

Week 4: Christian Mindfulness – From the Many to the One

Mindfulness

The Buddha was asked, "What do you and your disciples practice?" and he replied, "We sit, we walk, and we eat." The questioner continued, "But sir, everyone sits, walks and eats." The Buddha told him, "When we sit, we know we are sitting. When we walk, we know we are walking. When we eat, we know we are eating." Thich Nhat Han

Mindfulness is the psychological process of bringing one's attention to experiences occurring in the present moment, which can be developed through the practice of meditation and other training. Although such meditation on the present moment and situation has a long history in the Christian tradition of contemplative prayer, it has gained a renewed popularity in Western thought through the introduction of Buddhist teachings and practices of *sati* translated as "mindfulness".

Following extensive empirical studies in several fields, clinical psychologists and psychiatrists have developed a number of therapeutic applications of mindfulness techniques to treat people with depression, anxiety, stress and even addictions. The benefits of mindfulness training on healthy individuals has led to it being expanded in business, sport and education to assist people with healthy aging, weight control, children with special needs and athletic performance. The point is that mindfulness works.

The popularisation and especially the commercialisation of mindfulness exercises in easy-to-use breathing techniques, guided meditation apps for smart-phones and self-help books has caused orthodox Buddhists to recoil as many feel the moral and spiritual dimensions of the teaching are lost in translation. Some critics refer to this commercialisation as "McMindfulness".

Nevertheless, the point for our present study is simply to note that there is now good clinical evidence that the bare practices associated with mindfulness are in themselves beneficial in a wide range of physiological and psychological applications.

7-11 Breathing Exercise:

A very simple exercise that can be used simply and easily at any time and any place to calm the mind, increase concentration and focus, combat insomnia and even lower blood-pressure involves focussed, slow breathing.

1. Find somewhere comfortable to sit and relax.
2. Sit in a chair with your shoulders relaxed and your hands folded gently over your tummy.
3. If possible breathe in and out through your nose. In for a count of 7 and out for a count of 11 (if you find it too hard to breathe out 11, start off with 3/6 and work up to 7/11. The important thing here is to breathe out longer than you breathe in).
4. If you are doing it correctly your shoulders will remain still and your tummy will get bigger and smaller as you breathe (called belly or diaphragmatic breathing).
5. Once you can keep your shoulders still and relaxed without effort it is a good idea to close your eyes and try to picture the numbers in your mind's eye to help you concentrate completely on your breathing.

Christian Contemplative Tradition

The tradition of contemplative prayer has a rich legacy in the history of Christianity. Many of the ideas still associated with Christian meditation were developed by the monastic orders that emerged around the Desert Fathers in Egypt during the 3rd C AD. Other teachers and writers who have been closely associated with the tradition and its development in various forms include:

St John of the Cross (1542-1591) – “The Dark Night of the Soul”

St Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

“The Cloud of Unknowing” (by an unknown English mystic in the 14th Century)

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) – “The Spiritual Exercises”

Brother Lawrence (1614-1691) – “The Practice of the Presence of God”

Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675-1751) “The Sacrament of the Present Moment”

In the 20th Century the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, popularised a resurgence of interest in Christian contemplative prayer after spending many years investigating the similarities and correlation between Christian and Buddhist meditative practices.

Breathe

But contemplative practice traces its roots all the way through the New Testament to the Hebrew Scriptures and possibly all the way back to the founding moment of the Hebrew faith...

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed... God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Then the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians... Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.”

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”

Exodus 3

The name given to Moses for Godself in Exodus 3 is often written in English Bibles as LORD or, as in the passage above: “I am who I am”. It is a mysterious name which defies translation from the Hebrew. The Hebrew letters used to represent the Name of God can be transliterated into English script as “YHWH”. There is much speculation about how this name was meant to be pronounced, partly because ancient Hebrew had no system of recording vowel sounds but mostly because Hebrew tradition forbade the speaking of the

Name of God because it was regarded as too holy. Even today in synagogues when the Scriptures are read and the letters YHWH appear in the text, the word “Adonai” (the Name) is substituted.

Research into ancient Hebrew texts and culture suggests that the name may never have been pronounced – indeed that it may never have been pronounceable! The thought the letters YH and WH were intended to represent the sounds of breathing in and breathing out respectively. In other words, the Name of God is the sound of our breathing. Furthermore, both the Hebrew language of the Old Testament and the Greek language of the New Testament use the same words for breath and God’s Spirit – *ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek.

If it is true that the Name of God is the sound of our breathing, then a number of interesting ideas follow, including the possibility that breathing exercises may bring us much closer to God than we had previously realised. Let’s take a look at some of the ideas that flow from this line of thought:

- God’s Name (and therefore our consciousness of God) is possibly much closer to us than we have ever realised.
- God is close to all human beings (his Name is on everyone’s lips) and not only to the religious few.
- God’s closeness to us is experienced in our bodies – our breathing – and not simply apprehended in some incorporeal “spiritual” part of our being.
- Our very lives are tied up with the speaking of God’s name. His name is the very first word on our lips – when we take our first breath – and when we cease to speak God’s name our lives will end – when we take our final breath.

The idea that our breathing articulates the Name of God also highlights a key difference between Christian meditation and Buddhist mindfulness, namely the role of relationship. While both traditions practice meditation as a path towards detachment from the humdrum of the competing passions and distractions of life, Christian meditation has as its goal a building of relationship with God – we speak God’s Name – whereas Buddhism has detachment itself as the final goal.

Two Streams of Christian Meditation: Focus and Transcendence

It may be helpful to distinguish between two streams within Christian contemplative practice. On the one hand there are those practices that seek to focus our minds on conscious awareness of our present reality and on the other hand there are those that seek to lead us beyond (or perhaps beneath) the present reality. These should not be seen as competing streams but rather as complementary streams of contemplation, each opening for us a different view of God, ourselves and reality along a continuum or spectrum of consciousness.

In each case the goal is a deeper relationship with God and in each case the effect of such contemplation is intended to be a more meaningful engagement with the world around us rather than an escape from it.

Focussed Prayer

Focussed prayer engages the mind, the imagination and conscious reflection to draw us closer to God. Examples of such prayer include Lectio Divina, which is a prayerful reflection on a passage of Scripture, the Prayer of Examen, which guides us through a review of the day that has been and the day to come, and Ignatian prayer (according to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola) which uses our imagination to immerse us in a Biblical story. A brief example of each of these prayers is outlined below.

To these we may add Brother Lawrence's "Practice of the Presence of God" in which he depicts life as a constant, ongoing conversation with God in which every moment is lived in devotion to God. "The time of business," he says, "does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament."

Lectio Divina

1. **Lectio** (Reading)

What does the text say that everyone should understand?

In the first phase of *lectio divina* we understand what the passage we are reading says in itself.

2. **Meditatio** (Meditation)

What does this text say to me, today, and to my life?

We allow God to pull up certain memories of people, places, and events in our lives that relate to the passage we are reading.

3. **Oratio** (Prayer)

What can I say to the Lord in response to his word?

Having met our Lord in his holy word, we courageously speak to him in our own words. In this way we consider prayer to be a simple conversation with God.

4. **Contemplatio** (Contemplation)

What conversion of the mind, heart, and life is the Lord asking of me?

Through contemplation we come to an understanding of the parts of our lives that need to be transformed by God's grace.

5. **Actio** (Action)

What will I do next?

Having received God's love and grace, we go forth to serve others out of the love we have been given. Our transformation calls us to witness to others; it calls us to selflessly serve our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Prayer of Examen

1. Become aware of God's presence.
2. Review the day with gratitude.
3. Pay attention to your emotions.
4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.
5. Look toward tomorrow.

Ignatian Prayer

The story is a familiar one – Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand. Begin by imagining yourself the child who gave his lunch, or perhaps the child’s parents: at any rate, try to place yourself in the actual scene. Following the counsel of Ignatius of Loyola, attempt to use all of the senses as you slowly read the passage. Try to see the story – the grass, the hills, the faces of the people. Try to hear the story – the sound of the water, the noise of the children, the voice of the Master. Try to feel the story – the texture of your clothing, the hardness of the ground, the coarseness of your hands. Finally, try to feel the with your emotions – hesitancy at bringing your lunch, astonishment at the miracle of multiplied food, joy at the gracious provision of God. At first this approach may necessitate several readings of the text.

Then in your imagination watch the crowd leave and Jesus go up into the hills. You are left alone. You sit on a rock overlooking the water re-experiencing the events of the day. You become quiet, and after a little while Jesus returns and sits on a nearby rock. For a time you are both silent, looking out over the water, perhaps, and enjoying one another’s presence. After a bit, the Lord turns to you and asks this question, “What may I do for you?” Then you tell him what is in your heart – your needs, your fears, your hopes. If weeping or other emotions come, do not hinder them.

When you have finished, you become quiet for a little while. Then you turn to the Lord and ask, “What may I do for you?” And then you listen with the heart quietly, prayerfully. No instruction needs to come, for you are just glad to be in Christ’s presence. If some word does come to you, take it with the utmost seriousness. More often than not, it will be some utterly practical instruction about seemingly trivial matters, for God wants us to live out our spirituality in the ordinary events of our days.

(Richard Foster)

Transcendent Prayer

The idea of transcendent prayer is to go beyond, behind or beneath our words and our senses to apprehend God’s presence more fully. It often makes use of silence or “centering prayer” where the idea is to clear our consciousness of all thought other than our devotion to God in the present moment. This is achieved through silence or the repetition of a certain word or prayer and the deliberate setting aside of conscious thoughts as they arise. This is mystical prayer and is by definition difficult to articulate. The following quote from Maggie Gobran (Egypt’s “Mother Theresa”) helps to describe how such prayer moves us beyond words, thoughts and emotions to simply rest in the presence of God:

“Silence your body to listen to your words; Silence your tongue to listen to your thoughts; Silence your thoughts to listen to your heart beating; Silence your heart to listen to your spirit; and silence your spirit, you listen to his Spirit. You know in silence: you leave many and be with the one.”
Maggie Gobran

At retreats, Richard Rohr uses the following simple centering prayer before each session:

“Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10)

“Be still and know...”

“Be still...”

“Be.”

The Orthodox tradition makes use of “hesychastic prayer”, a practice that dates back as far as the 13th Century. It makes use of the so-called “Jesus prayer” which runs as follows: *“Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner.”* In this form of prayer, there are three stages: Purification, during which all passions and distractions are set aside; Illumination, during which the prayer moves from the mind to the heart (in other words, the contemplation of God goes beyond mental images); and, Deification, during which the person experiences a mystical contemplation of God as pure Being.

It is worth mentioning at this point that although experiences of such transcendent prayer may vary widely from person to person and tradition to tradition, the accounts of such experiences all match to some degree the Biblical description of prayer in “tongues”. There are two distinct forms of “tongues” according to the New Testament. First, there is the apparently unique occasion at Pentecost when the prayer in tongues was understandable to all language groups and, secondly, there is the more common form of ecstatic, incomprehensible prayer in tongues mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12-14 and in Acts 10 and 19. This second form of “tongues” is quite clearly a transcendent form of prayer in that it goes beyond words and, though it may be edifying for the individual praying, needs translation before it can be useful as prophecy for the gathered community of faith.

Centering Prayer Exercise:

1. Select a sacred word (eg. Jesus, peace, truth, Spirit) that best supports your sincere intention to be in the Lord's presence and open to His divine action within you.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word.
3. When you become aware of thoughts, words, images or emotions, acknowledge them and then gently return to the sacred word which acts as your anchor.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes before returning to full consciousness of the world around you.

A Word of Caution

To conclude, I wish to offer a few words of caution to those practicing these forms of prayer for the first time. Firstly, don't try to run before you can walk. These forms of prayer, especially transcendent prayers, can be unfamiliar and may seem strange at first. It is recommended that one start with short periods of prayer before advancing to longer periods of silence and meditation.

Secondly, be aware that the initial periods spent in such prayers often involve confession, shedding the heaviness of life and even an element of confronting the darkness within us. The Greek name for the first stage of hesychastic prayer is “Katharsis”. It may be wise to relate to a trusted prayer partner either during or after such prayer to talk through any spiritual experiences you may have during your prayer time.

Thirdly, on the topic of spiritual experiences, one should always be alert to the possibility of

deception. Spiritual experiences are notoriously hard to pin down and it is possible to get “carried away” or to have experiences that are not of God’s Spirit. Don’t be put off by this possibility. There are some simple tests that you can apply either during or after a time of prayer to discern whether a spiritual experience was authentic. God’s Spirit does not fill us with fear, nor does the Spirit sow disorder. After the event, ask yourself: Has this experience brought about more unity (between me and God, me and others, me and the world) or has it brought about division? Love unites and, by uniting, transforms all it unites. Sin separates and, by separating, destroys all it separates.

And finally, beware of impatience and pride. God’s Spirit blows where it will. We cannot switch it on or off or invoke it here or there. You may pray for 10 years without having a “transcendent” experience. Persevere anyway. The mere act of being in God’s presence is enough reward. Equally, you may have an overwhelming experience very early on in your prayers. Don’t let that become a matter of pride. Accept God’s gift with gratitude and continue in humility of prayer.