

HOLD FAST WHAT IS GOOD: ON BORROWING FORMS OF MEDITATION FROM EASTERN RELIGIONS

St. Peter Catholic Church † Faith Fact † July 2019

Issue: Should Christians look to non-Christian methods of meditation to draw closer to God? What are the more popular non-Christian methods of today? Can the Church's tradition meet the spiritual needs of those looking to non-Christian methods?

Response: The Church acknowledges the usefulness of some elements of meditation found in non-Christian religions, provided that these elements be renewed or redefined by the Catholic faith. The Church's basic understanding of Christian prayer must not be expanded to incorporate non-Christian elements.

Discussion: Prayer is the elevation of the mind and heart to God. In prayer we stand before the mystery of the Trinity and seek to remain in His loving presence. We are powerless to do this on our own; it is only because God first loves us that we are able to pray. Through the grace of Baptism, we receive the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to contemplate the face of Christ, who in turn leads us to the Father. Christian prayer is interior, in that it takes place in the depths of the heart, and yet it also looks outward and helps us turn away from sin and selfishness. It leads us to God and teaches us to embrace the life of the Church (cf. Catechism, nos. 2563-65).

Eastern meditation refers to the spiritual practices of the non-Christian religions of Asia. Instead of focusing on God in love, Eastern meditation turns us toward our state of consciousness. We are conscious of the individuality of ourselves, of other creatures, and of God. Eastern philosophies propose that these are enslaving perceptions—that they're not real and are spiritually limiting. The meditations that come from these philosophies seek to change our consciousness by making us conscious of no single or specific thing (such as a person or a truth).

However, some elements of Eastern meditation are found in its Christian counterpart. Repetition of words, such as in the Jesus Prayer or the Rosary, are part of meditative prayer. Movement and postures of the body are often associated with Christian prayer. Thus, in these areas of commonality, the Church recognizes that some elements of Eastern meditation can be put to good use.

An alarming trend is that Westerners are adopting entire methods of Eastern meditation. Yoga, Zen, and Tai Chi are among the most common practices that are gaining popularity. Before considering whether these techniques may be used in authentic Catholic spirituality, it's helpful to understand something of the traditions out of which they arose.

Yoga

Yoga, which arose in the Hinduism of India, is the most ancient of these traditions. The word "Yoga" means "yoke" or "union." It involves an attempt at spiritual liberation and union with the divine source of all. It does this by means of an emptying of the mind, a stilling of the senses, and dissociation from the material world (which is regarded as illusory). There are various types of Yoga. Hatha Yoga, which involves breathing techniques and the use of different physical stretches and postures, is the most well-known and practiced among Westerners. In fact, it is often used as a means to health and relaxation, and is usually divorced from any religious beliefs.

As a religious and philosophical system, Yoga contains elements that are incompatible with Christianity. First, there is the problem of "monism," the view that reality is ultimately one. In this view, an object or person does not have a distinct existence. Rather, when illusions are overcome, all of reality is immersed in the impersonal sea of the divine. This is not at all compatible with Christianity, in which God remains the transcendent Other, and the creature remains creature. In fact, there is a distinction of Persons in God Himself, who, though one in substance is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation, *Orationis Formas*, "OF," no. 14;

Catechism, nos. 253–54). Christian union with God does not involve a loss of personal identity into an impersonal divine consciousness. It is a union of love rather than a union of identity (cf. OF, no. 15).

Another problem with the religious ideas in Yoga is the view that the material world itself is illusory. Yoga attempts to bypass the senses and the material world in search of the divine. The Church teaches, however, that God reveals Himself to us in the material world through our senses. Thus, Christian mediation begins with the material world, grasping and pondering God's revelation. Later, in contemplation, the imagination, which combines images from the material world, is used to dwell on aspects of revealed truth.

Zen

Another popular form of Eastern meditation is Zen, a form of Buddhism. A fundamental aspect of Buddhism, including Zen, is the attempt to overcome suffering through the cessation of desire. The practitioner of Zen seeks enlightenment, which consists in recognizing the unity of being by the elimination of the kind of thinking that relates subject (the thinker) and object (the thing being thought). This is done by stilling the mind from logical thought. It involves the practice of "zazen," sitting in the cross-legged position for meditation, and "koan," meditating on impossible paradoxes in order to overcome the limitations of logical thought.

Similar to Yoga, Zen has a tendency toward monism, although Zen practitioners contend that Zen transcends all such categories. Zen seeks enlightenment through the use of direct, intuitive insights. It seeks to eliminate the use of distinctions and relationships, such as that between the Creator and the created. In Christianity, relationship—or the union of separate beings—is not something to overcome through "enlightenment." In fact, the most perfect unity of all, the Trinity, still has three separate Persons, distinguishable "solely in the relationships which relate them to one another" (Catechism, no. 255).

Tai Chi

Although Tai Chi is often used as a means of exercise and relaxation, as well as a martial art, it has its origins in the Chinese religion of Taoism. The words "Tai Chi" mean "supreme ultimate" from which are derived "yin," the passive principle associated with darkness and femininity, and "yang," associated with light and masculinity. All of physical reality is derived from these two principles. Taoism seeks to keep these two principles in harmony and balance and so often uses the symbolism of the yin and yang as talismans to exercise control over spiritual forces. As a martial art, Tai Chi seeks to be in tune with the vital energy of the opponent so as to be able to channel that energy (manifested in the movement of the opponent's body) away from one's self.

Although there is nothing objectively wrong with the physical movements of Tai Chi, there are many philosophical elements contrary to Christianity. The idea that the physical world comes from dualistic principles, which in turn come from an ultimate force, cannot be reconciled with the idea that the universe was created by an all-good, personal God. Furthermore, the attempt to channel and direct spiritual forces and the use of talismans violate the First Commandment (cf. Catechism, no. 2117).

Eastern Imports

The question remains whether Eastern techniques such as Zen, Yoga, and Tai Chi, apart from their religious ideas, which clearly are incompatible with Christianity, can be used for Christian prayer. The Church does not condemn out of hand all aspects of meditation arising in non-Christian religions. "One can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured" (OF, no. 16). However, the Church urges extreme caution and vigilance in order to ensure that the faithful do not deviate from the practice of authentic Christian prayer. Christian prayer is never purely a matter of technique, in which the person attempts by his own efforts to achieve union with God (cf. OF, no. 3). Rather, prayer is a gift from God. As the Catechism says, "Only when we humbly acknowledge that 'we do not know how to pray as we ought' are we ready to receive freely the gift of prayer" (Catechism, no. 2559). Any attempt to achieve union with God apart from grace is contrary to Christian prayer.

Further, while there are certain points of similarity in the practice of detachment and stillness, in Christian prayer these are not ends in themselves, but are meant to free the person for loving union with God. Placing ourselves before God with an intense focus and desire can leave behind physical sensation and awareness of the self. The emptying involved is primarily a turning away from sin and selfishness. With Eastern meditation techniques, a mental void is sought, resulting in an altered state of consciousness. This “enlightenment,” therefore, is not from God but from the self.

In seeking an altered state of consciousness, Eastern meditation uses various bodily postures. Christians can adopt such postures as well—the Church has always recognized the value of uniting the exterior actions of the body to the interior act of prayer (cf. Catechism, no. 2722). Here again, however, the Church offers a word of caution. Because certain physical techniques produce a sense of spiritual well being, there is a danger of mistaking physical sensations for the actions of the Holy Spirit. “To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life” (OF, no. 28).

Positive Aspects

The rise in interest in Eastern meditation, as well as in New Age ideas, is not purely negative; it indicates the hunger today for authentic spirituality. With this in mind, we must remember that “all the aspirations which the prayer of other religions expresses are fulfilled in the reality of Christianity beyond all measure” (OF, no. 15). While the Church does not reject what is good in other religions (cf. Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2), what is primarily needed is a return to authentic Christian spirituality (cf. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Jesus Christ: Bearer of the Water of Life, A Christian Reflection on the “New Age,”* 6.2).

For the Catholic, to pray is to contemplate the face of Christ. This is the greatest distinction between authentically Christian meditation and the methods discussed above. Prayer that fulfills the desire of the human heart for communion with God (the desire that may lead people to seek different techniques of meditation), contemplates the face of Christ.

Contemplation of Christ is to put oneself in His presence; methods of Christian prayer include recognizing His presence. While Christ is present in many ways, the place that Christ gave us to find Him in a preeminent way is in the Eucharist. This is the first place Christians should look for enlightenment.

“To contemplate Christ involves being able to recognize him wherever he manifests himself, in his many forms of presence, but above all in the living sacrament of his body and his blood. The Church draws her life from Christ in the Eucharist; by him she is fed and by him she is enlightened” (Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, no. 6).

On the road to Emmaus, though the two disciples walked with Jesus, listening to His teaching, it was not until the Eucharist that they fully recognized Him (cf. Lk. 24:31). The Eucharist is, in a most profound way, the sacrament of our union with God, as well as the sacrament of the unity of the whole Church (cf. Catechism, no. 1325, 1396). The whole prayer life of the Christian should be Eucharist-centered: “For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch” (Catechism, no. 1324).

“Finally, 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’” (OF, no. 22).

The Rosary

Contemplating the face of Christ also has a Marian dimension. Pope John Paul II reminds us that Mary shows us what it means to contemplate Christ, then the Holy Father urges us to discover the value of

praying the Rosary. "With the Rosary, the Christian people sit at the school of Mary and are led to contemplate the beauty of the face of Christ and to experience the depths of his love" (Pope John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, no. 1, "RVM," emphasis added). The Rosary, when prayed from the heart, is "an exquisitely contemplative prayer" (RVM, no. 12, original emphasis). Aided by the very rhythm of the prayer, we are led to contemplate with Mary the mysteries of Christ.

If we are to contemplate Christ, we must learn who He is from the Gospel. God makes known His saving action through the events of salvation history which are recorded in Scripture. Far from turning away from creation in a false other-worldliness, Christian prayer as revealed in Scripture recognizes and praises God for His actions in creation and in history. "Prayer is bound up with human history, for it is the relationship with God in historical events" (Catechism, no. 2568; cf. OF, nos. 4-5). We must turn particularly to the Gospels to nourish our life of prayer. The Rosary is at heart a meditation on the Gospels. In order to emphasize this Gospel dimension of the Rosary, Pope John Paul II has encouraged the faithful to pray the Luminous Mysteries, while meditating on the public ministry of Christ.

The Holy Father clearly sees the Rosary as an answer to the modern search for a means of meditation, the same search that has led many to seek out non-Christian forms of meditation. The Rosary has certain features, such as repetition in order to help the person with concentration on spiritual mysteries, which are also found in the techniques of Eastern meditation. The Rosary, however, is rooted in the Gospel, unlike meditations of other religions which arise out of philosophies incompatible with the Gospel. In the words of Pope John Paul II: "The West is now experiencing a renewed demand for meditation, which at times leads to a keen interest in aspects of other religions. Some Christians, limited in their knowledge of Christian contemplative tradition, are attracted to these forms of prayer. While the latter contain many elements which are positive and at times compatible with Christian experience, they are often based on ultimately unacceptable premises. Much in vogue among these approaches are methods aimed at attaining a high level of spiritual concentration by using techniques of a psychological, repetitive, and symbolic nature. The Rosary is situated within this broad gamut of religious phenomena, but it is distinguished by characteristics of its own which correspond to specifically Christian requirements" (RVM, no. 28).

Catholic Response

With all of these considerations in mind, it is clear that while the Church does not condemn all aspects of Eastern meditation, she encourages instead a renewal of Christian spirituality. The desire for spirituality seems to drive the interest of modern man in the techniques of Eastern and New Age meditation. It is therefore particularly important to recover the riches of our own Christian tradition.

Contemplation, as it is explained in the Catechism, is not primarily an experience of extraordinary gifts, but of loving union with God. It is not something accomplished on our own efforts but is the gift of grace. Far from being achieved as the result of technique, it is possible "independently of the conditions of health, work, or emotional state. The heart is the place of this quest and encounter, in poverty and in faith" (Catechism, no. 2710). To meet the challenge that Eastern meditation poses to Christian prayer, Catholics need to study this section of the Catechism (nos. 2709-19). "Contemplative prayer is the simple expression of the mystery of prayer. It is a gaze of faith fixed on Jesus, an attentiveness to the word of God, a silent love. It achieves real union with the prayer of Christ to the extent that it makes us share in His mystery" (Catechism, no. 2724).

Aware of the needs of our day, Pope John Paul II has encouraged the faithful to contemplate the face of Christ—especially in the Eucharist—and to renew the practice of praying the Rosary. Catholics should respond to the spiritual needs of modern man by living the life of prayer called for by our Holy Father.

Catholics United for the Faith, Lay Witness Archive; <http://www.cuf.org/2005/02/hold-fast-what-is-good-on-borrowing-forms-of-meditation-from-eastern-religions/>