

# BUILDING YOUR OWN VIRTUES: STILLNESS



Much has been written in recent years on the practice of ‘stilling techniques’. Mindfulness courses continue to flourish, and Eckhart Tolle’s *The Power of Now* rides high in the international bestsellers’ list. Something, it seems, is very much in the air, maybe in part because of the stresses and strains of modern living. Perhaps ‘stilling techniques’ are the perfect antidote to a restless, acquisitive age? One can but speculate, but if the popularity of this texts is anything to go by, then it seems that many experience a strong ‘felt absence’ at the loss of silence, or the cluttering up of ‘inner space’. Such ‘stilling’ techniques often form important components of substance abuse rehabilitation programmes.

There is, however, nothing new in ‘stilling techniques’; in fact, many have an ancient and venerable pedigree. They can be found both within religious traditions and outside them. Given that such techniques seem to transcend cultures, and stretch through time, it is reasonable to conclude that they play an important role in helping us to live fully human lives. There are times when we need silence, meditation, contemplation and rest, regardless of worldview – it is simply a practice we need in order to flourish. We need, at times, to be a little gentler with ourselves!

It is important to remember, though, that whilst these various techniques have much in common, on closer inspection, the different stilling techniques are often smaller parts of a bigger whole; they are practices that can be difficult to divorce from context in any sincere or meaningful way. Such techniques must bear fruit in ethical action – for Buddhists, it could be a ‘letting go’ of useless possessions or negative emotions, whilst for Christians, it could be a simple preparation for learning to live more fully for God and others.

This section, then, invites students and staff to explore, articulate and practise a set of ‘stilling’ techniques that are:

- a. personally meaningful to them;
- b. coherent with the moral life or the call to virtue; (this, of course, rules out the use of any illegal or psychoactive substances!)
- c. commended to them by the religious or spiritual traditions of the school community of which they are currently part.

Such an open-ended task offers students the possibility to explore spiritual and religious traditions they particularly identify with, or may be curious about. Here are some classic interpretations of ‘stilling’ techniques that students may wish to explore, according to interest and inclination:

- \* Yoga
- \* Mindfulness
- \* *The Power of Now*, Eckhart Tolle
- \* ‘*Centring Prayer*’ – *Into the Silent Land* by Martin Laird is a superb introduction to this.
- \* Hesychasm – the ‘Jesus Prayer’ of the Orthodox
- \* The Rosary
- \* Observing nature closely – *How to Connect With Nature*, by Tristan Gooley is a wonderfully practical text on deepening our experience of the joys of nature. For those spooked by the thought of ‘weird pseudo-religious practices’, this may be ideal.

Make students aware of how this virtue can link to other practices that are touched by the virtue of self-control. Stilling techniques have been used to help addictions, mental strains and stresses.



If appropriate, students could present on how they go about practising 'stillness'.

1. Students need to identify, or specify a field of interest.
2. Students need to research some of the techniques offered within that field, or tradition.
3. Students need to gather information and complete the Virtue Knowledge Template.
4. Students could use the Virtue Reasoning Guide as an aid to personal discernment – it has been adapted with the cultivation of 'stillness' in mind.

5. Ask students to research and practise their techniques for a specified time, with a view to reporting back and sharing their experiences with the class.
6. Students could use the Virtue Practice tool to review how they need to work to develop the habit of stillness.

Students are to make use of the photocopiable worksheets that follow in order to research, practise and report back on a stilling technique of personal interest to them.

