

The Character of Christian Meditation

One thing I brought home from India was a deeper appreciation for the distinctive character of ordinary “Christian” meditation. Though I think I have things to learn from the wisdom of other traditions, I am increasingly finding myself “at home” as a Christian, and furthermore, that my “at homeness” in the faith seems to gain a kind of richness or sweetness as I explore Christian spirituality in relation to other traditions. Let’s see if I can explain, specifically with relation to the subject of meditation.

What are the aims of meditation in non-Christian practice?

One morning early in my visit I was waiting for my mocha at the local coffee shop (the only mocha in Arambol - well worth the long wait). Near my table was a collection of posters advertising yoga classes, meditation seminars and the usual what-have-you of this community. I looked at a couple of posters and then thought, “Hey, I’m helping this group of Christians to develop meditation seminars for the people here; I ought to see what is being advertised through the non-Christian seminars.” So I got out my pen and took a few notes. And here is what was offered in the sessions advertised:

- find deep relaxation
- make harmony possible
- health, harmony, happiness, spiritual growth
- experience the love and bliss that leads to transformation
- journey of self-examination
- deep healing, balance
- open and undo energetic blockages in one’s energy channels
- induce a state of heightened awareness and tranquility

My favorite advertisement offered the discovery of “your inner child, clown, magician, hero, king, fool, ferry [sic.], angel.” I hope to spend some serious effort in my future searching for my inner “ferry.”

An interesting sample. But should I accept this sample as representative of eastern religions more generally? Isn’t this simply the marketing of popular religious-seeker culture? How do the central meditation texts of Hinduism or Buddhism speak of the character of their own meditative practices?

The *Yoga Sutras* of Hindu master Patanjali (around the second century BC), for example, outline a comprehensive program for meditative transformation that has been extremely influential in many circles of eastern philosophy and religion. This work sees the practice of meditation as a training in “restricting” human consciousness which results in a purification of mind, body, and soul. Along the way, the practitioner gains profound calm, discriminative insight, supernormal powers, and ultimately a transformative realization of Self.

The monumental *Visuddhimagga*, the classic meditation manual of the Abhidharma tradition of Buddhism (around the fifth century AD), speaks of the “benefits of developing concentration” (Buddhaghosa’s way of speaking of meditative practice) as fivefold: (1) blissful abiding here and now, (2) insight, (3) kinds of direct-knowledge (involving paranormal features), (4) an improved form of existence (a better reincarnation in the next life), and ultimately (5) cessation (entrance into nirvana)

More recently, Daniel Goleman, explorer and scholar of meditative states during the late sixties and early seventies, summarizes his survey of a wide range of meditative systems by claiming that, “The goal of all meditation paths, whatever their ideology, source, or methods, is to transform the meditator’s consciousness. . . . , the altered states [of consciousness] the meditator gains are dramatic in their discontinuity with his normal states. But the ultimate transformation for the meditator is a newer state still: the awakened state, which mixes with and re-creates his normal consciousness.”

For the seeker and beginner (represented in the posters), the practice of meditation offers a measure of health and balance, harmony, happiness, and spiritual growth. For the more serious student of meditation (represented in the texts) meditation offers insight, a transformed consciousness, supernatural powers, and ultimate realization.

What is meditation? Is there a *Christian* meditation?

Now, having glimpsed the goals of meditation in Hindu and Buddhist practice, let us take a step backwards. Just what *is* meditation anyway? And really is there such a thing as Christian meditation? A loose definition of religious or philosophical meditation may be offered as follows: meditation is repetition of particular means, generally without a lot of conversational words, as part of facilitating ultimate aims. First, meditation involves *repetition*: either the repetition of a text, or of a particular practice. Second, it deals with particular *means*: paying attention, devotional expression, sacred texts, and so on.

Usually in meditation there is a common pattern of preparation, use of skills, content/focus, transformation, and regrouping. Third, it generally *abstains from a lot of conversation*. Meditation is a kind of focused activity that stands outside ordinary conversational/active life for the most part. Finally, religious or philosophical meditation is pursued for *ultimate aims*. While we might casually muse over the shapes of clouds or ponder the behavior of two-year olds, religious or philosophical meditation undertaken as a “practice” is usually pursued for “ultimate” ends: as a way to realizing supreme truth. Pretty much all meditative practice fits this definition, at least in a loose kind-of way.

Which brings us to the question, “Is there a *Christian* meditation?” I would argue that there is. Even in the book of Psalms, we find a tradition of repeating phrases of sacred text (the word “meditate” suggests a repetitious muttering of words) and pondering their meaning. The early Christian elders spoke of the practice of reading, reflecting, and praying over sections of scripture. Desert fathers and mothers refined the biblical virtue of “sobriety”: learning to watch over thoughts and feelings for the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit (or evil spirits). Eastern Christians would use icons and Western Christians would use chants as means of slowly attending, through sight or sound, to the meaning of the gospel. The use of imagination with Gospel stories was developed in the medieval West. During the late medieval period, a wide range of devotional meditative practices were employed. Puritans approached the learning of theology as an essentially meditative practice. Christians throughout history have emphasized the value of meditative self-examination at the close of the day. I could go on and on. The point is that practices incorporating preparation, use of particular skills (thinking, imagination, textual reading, and so on), content or focus (on a text, on our day), transformation (graced by the Spirit), and regrouping (incorporating what we have gained into our life) have been a part of the Christian tradition throughout its history. There *is* a Christian meditation tradition.

The distinctive character of Christian meditation

That having been said, however, the point I want to make here is that *Christian* meditation exhibits its own distinctive character, a character which separates it from most Eastern forms of meditation and which endears it to me personally. And at this point I would differ from Goleman. I think that for the Christian, meditation is *not* about the transformation of consciousness. Rather it is about the engaging in a *relationship*. When Christians review their day in meditative self-examination, the point is the re-orienting of their relationship with God. We reflect on the day, attending to points in which God’s Spirit invited us into life and we were afraid to respond. And we notice how that minor lack of response altered the atmosphere of our relationship. Or we meditate on a passage of Scripture and experience God illumining a particular text to our heart and mind, bringing us closer to God’s own heart and mind. Christian meditation is all about the essentially interpersonal sharing of person and God. True, Christian meditation may bring happiness or healing. But it also may bring anger (at the influence of Satan or sin) and dis-ease (as we feel out of sorts with our old self or with the world). One may experience paranormal phenomena in meditation (a prophetic vision, perhaps). But even in this, the point is not the experience, but the dynamics of the relationship with the God who communicates through these kinds of experiences.

Now I know that some might argue that the change of relationship *is* a transformation of consciousness, and that Eastern traditions are very careful about supernatural phenomena. Nonetheless, when one examines the evidence, there is a clear difference of emphasis. I do not think that the classics of Christian meditation, while at times describing forms of practice or profound experiences that appear similar to those in other traditions, can be summarily reduced to an account of personal transformation. Neither can we declare the essential character of Christian meditation to be the “same” as that of other traditions. Yes, attention to thoughts or deep experiences of unity may be common to a number of traditions. But this does not give me warrant to declare them “the same.”

Let’s take poses and postures as a case in point. Most of us are all aware of the use of poses and postures in Eastern meditative practices. Some of these are employed simply to enable the practitioner to be undistracted in long periods of paying attention. Some are employed to facilitate the practitioner’s relationship with his or her own body. Some are used to express or embody certain truths associated with a given tradition. And some are used to facilitate altered states of consciousness within which deep religious insights are discovered. But what about postures in the Christian tradition? You may not have thought much about this, but biblical prayer is frequently described with a mention of the posture employed. Jesus “lifts his eyes” as he prays at the raising of Lazarus (John 11:41). The Psalmist “stretches out” his hands, pleading to the Lord for help (Psalm 143:6). Elijah “sits” himself down under a tree and prays that he might die (1 Kings 19:4). Jesus “kneels down” and prays that the cup of death might pass from him (Luke 22:41). The twenty-four elders “fall down” and worship the risen Christ (Revelation 4:10; 5:8). I could go on and on. The point is to see what is going on here. In Christian devotion (and, by the way, these postures of Christian devotion have been used by believers throughout the history of the Church - see, for example, “The Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic”) the use of our body is not so much about facilitating attention or achieving altered states of consciousness (although I’m sure that a sore back due to bad posture or lack of authentic relationship with our bodies might distract from Christian prayer and life). Rather the main point of these postures

is the facilitation and expression of relationship with God. Each posture “means” something in our relationship with God.

Conclusion

Eastern meditation offers new ways of experiencing and understanding the self. Christian meditation offers a means of conducting relationship with God. True, some Eastern traditions speak of a re-oriented relationship with the divine achieved through meditative practices. True, Christian meditation may result in changes in the way we relate to ourselves, to others, and even to nature or the spiritual world. And for some, these benefits may be experienced even before the more directly spiritual ones. But throughout history Christian meditation, as a spiritual practice, has fundamentally and essentially been about relationship with an interpersonal God. I long to see a generation of spiritual seekers discovering, through Christian meditation, a way into a more profound wholeness than they ever had imagined. I long to see a generation of Christians who, drinking deeply from the wells of the traditions of Christian meditation, are ever enriched in their relationship with God, and who, through this transformed relationship with God, become agents of transformation throughout the world.