
Christian Prayer and Eastern Meditation

In getting to know people of other Faiths we find ourselves asking more and more questions – questions of a practical as much as a theoretical nature. In the last couple of decades the West has witnessed a great interest in eastern forms of meditation. This has led many Christians to ask: can we use techniques of meditation which originate from other religious traditions in Christian prayer?

The Physical and the Spiritual

An immediate answer to the question would be to refer to those Christians who are already benefitting from this 'dialogue-of-practice' with eastern methods of meditation. For a good many years scores of Buddhist monks have spent periods in Catholic monasteries and Catholic monks and nuns have received similar hospitality and training in Buddhist monasteries of the East. In Japan several Jesuits have been involved in the dialogue with Buddhism for decades; Zen has become part of their normal spiritual practice. In India many relig-

ious have enriched their Christian faith with forms of Indian prayer.

The more immediate features of this dialogue of religious practice are scarcely controversial. At the heart of the Yoga tradition in India, and in the various forms of Buddhist meditation which grow from it, is one key insight: our physical and our spiritual sides are intimately connected. Correct preparation of the body – learning how to sit comfortably, to balance relaxation with a certain formality of posture – is essential for interior recollection. Thus the letter issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on some aspects of Christian meditation says that such postures 'can in a symbolic way express the prayer itself, depending on cultures and personal sensibilities. In some aspects, Christians are today becoming conscious of how one's posture can aid prayer' (para 26).

Authentic Christian Prayer

What is the experience of those most deeply influenced by this dialogue? It is that they

grow to appreciate more fully the infinite mystery of God's freedom. A Christian practises Zen as a Christian. Zen does not replace Christian faith with Buddhist faith but challenges the meditator to a more radical **Christian** faith. If our use of Zen or Yoga is authentic we find ourselves becoming not less but more Christian.

This, of course, is the question: what is an 'authentic' use of such traditions of meditation? Most spiritual guides and writers would say that prayer is truly Christian when it leads us into a deeper understanding of the nature of the Mystery of Christ – God's loving revelation of himself. The following remarks are no more than an introduction but they do contain important guidelines, a summary of some of the key points to be borne in mind if Christians are to participate effectively in this dialogue-of-practice which is taking place between Christians and the people of other Faiths.

The Prayer of the Lord

The obvious place to begin is with Jesus's own prayer. Christians are to pray as Jesus prayed, recognising the close and intimate relationship into which they are being drawn. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus instructs his disciples how to pray by warning them not to 'heap up empty phrases' but to retire into an 'inner room' where their innermost thoughts can be known. Jesus's followers are to present themselves before God **as they are**, not as they think they are or as they would like other people to see them, but with honesty and sincerity. Prayer is about becoming more truly ourselves.

Jesus teaches the disciples his special prayer – the Lord's Prayer, which expresses his

own relationship with God. In establishing this relationship it is God who takes the initiative – just as Jesus emphasises that 'you have not chosen me but I have chosen you'. Christian prayer, therefore, is the Christian's response to God's initiative. We recognise our own value and worth in so far as we respond to God's loving initiative revealed in Christ.

Responding to the Love of God

Whatever value there may be in technique or method in prayer – whether it comes from the east or from one of the many schools of Christian spirituality – it must be subordinate to the fundamental conviction that God has revealed himself to us. A Christian approach to prayer begins with the insight expressed so beautifully by St Paul who writes to the Romans that 'we do not know how to pray as we ought; the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words' (8:26). Prayer for Paul is the action of the Holy Spirit who 'prays in us' the prayer of Jesus to the Father.

What in that case do we do – or not do – to let the Spirit pray in us? Learning how to pray is not easy. We are all prone to distractions – especially in today's busy world. The suggestion that we can use Yoga techniques to help us concentrate has been greeted by many people with enthusiasm, by others with a good deal of suspicion. Why should this be? It springs not so much from a worry about anything 'non-Christian' but from the fear that people are trying to 'experience' God or 'achieve salvation' through their own powers or by means of some spiritual technique.

Such fears are largely misplaced. The Christian conviction is that God reaches down to us; obviously we cannot of ourselves do anything to 'earn' something that is pure gift. This is a truth which it would be disastrous to ignore. But it does not follow that all forms of prayer must be based on an attitude of passivity – waiting for the Spirit to act, to 'pray in us'. Preparation for prayer, as much as traditional forms of Christian devotion, meditation and contemplation, are a part of our **proper response** to God's initiative.

There is a multitude of types and methods of prayer, both in Christianity and in other Faiths, and knowledge of the others should reinforce our appreciation of our own. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are only the most familiar. In his opening notes he indicates that he is as much concerned for the proper physical preparation for prayer as for mental and spiritual development. 'Just as taking a walk, journeying on foot, and running, are bodily exercises, so we call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments.' Yet at no time is the aim to achieve some sort of spiritual 'experience'. Rather, as with all forms of Christian spirituality, prayer disposes or opens us up to the action of the Holy Spirit – that is to say, leaving God free to act in whatever way **God chooses**.

Prayer and the Christian Tradition

Such, in brief, are some of the distinctive features of Christian prayer. If our concern is to be more Christian, not less, then the use of techniques of meditation from Yoga and Zen may be a powerful stimulus to us to

discover the riches of our own tradition. In so many religions and spiritual traditions there is a vast amount of wisdom to be discovered – wisdom apparent in practice as much as in the writings of spiritual masters. Hinduism and Buddhism set great store by the experience of the enlightened teacher, the one who has gone before and can guide the inexperienced. Christians can learn from them the importance of keeping in touch with the wisdom of the past.

What we learn, above all, is that prayer is a human, as well as a divine, activity. To recognise in prayer something which has to be done need not contradict the fundamental conviction of Christianity that a relationship with God cannot be induced or forced. The experience of so many religious traditions is that activity must be held in tension with a certain passivity. Our 'work' of preparation to receive the gift of the Spirit, and thus to respond to God's loving initiative.

Suggested Reading

J.M. Déchanet, **Christian Yoga**, (London, Search Press, 1960).

Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, **Zen, Way to Enlightenment**, (New York, Taplinger, 1968).
Bede Griffiths, **Return to the Centre**, (London, Collins, 1976).
William Johnston, **Silent Music**, (London, Collins, 1974);
Christian Zen, (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 2nd edition, 1979).

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation', (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1989).

This is part of the series of leaflets prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacles of ignorance and promote through dialogue, prayer and action the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.

The Committee is grateful to its member Rev. Michael Barnes SJ for this contribution

+ Charles Henderson
Chairman

COMMITTEE FOR OTHER FAITHS PUBLICATIONS

Getting to Know People of Other Faiths series: Catholics and Other Faiths, Our Neighbour's Faith and Ours - a Catholic introduction to living with neighbours of other Faiths. What is Islam?, What is Buddhism? Who was the Buddha?, What is Hinduism?, The Mosque, What is the Baha'i Faith?, Our Sikh Neighbours, Is God at work outside the Church?, Christian Prayer and Eastern Meditation, What is Daoism?, Prayer and Prayers in Islam, What is Jainism?, Hindu Festivals, What is Shinto?, Who are the Zoroastrians? Aspects of Judaism, African Traditional Religion. The full set, one each of 18 leaflets, is available for £3.00 post free. Orders up to 25 leaflets will be charged at 10p per leaflet plus £1.00p postage and packing. Orders in bundles of 50 of the same leaflet £5.00 post free.

Family Life in... series: Catholic Family Life (in preparation), Jewish Family Life, Family Life in Islam, Family Life among Sikhs, Hindu Families, Family Life in Buddhism: set of leaflets £1.00, 50 of one leaflet £5.00.

Ways of Sharing Faith (summary of Dialogue and Proclamation) is also available at 20p each post free, £5.00 for 50. **Hospital Chaplaincy and Other Faiths 20p, £6.00 for 50.**

ORDERS may be sent to: CFOF, 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1BX.
Please make cheques payable to: **NCF (Other Faiths)**

Further information and copies of these leaflets can also be obtained from. Westminster Interfaith Centre: St Anne's, Underwood Road, LONDON E1 5AW.



COMMITTEE FOR OTHER FAITHS
Bishops' Conference of England and Wales
