formed exteriorly by fitting members, so is he marvelously shaped and ordered interiorly by appropriate virtues. And the very members of the body metaphorically manifest the virtues of a spiritual being. The head signifies the mind. ...

The eyes speak of contemplation. For as we see visible things with our bodily eyes, so through the rays of contemplation we have some idea of invisible reality.

We can distinguish with our nose. For with our nostrils we can discern good from bad smells. Therefore, it is not unfitting that we signify the virtue of discernment by the nose.

The ears express obedience in that they are instrumental for hearing and then obeying.

The mouth suggests intelligence. For as we receive food with our mouth, so by the power of intelligence do we take in the nourishment of holy reading.

And the teeth signify meditation, for as we chew up food with our teeth, so through the exercise of meditation we are able to taste the subtleties in the life-giving bread of reading.

Trans. Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, p. 21, n. 37.

Text #4: Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, book I, chapter 3.

Socrates in the *Alcibiades* rightly observes, that the soul entering into herself will behold all other things, and deity itself. For, verging to her own union, and to the centre of all life, laying aside multitude, and the variety of the all manifold powers which she contains, she ascends to the highest watchtower of beings. ... For the soul, when looking at things posterior to herself, beholds the shadows and images of beings; but when she turns to herself, she evolves¹ her own essence, and the reasons which she contains. And at first indeed, she only, as it were, beholds herself; but, when she penetrates more profoundly into the knowledge of herself, she finds in herself both intellect, and the orders of beings. But when she proceeds into her interior recesses, and into the adytum,² as it were, of the soul, she perceives with her eye closed, the genus of the Gods, and the unities of beings. For all things reside in us according to the peculiarity of the soul, and through this we are naturally capable of knowing all things, by exciting the powers and the images of wholes which we contain.

Trans. Thomas Taylor, from his notes to Plato's *Alcibiades*.

1 The word "evolve" is used here in its older, traditional sense (which strictly follows the etymology): to roll out or unfold, to take what was already contained inside and spin it out, as it were. In this sense, the term forms a matched pair with the word "involve," meaning to roll/fold inwards, to take what was external and tuck it inside.

2 Adytum: the inner sanctum, the holiest chamber inside a temple.