

Does having “spiritual experiences” mean we are growing spiritually? How might we make lasting, transformative, Christlike changes in our personality and character?

MORMON MANTRAS

A JOURNEY OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

By Philip G. McLemore

Spirituality . . . is the consciousness of victory over self, and of communion with the Infinite.¹

In our worship there are two elements: One is the spiritual communion arising from our own meditation; the other, instruction from others. . . . Of the two, the more profitable . . . is the meditation. Meditation is one of the most secret, most sacred doors through which we pass into the presence of the Lord.²

—PRESIDENT DAVID O. MCKAY

I WAS RAISED CATHOLIC BUT STOPPED GOING TO church when I started college at age seventeen. Mass was boring, and the doctrines, as I understood them, did not seem reflective of a kind and just God. I was always intrigued by what people believed and the impact those beliefs had in their lives, so even though I left Catholicism, I continued to search for a new spiritual home. I attended many Protestant and Evangelical churches, studied with Jehovah’s Witnesses, and if there was a tent meeting off the side of the road, I always stopped in. A friend tried to interest me in Eastern religious practices, but the incense nauseated me and the sharp pains in my knees from trying to twist into the lotus position discouraged me from further investigation.

Eventually I was exposed to Mormonism by a wonderful group of young adults, and at age nineteen, I joined the Church. The doctrine was more comprehensive and made more sense than anything I had experienced. The beliefs were clearly integral to the lives of Church members, which is what I envisioned the hallmark of a true religion to be. I loved the equality of expectation for spiritual growth: each individual, not just a holy elite, has a responsibility to be Christlike. Most



PHILIP G. McLEMORE is currently working as a hospice chaplain and meditation instructor. He is a former LDS Institute of Religion director and a retired Air Force chaplain. He lives in West Point, Utah. Phil and his wife, Kim, have four married children and six-and-three-fourths grandchildren. Phil welcomes comments at trans7med@yahoo.com.

important, I began having personal spiritual experiences, which made God real to me in a way I’d never known before.

The gospel and the Church were very stabilizing, helping turn an insecure, confused teenager into a more mature and responsible young man. Within seven years, I had served a mission, earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees, was employed by the Church Educational System as a seminary supervisor and director of an LDS Institute of Religion, and was married in the temple to the loveliest woman on the planet.

After eight years with the Church Educational System, I had the opportunity and honor of representing the Church as a military chaplain in the United States Air Force, in which capacity I served for the next twenty years. It was an amazing experience to share the full range of life—with all its joys and pains, successes and failures, delights and disappointments—with such a diverse group of people trying to make their way. I became friends and worked closely with priests, rabbis, and ministers from a wide variety of religions and denominations. In many of my assignments, I was the spiritual leader for a variety of non-LDS groups and worship services.

In my associations with Latter-day Saints, as well as with leaders and members of other faiths, I have encountered some wonderful, Christlike people. However, I noticed that their spiritual qualities seemed to be related to them as individuals rather than being connected to any particular religion or spiritual practice. It was much more common to see leaders and members of religious organizations striving for a Christlike nature but, under the pressures and responsibilities of life, failing to achieve a genuine, lasting spiritual transformation. Eventually I came to realize that I was one of those in this second category. I felt so validated by success at my jobs and in my church positions and activities, it was easy to overlook the fact that, at the deepest levels, I really wasn’t growing more Christlike. When failures came, I bounced back so well that I could live in the illusion that I was okay. Like many “faithful” persons—LDS or not—I was having periodic, if not regular, spiritual experiences, which *had* to mean that I was on the right path and progressing. It took a long time before I realized that having spiritual experiences often has little to do with spiritual transformation.

Like many people, when I was at work and at church, I was fairly angelic—kind, patient, loving, helpful, accepting. At home, I was often a different guy. I loved my family and worked hard for them, but I could be defensive, selfish, judgmental, impatient, and I lacked the emotional honesty and vulnerability to love openly and deeply. And to the extent I recognized these deficiencies in character, I approached them in typical Mormon fashion—through goal-setting, scripture study, fasting, and prayer. But I made only pitiful progress, mainly in learning how to love my wife. I provided, protected, disciplined, and taught, but I did not give my children enough of the love and kindness they needed when they were young. I was dismayed that even after years of sincere effort devoted to spiritual growth, I still did not embody the key Christlike qualities I earnestly desired. Religion and spiritual growth were my

anxiety disorder. It was a misdiagnosis that delayed the search for underlying causes for eighteen months and eventually left me, Mr. Pinnacle of Success, a confused, unstable, fearful mess. Again, I approached this challenge in typical Mormon fashion—goal-setting, scripture study, fasting, prayer, a series of priesthood blessings, and a concerted effort to develop greater faith.

Nothing helped. Exhausted and resigned to a life of misery, I finally surrendered.

At this point, two gifts providentially appeared: the book, *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn, and the audio program, *Training the Mind, Healing the Body*, by Deepak Chopra. These introduced me to the practice of meditation and meditative yoga. Within just a few weeks of practice, I was symptom-free during each period of meditation—which then was



SINCE OUR DEEPEST BIOLOGICAL

*instincts are fear-based, our negative experiences usually dominate our conditioning,
making the development of faith, love, and spiritual growth an uphill battle.*

business! What was I missing?

Despite these occasional realizations of my shortcomings, I forged ahead, still sure that I was on the right path, confident that continued, directed effort would eventually produce the genuine transformation I sought. Finally in August 2000, I reached what I considered to be a pinnacle of professional, personal, and spiritual success. My inner dialogue went something like this: *Even though I still lack some key spiritual qualities, I have theological certainty, I can teach the gospel with impact, I have overcome some serious character flaws, and I have learned how to really love my wife.* I felt like I had completed the purpose of my mortal probation and sensed no fear of death.

Oh what a difference a month can make! A year earlier, I had injured my neck, back, and left shoulder. The full extent of the injuries to my neck and back were overshadowed by the severe shoulder pain, which became the sole focus for medical care. In September 2000, I was stunned by an unrelenting cascade of muscle spasms, headaches, unusual pain patterns, and episodes of dizziness, anxiety, and depression. Responding to these new symptoms, my doctor diagnosed me as having an

twenty minutes twice a day, but this gave me hope I could extend that relief into my day-to-day activities.

After two months of meditation and yoga, I shifted from practicing “mindfulness meditation” (in which the goal is to create greater awareness of one’s thoughts, emotions, and body sensations by observing them from a witness position without judging them) to a mantra-based meditation practice. Almost immediately, I noticed that my scripture studies were more insightful and my prayers more rich and profound. I soon realized that meditation was not primarily about relaxation and stress reduction but rather an awakening into the Spirit—and that this communion with Spirit had the power to heal and transform. Touched by the sacredness of this realization, I began to meditate in a kneeling position. It wasn’t long before I began to consider my symptoms a small price to pay for their role in leading me into expanded states of bliss, peace, and spiritual connection.

After seven months of devoted meditation practice, I began to have consciousness-expanding experiences that provided exhilarating moments in which I felt a deep sense of oneness

BASICS

for a beginning meditation practice

1. Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Early morning is best, but do it, when you can, prior to eating a meal.
2. Choose a comfortable sitting position in which you can hold your neck and back straight. If you are in a chair, make sure your hips are slightly higher than your knees. If needed, use a cushion to support your lower back, but your head should be unsupported. Place your hands, palms up, on your thighs.
3. Twenty minutes is an ideal time for a substantive meditation. If that is too long, start with ten and work up to twenty.
4. Close your eyes, and offer a short, devotional prayer expressing your intent to commune with God.
5. Inhale, exhale, and make sure you are breathing diaphragmatically. That means your belly expands when you inhale and recedes when you exhale. If you find this difficult, practice this breath for several minutes until it flows naturally. Bring your awareness to the breath flowing in and out of your nostrils. Let your breath find its own pace.
6. Begin your mantra, and repeat it gently in your mind. Initially associate your mantra with your inhalations and exhalations. A two- or four-word mantra is easily divided between the "ins" and "outs" of your breath. A longer phrase should have a natural break.
7. When other thoughts distract you, gently and without distress return to the mantra. The intrusion of these thoughts can be frustrating at first, but after a few weeks of consistent practice, your thoughts will calm down (along with your nervous system and blood pressure!).
8. At some point, you want to begin just hearing the mantra rather than thinking it, and your breath can become so soft that the mantra will detach from it and flow at its own pace. Sometimes the mantra will cease, and you will be in a superconscious state of silence that is healing and transforming. Even before this occurs, you will experience many physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual benefits. Each person develops at a different pace. Meditate without expectation. Be patient.
9. If you need to time yourself, use an alarm with a gentle tone. After my meditation, I usually do scripture study or other spiritual reading and pray.
10. Try to bring the peace and divine presence of your meditation into your daily activities and personal interactions.

with the universe and all of creation. I also began to identify much more with my spirit instead of my body, thoughts, and emotions. These states of higher awareness are nicely captured in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's phrase, "You are not a human being in search of a spiritual experience. You are a spiritual being immersed in a human experience." I was so captivated by these "cosmic" events that I began to expect them and felt disappointed with my meditation if one did not occur. In a conversation I had with Deepak Chopra about these disappointments, he told me not to get attached to the meditation experience itself and be trapped by the expectation of "meditation highs." He said I would know that my meditation was effective by seeing spiritual growth manifesting in my day-to-day living. I pressed on using the "Liahona" principles of faith and diligence (1 Nephi 16:28). I expressed faith by remaining confident that the spiritual growth I desired would come to pass, and diligence by continuing my daily meditation regardless of the perceived quality of the experience.

This proved to be a wise course. As the months passed, unhealthy thought and behavior patterns receded and Christlike virtues became more deeply rooted. After three-and-a-half years of daily meditation, I experienced the realization that, without the goal-setting or other conscious self-improvement efforts I'd tried in the past, I had become much less defensive, selfish, impatient, and judgmental. I had also become far more emotionally vulnerable, open, and honest. The positive spiritual qualities I had worked at, mostly unsuccessfully, for thirty years were simply unfolding! Three-plus years might seem like a long time to some. It is a mustard seed compared to the mammoth miracle of transformation that was taking place. What had started as a last-ditch attempt to relieve pain and reduce stress had become a journey of spiritual transformation.

My neck and back injuries were properly diagnosed by September 2002, and the combination of meditation, yoga, and medical care have enabled me to be symptom-free 90 percent of the time. A number of physical disabilities and limitations remain. I see them as reminders of my need for God and the wonderful door he opened for me.

AWAKENING TO THE "IMAGE OF GOD" WITHIN

Liberation from past experience and conditioning

SPIRITUAL GROWTH UNFOLDS as we have direct experience of the Divine and an increasingly intimate relationship with God. This experience and relationship awakens the Divine within; increases our ability to make conscious, loving choices; and nurtures unity within ourselves, with God, and with others. We develop emotional honesty; a calm, appreciative spirit; an increased capacity to love; and freedom from conditioned perception and response. Both Eastern and Western spiritual texts refer to this state as *awakened*.

Over the past few years, I have asked people from many different walks of life and religious traditions to rate the percentage of human perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that are based on conditioned response as opposed to conscious choice. Almost without fail, they estimated that it is

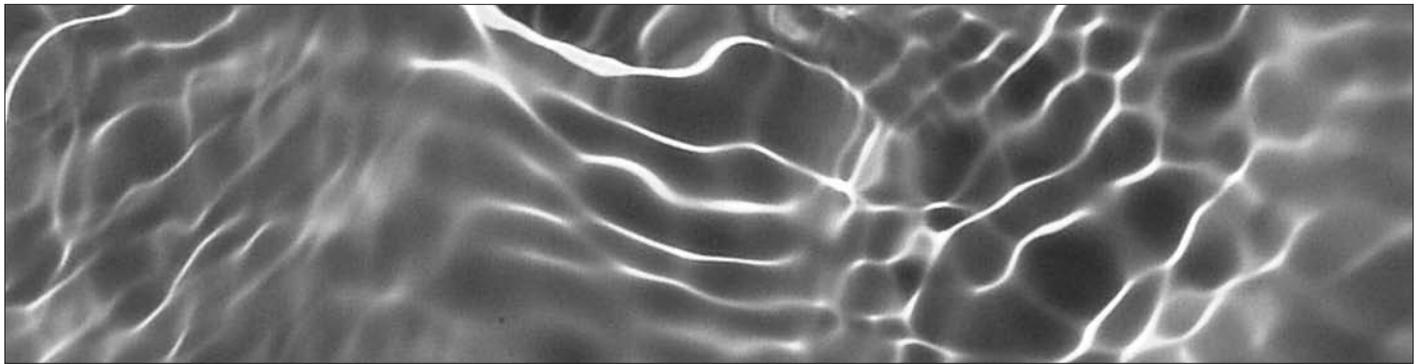
about 90–95 percent. I believe honest reflection by any thoughtful person will verify that this is true. In admitting this, we’re acknowledging that our free agency actually functions in the 5–10 percent range. What an astounding realization!

Scientists and philosophers sometimes refer to this phenomenon as the hypnosis of social conditioning. Our brains love the economy of repetitive patterns. When this process is combined with our subconscious inner dialogue and the habits of a lifetime, we find ourselves imprisoned in a very narrow range of perception and response. Both Eastern and Western spiritual texts refer to this state as *asleep*.

We cannot sleep our way toward spiritual growth! Since our deepest biological instincts are fear-based, our negative experiences usually dominate our conditioning, making the development of faith, love, and spiritual growth an uphill battle. How

being perfect in our tithing and meeting attendance. I’ve had several Church members and leaders ask me if rebirth and sanctification are things that we just talk about or if they can really be achieved in this life. Have we as Latter-day Saints come to believe that we must wait for the next life before really becoming like Christ?

Scripturally, the word “perfect” carries the meaning of wholeness and completeness. As I read the scriptures, they speak forcefully of rebirth, sanctification, and spiritual transformation. I believe that when we consistently spend time in spiritual communion, the Spirit of God nourishes the divine qualities we inherited from our heavenly parents, and this divine nature unfolds in our perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. We are reborn, transformed, and liberated from past experience and the limitations of our conditioning. We



SEVERAL CHURCH MEMBERS

and leaders have asked me if rebirth and sanctification are things that we just talk about or if they can really be achieved in this life. Have we come to believe that we must wait for the next life before really becoming like Christ?

easy has it been for you to make lasting, transformative, Christlike changes in your nature, personality, and character? As a military chaplain, I counseled thousands of people, many with deep religious convictions, including many Latter-day Saints with strong testimonies. They deeply desired to improve themselves and their relationships, but in most cases, their spiritual insights, noble intentions, and hopeful commitments were overwhelmed by their conditioned perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

For the past several decades, it has been popular in LDS literature to emphasize that in this life, we “chart a course” for our growth, with the expectation that this growth toward perfection continues into the next life.³ I wonder if this rhetoric has arisen out of the subconscious realization that because so few are experiencing a deep, spiritual transformation, it must not be possible to attain while here on earth? The three-fold mission of the Church contains the goal of “perfecting the saints.” Yet the emphasis of late is upon behaviors such as

can and should experience wholeness and transformation in this life. God promises us his light, grace, and power, so that we can be one with him in Christ. This is not a promise of “pie in the sky”: we can experience these blessings now.

President David O. McKay’s statement at the beginning of this article, that spirituality is the consciousness of victory over self and of communion with the Infinite, contains the two critical elements of spiritual growth. I interpret the “self” in President McKay’s reference to “victory over self” as being the “natural man” which the Book of Mormon tells us is an “enemy to God” (Mosiah 3:19). This is the self of conditioned perceptions and responses that rob us of free agency, a self that is “acted upon” and not “free. . . to act” according to Divine will and nature (2 Nephi 2:14, 26). President McKay’s words suggest that we must become conscious of the sleep of conditioning that has taken place through our interaction with the finite world around us. Then, through communion with the Infinite, we must awaken to the “image of God” within our

FOUR THINGS

*that can happen when you begin
a meditation practice*

1. You fall asleep. (You are tired; get more rest!)
2. Stress release manifested as restlessness or boredom; a flood of thoughts or emotions including anxiety, anger, sadness; physical responses like twitching and pain. (This sounds grim, but it is part of the healing and balancing process and will pass; keep your attention on the mantra.)
3. Pleasurable or inspiring subjective manifestations.
4. The experience of spiritual communion and transformation.

soul. The fruit of this awakening is the ability to make choices that create environments and relationships full of love, peace, and joy. I believe that meditation practice supported by a healthy lifestyle is the most effective way to accomplish this transformation.⁴

Although yoga is usually thought of as a series of stretching exercises, it is actually a comprehensive system of principles and practices for spiritual development. It includes rules of social behavior, such as honesty, chastity, generosity; rules of personal behavior, such as purity, discipline, self-study; physical and breathing techniques to promote health and awareness; and techniques for concentration and meditation. This ancient system was passed down orally from teacher to disciple and finally put into writing in the classic text, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. A sutra is a thread of understanding. Patanjali listed approximately two hundred of these threads in four chapters. Consider sutras 2–4 from Chapter One.

2. *Yoga is the progressive settling down of the mind into the field of pure silence.*
3. *When the mind is silent, we are in our essential state.*
4. *Our essential state is usually overshadowed by the activity of the mind.*⁵

Our essential state is our eternal, spiritual identity. Many people associate their spirit with their mind and personality. However both one's mental activity (thoughts and emotions) and personality traits can be observed. Whatever we can observe is not really us. We are the observer: the capacity to observe is a characteristic of spiritual awareness.

Our minds—which include our perceptions, thoughts, and emotions, as expressed through our bodies and behavior—were intended to give us experience. And those experiences were intended to be reconciled to the perfections of spirit. However, we are seduced so much by the noise, form, and activity of the material world that we lose awareness of our true identity and become identified primarily with our thoughts

(mental noise) and bodies. Why is a disease like dementia or Alzheimer's so frightening? Because we feel as if our identity is lost even with the body still present.

Ideally, the spirit should use the mind to deal with the practical aspects of living in the material world. Instead, the mind overshadows our essential state—we identify with mental activity and then live with a gnawing fear of death since we intuitively know that our mind is finite. On top of that, the mind becomes scripted and conditioned, which negatively affects our ability to make conscious choices. No wonder the word “liberation” is used to describe the spiritual path! One of my most liberating moments occurred when in the course of a meditation, my body awareness fell away and my mental activity ceased. This sounds like death and loss of identity. But not only was I still alive and myself, I was *more* aware, alive, and myself than I had ever experienced. It is truly transforming to gain not just the *belief* but the *direct experience* of yourself as more than a body and a mind!

Our minds are constantly buzzing with thoughts at the conscious and subconscious levels. The biggest complaint new meditators have is that they're having “too many thoughts.” Actually, they are just now becoming more aware of how pervasively we all talk to ourselves. These thoughts that now feel intrusive were always there. Most thoughts consist of reviews of the past and projections into the future; they represent memory and desire. Our thoughts are rarely purely in the present.

But the spirit is a present-moment reality! That is why meditating, pondering, and contemplating are such powerful spiritual disciplines. They take us to the present, where the spirit is experienced directly—to the only state in which we can commune with the Infinite.

Although there are many different styles and practices of meditation, each with its own benefits, I have found mantra meditation and mantra practice to be valuable tools for spiritual growth and for reclaiming and maintaining our essential state. I will first address the use of mantra in mediation. Then I will discuss some ways mantra is used in inner dialogue—knowingly and unknowingly, in healthy or unhealthy ways—and in LDS culture.

MANTRA MEDITATION

True meditation is not a blank mind but an awakened spirit

THE WORD MANTRA is defined in two ways. Most dictionaries focus on its origins in Eastern traditions, in which a mantra is a sacred, verbal formula repeated in prayer or mediation. In the past century, it has also become common to use the term to refer to any often-repeated word, formula, slogan, or stock phrase.

The Sanskrit root meaning of the term is instructive. In that language, *man* refers to “mind,” and *tra* means “tool.” The word itself carries the sense that a mantra is a device that liberates us from our minds, which would include our conditioned perceptions and responses. In Eastern religions, mantras are sometimes used in superstitious or magical ways. However, the ideal practice of mantra is as a spiritual conduit

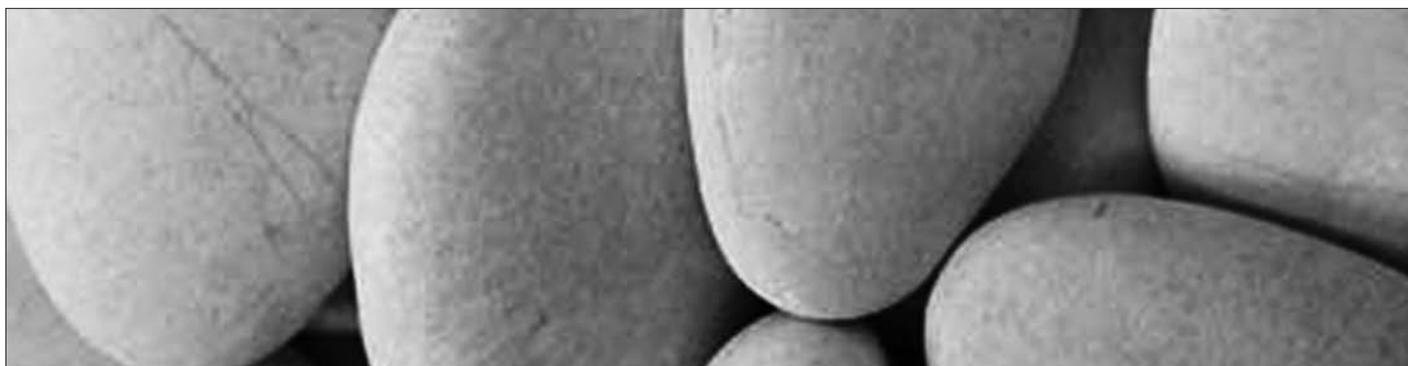
that uses words or vibrations (1) to instill one-pointed concentration by interrupting the flow of the normal thinking process, allowing attention to slip into silence, beyond body and mind to spirit; and (2) to put one into a state of harmony with the Divine or with specific qualities or characteristics of the Divine. Mantras are used silently in meditation and vocally in chanting.

In a meditation course I attended, the instructor stated that mantra practice is a way to use the mind to free oneself from the mind. The objective is to use a word, sound, or phrase that is devotional in nature and will not generate more mental activity. The mantra is then repeated gently, becoming the sole focus of your attention. Your mind will resist this process and spin up a number of thoughts and sensations in an effort to regain its normal flow and control. The meditation discipline is

FORMULA MANTRAS

Creating a “space” where we can respond with loving awareness instead of with instant, mindless reactions

IN ADDITION TO meditation mantras, there are the mantras of our inner dialogue and the subcultures in which we live—for example, our families, professions, the Church. I call these *formula* mantras. Ideally, these mantras should support the spiritual growth unfolding in our meditation practice. As discussed above, good mantras should take one through and beyond the slavery of conditioned perceptions and responses to the experience of spiritual connection and insight that allow us to see through God’s eyes and to respond in harmony with divine nature. Good mantras create a “space” where we can see more clearly and respond with



WE ARE SEDUCED SO MUCH

by the noise, form, and activity of the material world that we lose awareness of our true identity and become identified primarily with our thoughts and bodies.

to gently return and stay with your mantra. With practice, your power of concentration will improve and, at some point, your mantra and the mind’s thoughts will cancel each other out, allowing you to slip into the gap between thoughts and into the silence of spiritual awareness. True meditation is not a blank mind but an awakened spirit.

I use a Sanskrit mantra for its vibrational quality, but there are many phrases from the scriptures that can serve as wonderful mantras. A few examples:

- *Be still [and know that I am God]* (Psalm 46:10).
I recommend you use the first two words but retain the sense of the whole verse.
- *Peace, be still* (Mark 4:39)
- *Abba, Father* (Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15)⁶
- *Thy will be done* (Matthew 26:42)
- *The Father is with me* (John 16:32)
- *I am in your midst* (D&C 29:5)
- *Filled with the love of God* (Mosiah 4:12)

loving awareness instead of with instant, mindless reactions.

Through my years as a military chaplain counseling couples, I have become convinced that most expressions of anger are protective coverings for fear or pain. Usually, when we see people afraid or in pain, we respond in a nurturing way. The problem arises when the expression of fear or pain surfaces as ugly anger. When I first came to understand this connection between anger, fear, and pain, I had the couples (and myself) repeat over and over, hundreds of times, the phrase, or mantra, “*Anger is a sign of fear or pain; nurture him/her.*” I wanted this idea driven deep into our subconscious minds. As a result, many of the couples were empowered to react to anger in more positive ways.

Fast forward to a new assignment that did not require me to counsel couples, and hence to a time when I hadn’t repeated this mantra to myself for several months. Though frequent military moves are never easy on anyone of us, they exacted a particularly heavy toll on our son, Gordon—so much so that he ended up attending three different high schools. When he was sixteen, we had just moved to Washington, D.C., and he

TWO OBSTACLES

*to spiritual growth that are often reflected
in Mormon mantras*

1. SUPERSTITION. Mormons *aren't* superstitious. We are modern and sophisticated; we don't dance in circles or chant incantations. Or do we? If someone uses words or actions to influence God to do what they want, I believe that is superstition. Prayer and ordinances were designed to put us in harmony with God so we can be spiritually nourished. They are not designed to turn God into a cosmic vending machine. Acts of service are designed to benefit others, not to motivate God to be nicer to us. Keeping commandments should be acts of faith and love, but too often they seem to be approached as ways to get "blessed" (which, in our minds, usually means getting what we want or avoiding what we don't want).
2. "BAD" RELIGION. Bad religion occurs when the ordinances and practices become ends in themselves rather than support for spiritual growth. I've seen couples extend themselves to become worthy to get "married in the temple" only to return to past problem behaviors afterwards. They somehow thought the ordinance itself would be transforming and give them power over sinful attitudes and behavior. In counseling, several Latter-day Saints have said to me: "I keep the Word of Wisdom, pay my tithing, and serve faithfully in my calling. Why is my marriage failing?" Or "Elder _____ said in conference that if we attended the temple regularly, our marriage would be successful!" My response is usually something like, "I'm glad you are doing all this good, church-related stuff, but until you learn how to be patient, kind, affectionate, and emotionally honest, your marriage is going to be a mess." There is no doubt that LDS practices and ordinances can help us acquire these qualities but only if they are seen as supports and not ends.

was trying to adjust to a new school and new friends. One day, our usually kind and gentle son came home from school in a foul mood, and when my wife spoke to him, he snapped at her in a rude and ugly tone. Like a trained dog, I was immediately in his face giving him Dad Lecture Forty-One—you know, the one that goes: "Don't you EVER use that tone with your mother in this house or I'll . . ."

Well, Gordon wasn't eight years old anymore with a giant dad towering over him. We were actually very close to the same size, eyeball to eyeball. He did not back down, and I can remember seeing in his eyes, as clearly as if it were on a ticker-tape scrolling across them, the thought, "I think I can take him."

Instinctively, we both clenched our fists; a tragic, physical fight was no more than a second away. Before that second

passed, however, a timeless "space" opened up, and I heard the mantra, "Anger is a sign of fear or pain; nurture him." I said, "Gordon, for you to be acting this way, you must really be hurt or afraid." He looked stunned, took two steps backwards, collapsed into a chair, leaned over, and began to cry. I immediately moved to his side, placed my arm around him, and asked him to share what was going on. Our near-brawl and the tender moments that followed this reversal of energies proved to be a lifelong, bonding moment for us. Because of the liberating space the mantra created, a potential disaster was transformed into a sacred moment of intimacy between a father and son.

I place formula mantras and their effects into three categories:

Ideal mantras

- help us awaken to the divine nature within and lead to harmony with God
- create "space" for conscious, inspired decision-making and responses
- promote unity within self, with God, and with others

Helpful mantras

- help us endure or hold on
- provide comfort
- promote organizational unity

Problem mantras

- reflect superstition or "bad" religion and cripple spiritual independence (see sidebar)
- excuse or cover ungodly behavior
- oppress or lead to taking advantage of others

In preparing this essay, I asked several people for what they consider to be the most common, formula-type "Mormon mantras" used by mainstream Church members. The following are a few I received. Some are the exact wording of the phrases we frequently hear; some are concepts that we hear expressed in a range of ways:

- *I know the Church is true.*
- *But the Church is still true.*
- *Follow the prophet/Brethren.*
- *Keep the commandments.*
- *Sustain the Lord's chosen.*
- *I'm active in the Church.*
- *I have a testimony.*
- *Obedience is the first law of heaven.*
- *Higher Church position means greater inspiration or spiritual development.*
- *Revelation comes according to stewardship.*
- *This is the Lord's church so . . .*
- *Disagreement/dissent equals unfaithfulness or sinfulness.*
- *I hold the priesthood, so . . .*
- *If I (go to the temple, keep this commandment) then . . .*

A little analysis reveals that, at their best, these mantras fit into the “Helpful” category. They serve a number of useful purposes, but none leads to the kinds of transformation described in the “Ideal” category. Most thoughtful mainstream members I’ve spoken with have confirmed this perspective. A few argued that “following the prophet” and “keeping the commandments” bring the Spirit into one’s life, which results in spiritual growth. The question then becomes, “How much growth?” Enough to overcome conditioned behavior and to experience the unfolding of the divine nature within us? Few will assert that. Like my past experience, most of those who actively participate in church services, activities, and ordinances are lifted to live more maturely and responsibly, enjoy gospel fellowship, and have wonderful spiritual experiences but still lack desired Christlike characteristics and feel shackled by unhealthy con-

circumstances supporting it, members often gloss over it with the “But. . .” mantra. During the first year of my mission in Brazil, I witnessed outrageous abuses. “Gospel salesmanship” was taken to its ugliest extreme. Missionaries were being bullied and bribed to get more baptisms. Spiritual oversight was neglected. Over and over I heard, “But the Church is still true!” In the thirty-three years since I’ve been home, I’ve heard similar accounts. Glossing over this kind of behavior has disrupted spiritual growth for too many.⁷

Let me give two more examples of common formula mantras gone awry: As a home teacher, I felt inspired to advise a sister who was married to a violent, alcoholic husband to pack her bags immediately and to find a safe place. She agreed. I told her I would contact the bishop and go with her to counsel with him that Sunday. She weakened after I left and



THE SPIRIT IS A PRESENT-MOMENT

reality. Meditating, pondering, and contemplating are powerful spiritual disciplines.

They take us to the present, where the spirit is experienced directly ~ to the only state in which we can commune with the Infinite.

ditioning. For many, being “active” and in good standing in the “true church” feels like enough. When big crises come, these mantras help them endure and “hold on.” Helpful, but not ideal.

At their worst, these mantras lead to events described under the “problem” category or they become “end-states” that dull the hunger and thirst for further growth. They can also set people up for failure. I worked with a couple in Mississippi who were in constant stress and conflict over financial problems. After hearing a general conference message about how going to the temple improves marriages, they decided to be obedient and follow this counsel. In those days, the nearest temple was in Washington, D.C. The couple had an “inspiring” trip but returned home \$500 more in debt, and within a week, they were even more stressed and fighting even more severely.

I’ve always cringed whenever I hear the mantra, “But the Church is still true,” because it is usually preceded by some unfortunate event—usually the result of ungodly behavior by a member or leader. Instead of addressing the behavior or the

reached the bishop by phone before I did. He advised her to stay at home until Sunday when they could talk about what to do. When I visited her in the hospital the next day, after her husband had threatened their baby, sexually abused her, and severely and repeatedly beat her face with a gun, she said she hadn’t taken my advice because she believed a bishop had more inspiration than a home teacher. Repairing her face took several surgeries.

A second example: Last year, I sat in a Gospel Doctrine class where a sister asked for advice about something that was troubling her. An incident of child sexual abuse had occurred in another stake. She reported that during the next stake conference, the stake president advised the brethren that they should not change their daughters’ diapers. She didn’t understand how an inspired leader could make such an absurd comment. The teacher wasn’t sure how to handle the question, so the bishop rose to help. I can only assume he felt the need to support this leader, so he used one of the stewardship/revelation mantras and said, “What is revelation in one stake might not

be in another.” This response proved to be even more confusing, and one bright brother in the class, who had plenty of female diapers to change, asked if that could be a revelation in their ward as well!

Since so many of our mantras are designed to protect Church interests, the truth and the needs of individuals often get lost. In the case of the sister who had been troubled by the stake president’s counsel, I told her that in reaction to this distressing incident, the president had probably just made an unwise comment. Her response was, “Oh, that makes sense.” She seemed satisfied at that point and, I believe, thought no worse of the Church or that leader.

I’ve always been inspired by President David O. McKay’s rich statements about spiritual growth through meditation and communion. I’ve heard it said that we Latter-day Saints left the

fewer friends about this question, I think we identified several that fairly represent attitudes found among some who affiliate with Sunstone:

- *Most Mormons don’t think for themselves.*
- *There is nothing for me to learn at Church meetings.*
- *Commandments are for gospel beginners.*
- *The Church’s focus is too narrow.*
- *Church leaders are out of touch with the “real” issues.*
- *Progress in the Church comes too slowly.*
- *The Church would be better off if it listened to its liberal members.*

Just as with the mantras of mainstream members, even if there is some truth in these statements, I contend that such formulas do



SPIRITUAL LIVING IS CREATIVE.

New and wonderful things emerge with each step.

sacred grove many years ago and have been trapped in a beehive ever since. I agree. Through the years, I’ve personally listened as Elders Boyd K. Packer and Dallin H. Oaks taught principles that support deep transformation instead of surface spirituality. In an LDS military chaplain’s conference, I heard Elder Oaks state that our responsibility is not to get a testimony but to become converted and experience a profound change of nature. In 2001, I attended a four-hour leadership meeting in which Elder Packer flat-out stated that we are too wrapped up in organizations and programs and, as a result, are losing the gospel. He begged us to streamline programs, meetings, and activities so more focus could be placed on personal and family spiritual growth. The next week, our stake increased the number of meetings! Our common LDS mantras, and the culture they create, support external compliance and organizational activity to such a degree that even influential general authorities working hard to promote genuine spiritual growth have minimal impact.

Before discussing ideal Mormon mantras, we should pause a moment to ask if there are Sunstone community mantras, and assess what category they might fit in. Though I sampled

not promote spiritual growth. Instead, I believe they keep those who hold them stuck in intellectual and ego satisfaction, or possibly in distress over feelings of disappointment or betrayal.

“IDEAL” MANTRAS

Mantra meditation, done mindfully, expands the soul.

WHAT ARE SOME formula mantras that fit Mormon culture and also have the potential to break through conditioned thinking and responses, to awaken the higher self, to create “space” for inspired decisions, and to promote unity within self, with God, and with others?

As discussed earlier, meditation mantras are designed to focus attention on the silence beyond thoughts and bodily sensations so we can commune deeply with Spirit and be nourished and transformed in Christ’s image. Intentional formula mantras are a way to change our internal dialogue to support a godly nature as we live day to day. Some might consider the mantra suggestions that follow to be similar to “affirmations.” Call them what you will. The important point is their function: they can assist you in breaking through past perceptions and

thought patterns that have been repeated in your minds millions of times, narrowed your agency, and crippled your power to change. And if the ones I suggest don't work for you, find some that do!

Mantras are intended to be repeated hundreds of times throughout the day. "Vain repetitions" numb the mind, but mantra meditation, done mindfully, expands the soul.⁸

- *"Be still and know that I Am God" (Psalm 46:10).*
This is a classic that can be used as a meditation or formula mantra. When it's repeated meditatively, you can feel your soul expand to receive divine presence. *"Thy will be done"* works in much the same way.
- *"Love as Christ loved" (John 13:34).*
Why we tend to quote Jesus' summary and restatement of Old Testament law in Matthew 22:37–40 (to love God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves) in preference to the "New Commandment" in John 13:34 is a mystery to me. Our love of self is not always a wise standard by which to love God and neighbor. To state that we will love as Christ loved opens our minds and hearts and causes us to extend ourselves beyond our weaknesses and limitations to benefit others.
- *"I am not bound to accept anything that is contrary to the character and attributes manifested in Jesus."*
I call this my "Lowell Bennion mantra" as I adapted it from his book, *I Believe* (page 11). Something very similar to this phrase came into my heart when I was baptized. A year later, it assisted me in staying independent and unspotted from the pressures and abuses I experienced during the first year of my mission (described earlier). Since then, it has stabilized me on several other occasions when a Church leader has attempted to use his authority to constrain me or a family member to participate in activities that I felt were contrary to fundamental Christian ideals.
- *"Afflictions are consecrated for my growth [or enlightenment]" (2 Nephi 2:2).* If all things work together for good to them that love God (Romans 8:28), then our number one task is to love God. Communion with Him can transmute pain and disappointment into treasures of wisdom and compassion.
- *"I will suffer with Him," or "I will bear others' burdens."* Jesus says we will be heirs of God if we suffer with him (Romans 8:16,17). His atonement is evidence of the core truth that the highest qualities of intimacy and unity (John 17:21–23) are inseparable from suffering. By bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) and suffering with Christ, we make the unity of the cosmic Atonement a reality in mortality. We do this the same way he did: we look past sin and ignorance, we forgive, and we nourish the divine within others. It's not easy when others' sins and ignorance create suffering for us and when their burdens generate resistance to our best efforts. It's not easy when we have our own burdens to deal with at the same time. It's difficult and painful. But it's impossible if we are stuck in conditioning. This is why we have to be one with God. This oneness enables us to be "new creatures" liberated from past patterns, and to suffer with Christ, who, since he has walked the path, can sustain us in the process (Alma 7:12). When one of these mantras carries this meaning, it is powerful.
- *"Forgiveness, with love and tolerance, accomplishes miracles"* (Gordon B. Hinckley, "Forgiveness," *Ensign*, November 2005).
- *"Speak the truth in love"* (Ephesians 4:15).
- *"Peace and presence in all circumstances."* Whenever I feel provoked into impatience or anger, this mantra has been successful in reminding me to

Pontius' Puddle



reconnect with the peace and presence of God experienced in morning meditation and prayer. The mantra creates “space” for me to respond from the spiritual mind and not the carnal mind (Romans 8:6).

- “A testimony is not enough; I need to become Christlike” (Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, November 2000). This is an inspiring general conference address, full of great potential mantras.
- “Bathe me in thy light, life, and love.” This mantra has sustained and lifted me during periods of pain and distress as I meditatively reflect on each element.
- “What can I do with God today?” A hospice patient shared this mantra with me shortly before his death. He said, “I’m tired of hearing people say what they are going to do *for* God. He doesn’t need our help. Let’s do something *with* Him and bless people’s lives.” He told his nurse he could die now since he had passed his mantra on to me, and I had agreed to share it. Thanks, Ed.
- “Anger is a cover for fear or pain—nurture him/her” (Matthew 6:44).

- “I am above no one; I am beneath no one” (Matthew 7:3–6). This is a great mantra to assist in achieving balance if you are being intimidated or tempted to put down another.

RESPONDING TO THE ALLURE OF FAITH “The field of all possibilities . . .”

HUMAN GROWTH AND development are analogous to spiritual growth and development. Babies are under the care of a person of authority who protects and nourishes them in the same way spiritual leaders care for their young ones of any age. Yet soon the young ones need to be moved toward independence, so they are given rules and commandments which expand their range of activity free of direct supervision. Rules and commandments are helpful but lack universal application in many of life’s grey areas. As soon as feasible, it is important to teach the principles that underlie the rules so wise decisions can be made in a greater variety of circumstances. Ultimately we want our children or disciples to be able to draw on spiritual intuition or inspiration that will provide guidance in any and all situations.

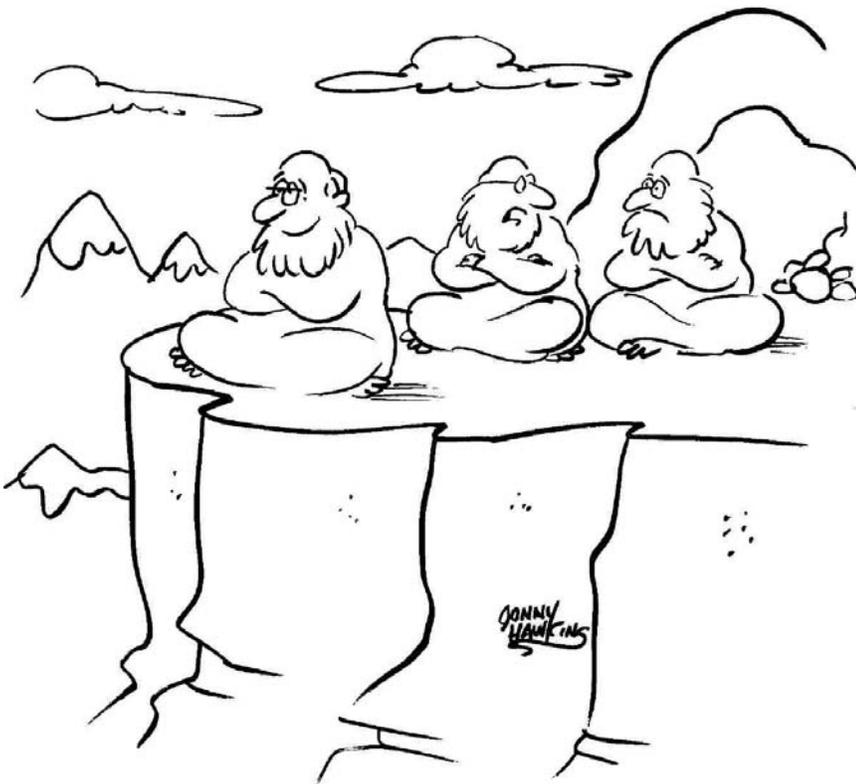
There is no question that Mormon mantras and teaching focus on authority and commandments. The benefit is safety and predictability. However, this focus creates boredom and hampers spiritual growth. The biggest complaint I hear from faithful, mainstream Mormons is that so many of our meetings and classes are boring. Contrast these emphases and the resultant boredom to what happens when people live by principles and Spirit. Passion and excitement arise when we move into unpredictable paths in response to the allure of faith.

Something like this was expressed well by Nephi when he said, “I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do” (1 Nephi 4:6). Neither life nor spiritual growth is safe and predictable. Spiritual living is creative—which means new and wonderful things can emerge with each step. Living by faith is being open to the wisdom of uncertainty.

In the words of Deepak Chopra:

The search for security and certainty is actually an attachment to the known. And what’s the known? The known is our past. The known is nothing other than the prison of past conditioning. . . . The unknown is the field of all possibilities, ever fresh, ever new, always open to the creation of new manifestations. . . . This means that in every moment of your life, you will have excitement, adventure, mystery. You will experience the fun of life—the magic, the celebration, the exhilaration, and the exultation of your own spirit.⁹

True spirituality has to be more than the



“He does pretty well, but sometimes he gets off track and contemplates Jennifer Lopez’s navel.”

practice of a religion and maintaining good standing in an organization. The Apostle Paul said, “Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). This transformation is, as President McKay said, the result of “consciousness of victory over self and of communion with the Infinite.” I hope the practices of mantra described here for use in meditation and for strengthening the qualities of your innate divinity will bless you in moving beyond the bonds of conditioning and into the creative life of spiritual growth. Thus awakened, we truly become the sons and daughters of God, possessing the mind and heart of Christ. ☺



NOTES

1. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals: Selections from the Discourses of David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1953), 390

2. David O. McKay, *Conference Reports* (April 1967): 85.

3. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Seven Deadly Heresies,” *1980 Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1980), 78–79.

4. Some people resist the idea that meditation is a necessary practice for transformative spiritual growth. There are a few individuals who seem to be born with divine consciousness, but for most of us, meditation or one of its cousins (such as contemplative prayer) is the most reliable, intentional practice for piercing through the carnal man to our underlying spiritual nature.

This truth is pervasive in the ancient, yogic scriptures. Consider this quote from the *Katha Upanishad* 2:24: “The Self (or our true nature) cannot be known by anyone, who desists not from unrighteous ways, controls not his senses, stills not his mind, and practices not meditation.”

5. This translation is from *Primordial Sound Meditation Manual for Students*. It was written by Roger Gabriel for Deepak Chopra's meditation course and is not available for purchase. The two translations and commentaries of Patanjali's yoga sutras I recommend are: (1) *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali*, Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, trans. (Hollywood, California: The Vedanta Society of Southern California, 1953). This has been a standard translation for many years and is available in several new editions. (2) Roy Eugene Davis, *The Science of Self-Realization* (Lakemont, Georgia, CSA Press, 2004). This is a very clear translation with a brief commentary by my current meditation teacher.

6. The sound “Ah” is prominent in many meditation mantras since it is associated with the name of God (*GahD*) in many cultures and religions. You can hear it pronounced in names such as Allah, Krishna, Rama, Jehovah, Yahweh, Ra, Abba, and others. *Ah* is a primordial sound that is very soothing and the only sound we can make without having to manipulate our lips, tongue, throat, and jaw. Many ancient meditative traditions feel that one of the quickest ways to enter into union with God is to use God's name in your mantra.

7. In post-mission conversations with past mission leaders and our interim mission president, we estimated that 50 percent or more of the returned missionaries from that regime went inactive in the Church. Humble, poor Brazilians were strong-armed into baptism by large, forceful Americans who were at their homes every day. Submitting to baptism was a quick way to get rid of them. Young boys were promised soccer balls if they would watch a filmstrip and be baptized. Missionary discussions were not necessary. When I protested against these practices, I was demoted from district leader to junior companion and sent to a two-Elder town out in the interior. Freed from such pressure tactics, I had a wonderful experience.

8. Ideally, after some initial experimentation, a meditation mantra should not be changed. Once rooted, it gains strength, taking one more quickly into higher states of consciousness and communion with the Divine. On the other hand, formula mantras are changed depending on one's circumstances and the areas of spiritual growth one chooses to focus on.

9. Deepak Chopra, *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* (San Rafael, California: Amber-Allen Publishing, 1994), 86.



THE PEASANT HOUSE

(after oil painting by Eugenio Zamphighi, Italian, 1859–1944, located in Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento)

In the peasant house there's light on every human face, a smile, almost a giggle, and even the cat at play, freely roams near an open bowl filled with liquid. A metal cistern is standing

by, and who could guess what it contains except it adds to the completeness. A simple burst of sunlight through an open window fills the room, highlights the clutter

on the floor pecked at by the chicks, with a rooster stiffly standing by, but the parents simply can't contain their pride as the father holds up their latest child, perhaps a year

or so along, and on the wall behind them, hangings—artifacts and art—even a madonna and child, and, of course, red ornaments nearly matching in color the

father's cap, that let us know for sure, the time for festivities is now. The signs are clearly in the air. In the background, somewhat to the side, the hearth just heats

away. Yes, everybody here knows the peasants life, the work and fun of it, and even as the parents sit on the hard wooden bench in a moment of morning joy and comfort, it has

all come together for a glowing portrait of this congealed age, when everything is so clearly understood, and everything has its established time and place.

—LAVERNE FRITH