

Contemplative prayer: Meditation in the Christian Tradition

Welcome to our Prayer page. Meditation is prayer.

My name is Mary McVay and I'm one of the Lay Ministers in the South Cleley Benefice of Churches. I am a member of the World Community for Christian Meditation and I'm trained in teaching and facilitating meditation sessions.

A group of us meet regularly in the villages – often in my house where we have the use of a meditation room. – At present on Zoom due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Its very easy to join in. Anyone can join; not religious, it doesn't matter; don't believe in God, I probably don't believe in that God either. Taste and see ...

Contact me at admin@southcleley-benefice.org.uk for full information.



Why Meditate?

Meditation is a universal spiritual wisdom. A practice rather than just a theory, it is found at the heart of all the great religious traditions, back as far as the aboriginal culture of Australia forty thousand years ago.

Its essential insight is that the most human aspects in the journey of life: truth, love, joy, peace compassion and wisdom, are there to be found within ourselves. To discover this inner reality it is necessary to come to clarity, to calm the mind and emotions – and to “descend” into the heart, the deeper level of consciousness where we remain awake in silence, undisturbed by the images of conflicting ideas and desires. The universal human wisdom teaches us that the way to this is simple – but not easy.

The essence of meditation is sitting still and learning to recite, from beginning until the end of your meditation, a word that is called in some traditions a *mantra*. The essential teaching of meditation is contained in the three words: *say your mantra*. For people starting it can be difficult to believe that there is anything very significant in sitting still, closing your eyes lightly and just reciting one word. You have to take that on faith when you begin.

Saying the mantra is simply our beginning on the path of selfless attention, turning the searchlight of consciousness off ourselves, leaving all limited, distorted perceptions behind.

In meditation we are not just seeking for immediate and limited goals. We set out to realise our total potential. For example, we are not just learning to concentrate, to be silent or relax. Meditation is well described as the way of self realisation and that means realising our total capacity. We are seeking to go from the periphery of limited goals to the centre, to the heart.

Mindfulness and Christian Meditation

Mindfulness and Christian Meditation are both widely practised nowadays and have much in common. We are all aware of the stress and bustle of modern life and seek some escape into a state of peace or freedom from stress. We might be aware that we can find this within ourselves in special moments. Through the meditation practices of Mindfulness and Christian Meditation we can find a way of stabilising these special moments and integrating them into our daily life. For some who have followed a Mindfulness course it may be important to develop this in a way which acknowledges the spiritual and they may choose to do this through Christian Meditation.

Meditation means turning round our attention which habitually flows outward to all the attractions of the world. As we sit down and turn inwards in meditation we immediately encounter/become conscious of the frenzied activity of our mind. Learning to meditate means learning how to train and restrain this tumult of thoughts and feelings.

Among the many aspects that Mindfulness and Christian Meditation have in common is the necessity of having a daily practice. Like acquiring any other skill, the essence of meditation is that it becomes a way of life, not an occasional or one-off experience. We grow and cultivate the fruits of inner peace, stability and centred presence through daily practice. Both traditions recommend a regular daily practice. Commitment and self-discipline are both the way and the reward.

In Mindfulness you pay attention to the activity of the mind in a non-judgemental way. You become the impartial witness of your experience. You cultivate a willingness to see and accept things as they are, letting go of grasping or pushing away. You become the detached observer of your thoughts and state of mind and body and hold your attention by focusing on the breath. You calmly notice the bodily sensations of breathing out and breathing in. The field of attention may be expanded to include whole body awareness, sounds or thought processes.

Similarly in the Christian Meditation teaching of John Main who was the initial inspiration for the World Community for Christian Meditation, you meditate without ambition or expectation – you accept what happens,

indeed he says, "Be grateful if nothing happens"! The essence is faithfulness to the practice and not seeking special or altered states of consciousness.

In Christian Meditation the anchor for the attention is the age-old practice of focusing on a sacred word or phrase, a mantra. This is repeated silently and interiorly during the time of meditation. Thoughts and images are considered distractions in the time of meditation so when they come we let go of them by returning attention to the mantra.

John Main recommends the prayer word 'Maranatha' and this teaching is passed on in WCCM. However, in our weekly groups we welcome all who come and in the shared silence each one follows their own individual practice.

Present moment awareness is fundamental in both Christian Meditation and Mindfulness practices – that is not being in the past, ruminating on past joys and sorrows, not anticipating the future anxiously or indulging in fantasy. We cultivate a state of Presence. Rootedness in the present moment necessarily entails awareness of the body. A good sitting posture which is stable and balanced, with your spine upright, supports the stability and poise of the stilled mind which nevertheless 'quivers like a bead of mercury' – always ready to run off!

As a Christian Meditator following the teaching of Jesus, we are called to 'leave self behind'. This is what we are doing in Christian Meditation, leaving behind the small egotistical mind and our obsession with our sense of self, in order to find the fullness of being to which the practice opens us. We follow Jesus who was able to say 'The Father and I are one'

Christian Meditation is a spiritual practice. By stilling the mind we become open to our own spirit and the creator spirit of God that fills the whole universe. By awakening to the spirit who dwells in our hearts we become one with the Spirit who 'in silence is loving to all'. So the ultimate aim in Christian Meditation is the state of presence. In the words of John Main "To be one with the One who is One". Stilling the mind allows the heart to open to the unity of Being which lies behind the rich diversity of creation. This is the deep purpose of meditation.

John Main wrote "The mantra leads us to attention, a spirit of attention, a mindfulness of what is, not what has been or what might be, but what is. The first step, therefore, is mindfulness, attention. The second step – which is more like a leap, or a plunge into the very basis of all that is – the second step is the realisation that God is, that God is present, that God is now and, perhaps the most wonderful of all, that God is mindful of all" (from The Door to Silence quoted in Silence and Stillness in Every Season p.346 ed. Paul Harris).

Shelagh Layet

Yoga and Christian Meditation

The practice of Yoga predates Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism and this path to wholeness has been interpreted over the centuries and throughout the world in many different ways. You may attend a class where there are candles, joss sticks, chanting and references to ancient Hindu texts. The teacher may talk of his or her own guru and the lineage of their tradition. On the other hand, you may be in a very hot room doing very strenuous exercise. Of course, there is every variation in between. It is important to find a class where you are comfortable and at ease, both physically and spiritually and where the discipline supports your own journey to wholeness.



In the ancient writings where yoga finds its roots, the physical practice was just one component of an eight-fold path which prepared the way for meditation.

The most ancient poses we know of are just about being able to sit well. Being able to sit, relaxed but alert and without pain is a valuable skill, as modern day practitioners know well!

These writings (the aphorisms of Patanjali) describe yoga as, "stilling the restless fluctuations of the mind" and another tells us that "postures should be steady and relaxed." So, we do the poses with attention and focus, being in the present moment, noticing how it feels, without judgement, without trying to achieve anything. As we move and breathe we look for unnecessary tension and habits which are not useful. Over time we develop the ability to release effort and let go. The age, shape and flexibility of the practitioner are not important.

Of course, meditators will recognise the skills we are practising here. In our contemplative work we sit in the present moment, noticing and letting go of distractions, mental habits and tensions. We do this without undue effort or judgement. It is a discipline which bears fruit in our lives outside of the time of sitting.

As a Christian meditator I find that my sitting meditation practice and my bodywork practice reflect, support and enhance each other. Without trying to achieve, but applying a kindly discipline, both aspects of this quiet work enrich my life "off the mat."

Chris Hurley