

JOCELYNE'S RESOURCE-OF-THE-MONTH: November 2018

My Resource-of-the-Month: The "Divine Intimacy Radio" Podcast

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Christian Meditation: What it is and how it differs From Other Forms of Meditation

Interest in meditation has been growing for some time, as a form of relaxation and by many looking to fill a spiritual gap in their lives. Meditation has also now become a popular prescription for those suffering from various psychological illnesses or as a tool to help manage chronic pain. Meditation in this form usually involves focus on breathing or on the concentrated relaxation of each part of the body, but can take on other forms as well. When prescribed by a doctor, this type of meditation is usually termed, "mindfulness."

Meditation can indeed be beneficial for our overall health. But are all forms of meditation equal? Can meditation be harmful? What is Christian meditation? How does it differ from mindfulness or from other popular eastern forms of meditation? This commentary seeks to answer these questions... so stay tuned.

I'd like to dive specifically into the Church document, *On Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, as it provides a good summary of the official Church teaching on the matter. Note: From now on I will quote from this document using the acronym, OSACM.

In our busy world, full of various forms of technology, noise, and distraction, many are just looking for some peace and quiet. Due to this deep seeded hunger for peace, and for the spiritual, many have been drawn to the forms of meditation and prayer offered by eastern religious traditions. *On Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, recognizes this need for "spiritual recollection and a deep contact with the divine mystery," and looks to provide a solid formation in the various forms of Christian prayer, "while remaining faithful to the truth revealed in Jesus, by means of the genuine Tradition of the Church."

If you have had any exposure to eastern meditation, even inadvertently, you may not have noticed anything contrary to Christianity. Indeed some aspects of eastern religious thought can seem very similar to Christian revelation. Eastern meditation is also many times marketed as neutral and non-religious, appropriate and beneficial for all. However, the document, OSACM, warns against the danger of syncretism. "With the present diffusion of eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world and in ecclesial communities, we find ourselves faced with a pointed renewal of an attempt, which is not free from dangers and errors, to fuse Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian (OSACM)."

So, in order to better recognize the differences and incompatibilities of eastern and of Christian meditation, we need to look more closely at, and clearly understand, them both. Eastern meditation techniques focus on the self, on union with or immersion into the divine (within oneself), on emptying the mind, on reaching mystical states and on escape from suffering. The ultimate goal is to eventually achieve enlightenment, where one is freed from reincarnation (ie. cyclical suffering).

Looking at these ideas more closely, it becomes clear that eastern meditation is incompatible with Christian revelation in many important aspects. Firstly, we should understand that Christian mediation is a form of prayer. Therefore, like all prayer, it can be defined as, "a personal, intimate and profound dialogue between man and God (OSACM)." In this way, Christian meditation is always a communion with our Trinitarian God. "This communion, based on Baptism and the Eucharist, source and summit of the life of the Church, implies an attitude of conversion, a flight from 'self' to the 'You' of God (OSACM)."

This is in direct contrast to eastern meditation techniques where the focus is on the self. Further, the OSACM stipulates that, “it [Christian meditation] flees from impersonal techniques or from concentrating on oneself, which can create a kind of rut,” as focus on the self detracts from our Lord and closes off communication with Him.

“St. Augustine is an excellent teacher: if you want to find God, he says, abandon the exterior world and re-enter into yourself. However, he continues, do not remain in yourself, but go beyond yourself because you are not God (OSACM).”

You may be wondering, however, how the use of eastern meditation as a means of attaining union with the divine (within), or immersion into the divine, isn't akin to how we as Christians seek union with Christ, whose Holy Spirit we understand dwells within us. Well, the difference may seem subtle, but it's actually not. What is significant here is the difference in the understanding of the divine. In eastern traditions, there are many schools of thought on the subject, ranging from a belief in many gods to no god at all. Eastern meditation techniques “propose abandoning not only meditation on the salvific works accomplished in history by the God of the Old and New Covenant, but also the very idea of the One and Triune God, who is Love, in favor of an immersion ‘in the indeterminate abyss of the divinity’ (OSACM).” Moreover, as Christians we believe that, “an absorbing of the human self into the divine self is never possible, not even in the highest states of grace (OSACM).”

These ideas are contrary to Christian revelation. We believe in One, Trinitarian God. We believe that God has created all, but that He is separate from His creation; we recognize that we are creatures and He is our Creator. We seek to be unified to the will of God, and we understand that we become like God through Baptism; we are His sons and daughters made in His image and likeness, but we are not God, nor will we ever become gods. We acknowledge our total dependence on Him in all things. These are just some of the marked differences.

“Ok,” you might be saying to yourself, “but what can be wrong with emptying the mind, with trying to reach mystical or alternate states of consciousness, or with seeking escape from suffering? Are these ideas really out of sync with Christianity?” Well, while we again use similar language in that, as Christians, we seek to “empty ourselves,” this is not the same as emptying our minds. As Christians, we meditate not to leave ourselves empty, but to fill ourselves with Christ. We do not actually want to empty our minds and focus on the self during meditation. Scripture warns us against doing this (see Matthew 12:43-45). What we want to do is quiet our minds so that we can contemplate the things of God. The Christian understanding of “emptying” involves ridding ourselves of our selfish and unhealthy desires, so that we can more fully focus on Christ. We seek to give ourselves completely to God, so that He may fill us with His Spirit.

In the case of seeking alternate states of consciousness or mystical experiences, as Christians, we understand that there are no methods to follow that will guarantee mystical graces, but that these are always an unmerited gift from God, to those He has chosen, for the good of His Church. “The Christian who prays can, if God so wishes, come to a particular experience of union. The Sacraments, especially Baptism and the Eucharist, are the objective beginning of the union of the Christian with God. Upon this foundation, the person who prays can be called, by a special grace of the Spirit, to that specific type of union with God, which in Christian terms is called mystical (OSACM).”

So contemplation is in its essence a gift from God, a gift of intimate knowledge of our Father, God, through Jesus Christ. It is a deepening of our relationship with Christ... it draws us closer to Him and reveals to our souls the depths of His Truth. However, “Genuine Christian mysticism has nothing to do with technique: it is always a gift of God, and the one who benefits from it knows himself to be unworthy (OSACM).”

Obviously, the concept of reincarnation is not compatible with Christian revelation, as we believe in heaven and hell, and in the Resurrection. However, let's address the escape from suffering. Christians acknowledge the inevitability of suffering, as do the eastern religions. No one enjoys suffering, but escape from suffering is contrary to Christ's instruction to take up our cross and follow in His footsteps (Matthew 16:24). As Christians, we accept our cross, our suffering, and we unite it with the cross of Christ for the good of His Church. We believe our suffering has meaning and that Christ accompanies us in our times of trouble. Our suffering can actually bring us closer to Christ and God

can use it to advance our spiritual lives. Therefore, we should not run from suffering. Instead, we can remain faithful, bearing our cross as Christ did for us, and trust in Him and in the Resurrection.

Alright, at this point you might be thinking, “So should we reject something, just because it is not Christian?” The answer is no. As the document OSACM stipulates. “The majority of the great religions which have sought union with God in prayer have also pointed out ways to achieve it. Just as ‘the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions,’ neither should these ways be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian. On the contrary, one can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured.”

I believe that the practice of mindfulness, as I described above, falls into this camp. It is not harmful to us to use these mindfulness strategies to quiet our minds and relax our bodies. However, we can take this further, using these methods as a primer, so that we are better able to focus on God during the practice of genuine Christian meditation.

So in sum, we can acknowledge what is good and true in other religions, but we need to be careful not to injure our relationship with Christ with false forms of prayer and worship. The document OSACM specifies that, “even in the first centuries of the Church some incorrect forms of prayer crept in. Some New Testament texts (cf. 1 Jn 4:3; 1 Tim 1:3-7 and 4:3-4) already give hints of their existence.”

According to the document, these “incorrect forms” generally fall into two categories and tempt us in our pride to “try and overcome the distance separating creature from Creator, as though there ought not to be such a distance; to consider the way of Christ on earth, by which he wishes to lead us to the Father, as something now surpassed; to bring down to the level of natural psychology what has been regarded as pure grace, considering it instead as ‘superior knowledge’ or as ‘experience’ (OSACM.)”

The document continues saying, “such erroneous forms, having reappeared in history from time to time on the fringes of the Church's prayer, seem once more to impress many Christians, appealing to them as a kind of remedy, be it psychological or spiritual, or as a quick way of finding God (OSACM).”

Unfortunately, these “erroneous forms” of meditation are not neutral and can also cause harm. I have a book on Ayurveda, a medicine practiced in eastern traditions. The title is, “Ayurvedic Healing, A Comprehensive Guide.” I bought it in my desperation for recovery after I sustained a brain injury and conventional medicine had nothing else to offer me. It is a manual outlining Ayurvedic medicinal practices and herbal and other remedies. Looking through its pages has raised some very real concerns for me. The author, Dr. David Frawley, writes of some of the health dangers associated with Yoga and with eastern meditation and breath practices. These are found in the section of the book that deals with Ayurvedic Psychology. I will not address Yoga at this time, but I might in a future post.

When speaking of eastern meditation techniques, Frawley says that “wrongly practiced or done with strain” they can damage the body and mind. He continues, “In both Ayurvedic and Tibetan medicine, cultures where a great deal of meditation is practiced and often with great effort, a whole series of meditation diseases are recognized (pg.334).” Frawley notes as well, “with the new and sometimes naïve practice of meditation techniques, we are beginning to see [these disorders in the West] as well (pg.335).”

Often linked to eastern meditation practices are breath practices called “pranayama.” Dr. Frawley addresses some of the dangers of these unnatural breathing techniques in another section of his book dedicated to pranayama disorders. These breath practices are oftentimes another method aimed at producing mystical experiences. Frawley says, “Excessive pranayama causes ungroundedness, anxiety, palpitations, insomnia, involuntary movements, ringing in the ears, dizziness, fainting, vertigo, and other conditions of high Vata (pg. 336).” The other conditions are not specified, but a quick online search provides a list of these other conditions, all closely related to those Dr. Frawley has already named, including: panic, tremors, spasms, a spaced-out feeling, etc.

As you can see, the health risks associated with pranayama and eastern meditation techniques are not negligible. In

all cases, according to Frawley, the first step to treating these disorders is to cease the practice. It is significant that this information comes, not from a book that is critical of these practices, but one that in most cases promotes them. It should also be noted that there are no concerning side effects to Christian meditation.

Accordingly, it would be beneficial to gain a more solid understanding of Christian meditation, and how we are to pray in this way, so that we can avoid these errors and the possible concerning side effects. We now know what Christian meditation is (prayer, communion with God), and how it differs from other forms of meditation, so let's talk more about how to practice it. Christian meditation often involves the pondering of sacred images, sacred scripture or other sacred writings, such as the lives of the saints. Above all, the Church recommends the reading of sacred scripture as the foundation of our prayer. We can use scripture in our prayer to delve deeper into its mysteries and, "so that a dialogue takes place between God and man (OSACM)." We speak to God and we listen to Him in the Word of God. Lectio Divina is a great method that can be used. The Rosary is another form of meditation. There are many others. Our aim is to be in conversation with God and to develop a greater intimacy with our Lord. The focus is on relationship, on a deeper understanding of His Truth.

As Christians, our ultimate role model to emulate is Jesus. Therefore, "To find the right 'way' of prayer, the Christian should consider what has been said earlier regarding the prominent features of the way of Christ, whose 'food is to do the will of him who sent (him), and to accomplish his work' (Jn 4:34). Jesus lives no more intimate or closer a union with the Father than this, which for him is continually translated into deep prayer. By the will of the Father he is sent to mankind, to sinners, to his very executioners, and he could not be more intimately united to the Father than by obeying his will. This did not in any way prevent him, however, from also retiring to a solitary place during his earthly sojourn to unite himself to the Father and receive from him new strength for his mission in this world (OSACM)."

We are all different, and will experience Christ in unique ways. We may not all be chosen for the type of mystical experiences conferred upon Saint Teresa of Avila, for example, but, "every 'living' Christian has a specific task (and in this sense a 'charism') 'for the building up of the body of Christ' (cf. Eph 4:15-16), in communion with the Hierarchy whose job it is 'not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good (OSACM)."

We are called to discern the unique charisms that we have been given by God and to use these in service for the good of His Church. Finally it is important to keep in mind that, "Contemplative Christian prayer always leads to love of neighbor, to action and to the acceptance of trials, and precisely because of this it draws one close to God (OSACM)."

My Resource-of-the-Month is, "Divine Intimacy Radio," a podcast that I have really been into lately. It's one of my faves at the moment! I encourage you to check it out if you would like to explore and delve more deeply into depths of Catholic Christian prayer. While a number of topics are addressed, most often, prayer and the spiritual life is the focus. I have posted the link to their podcast website, but you can subscribe to it in iTunes as well. It's free.

I'll end with a final quote from, *On Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*:

"From the rich variety of Christian prayer as proposed by the Church, each member of the faithful should seek and find his own way, his own form of prayer. But all of these personal ways, in the end, flow into the way to the Father, which is how Jesus Christ has described himself. In the search for his own way, each person will, therefore, let himself be led not so much by his personal tastes as by the Holy Spirit, who guides him, through Christ, to the Father."

I hope you have found this helpful and informative. To learn more, I invite you to read, *On Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, in its entirety. If you have any questions or comments, we would love to hear from you. Please contact us and let us know your thoughts.

Your sister in Christ,
Jocelyne



Works Cited

Frawley, David. *Ayurvedic Healing, A Comprehensive Guide*. Lotus Press, Wisconsin. 2000.

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