

Chewing

The art of Christian meditation

Since the 1960's, the "Christian West" has shown a growing interest in eastern religions and some of their practices. The New Age influence has stimulated the multiplication of workshops, clubs and clinics associated with Yoga, Zen, Buddhist and Taoist related practices, Transcendental Meditation (TM) and the like. In particular, the practice of meditation has become popular, even trendy. Today meditation is definitely "in." Through diverse websites, a variety of meditation techniques are encouraged promising results such as inner peace, fulfillment and enlightenment, better mental and physical health, increased intelligence and creativity. They recommend meditation stools, cushions, background music, postures and sacred places. They invite you to "enter into the realm of meditation," to "seek your personal revelation," to "tap into the power of your mind." In the Bible we also find references to meditation. Is Christian meditation similar to that practiced in eastern religions? Can we combine them?

What is Christian meditation?

Before entering the promised land, the Lord God instructed Joshua: "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful" (Josh 1:8). It is important to notice that the biblical definition of meditation encourages an active mind, focused thinking. Here Joshua is commanded by the Lord not only to read the Law, but take the necessary time to meditate on it, to think about it, to reflect on it. This meditation is a calm and disciplined "chewing" of God's words. The insights and convictions gained through this meditation will lead naturally to God pleasing attitudes and activities that He can bless.

What is Eastern or New Age meditation?

In order to relax or achieve inner peace, meditation techniques based on Eastern religions suggest ways to empty your mind. By choosing to disconnect from reality, either by concentrating on your breathing, by repeating again and again a word or set of sounds (called a "mantra"), or focusing all your attention on one object (like a light or a tree), the mind enters into peaceful standby. It is a mystic or psychic experience. The emptying of the mind can also lead to a spiritual experience. Many testify how hypnosis and trance have opened their life to the influence and torment of evil spirits.

Notice the stark contrast between Christian meditation and Eastern or New Age meditation. Christian meditation leads to freedom and blessing through the filling of the mind while the other offers a false peace by seeking to empty the mind. It is a

false peace because it is achieved through denial. It is a peace apart from God. Christian meditation encourages an active rather than a passive mind, constructive thinking rather than mindless drifting. When we live difficult times, the practice of Christian meditation eventually leads us to face the source of anxiety, guilt, sin or conflict. The Lord uses this meditation to correct our defective thinking or lead us to recognition, confession and restoration. Those who try to empty their mind are really trying to run away from their problems. The feeling of peace and wellbeing achieved through a static or vacant mind is at best artificial and short-lived. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (Jn 14:27).

The content of Christian meditation

Our minds can be actively engaged in good as well as bad things (Ps 38:12). Therefore the Psalmist prays "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD" (Ps 19:14). Some of the Psalms suggest good themes for our meditation.

- (a) The Word of God: "Oh how I love thy law! it is my meditation all the day... I have more understanding than all my teachers; for thy testimonies are my meditation" (Ps 119:97-99). Meditation of God's Word leads to improved understanding.
- (b) The works of God: "I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds." "I will meditate on your wonderful works" (Ps 77:12; 145:5). This could include meditating on the wonders of God's creation, God's acts of judgment and of grace, the sublime act when God the Father gave His beloved Son and what has been achieved when the Lord Jesus gave His life to save a lost world.
- (c) Past experiences with the Lord: "So my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed. I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done. I spread out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land" (Ps 143:3-6). We can meditate on God's dealings with humans over the years. This is a particular type of work of God. We may also reflect on how the Lord has touched our own life in the past and how He is dealing with us today.
- (d) The Lord Himself: "Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love." "May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the LORD" (Ps 48:9; 104:34). We can meditate on some of the attributes of God, such as His love, goodness, mercy, patience, holiness, justice, faithfulness, nearness, greatness, transcendence, etc., and the attractive virtues we see in our Lord Jesus Christ. You will find that it is difficult to meditate on Him without talking to Him. Christian meditation and prayer are closely related.

The practice of Christian meditation

It has been said that if you know how to worry, you have the necessary skills to meditate! What do you do when you worry? You talk to yourself. You ask your self "what if..." "Why did..." "How can..." Similarly, when you meditate on Scripture, you talk to yourself about it. It is a chewing process. We start by asking the Lord to speak to us through His word, to illuminate our minds. We read a chapter or so, but we stop or go back to that verse or expression that caught our attention. We then begin to talk to ourselves about it. We can ask ourselves questions such as: What could this mean? What does this say about God? Is this something I should do? How can I lean

on this truth? Does it point to a sin I should confess? Alternate between speaking to yourself and speaking to the Lord.

Where and when can we meditate? In the Bible we find people meditating out in a field (Gen. 24:63), in a place of worship (Ps 48:9) even while lying down in bed! (Ps. 63:6). "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long" (Ps. 119:97). Christian meditation is not something for the "advanced." It is an art designed for all to enjoy! Meditation is, and always has been, a basic and necessary tool in genuine Christian spirituality.

Benefits of Christian meditation

Of course it is good to listen to Scriptural sermons and attend Biblical seminars. Of course it is good to read Christian books, watch Christian videos and listen to Christian music. But none of these can yield the benefits of meditation. C H Spurgeon once said, "It is well to meditate upon the things of God, because thus we get the real nutriment out of them." Meditation makes truth real to us. It helps truth travel from the head to the heart. It opens truth, it fixes truth in our mind, it warms our heart.

Dangers of Christian meditation

Can Christian meditation be dangerous? Yes it can. It can be dangerous because as we meditate, we focus only on one text or one truth. We can only chew on what fits into our mouth! The danger therefore is to work on a verse ignoring the general Biblical context, to chew, eat and digest only on one side of a truth. For example, like David we can meditate on God's unfailing love. We can enjoy and maybe even begin to feel the warmth of His love. But in doing so, we should not forget that our loving God is also a righteous and a holy God.

Conclusion

Christian meditation is completely different from New Age type meditation. Seeking to empty or disconnect our minds can be dangerous. On the contrary, we should follow Paul's advice to Timothy and engage our minds with God's words: "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Tm. 2:7). Christian meditation is a chewing process. As Christians we are encouraged to meditate of God's Word, God's works and on God Himself. This will enhance our spirituality by making God's truth real in our experience. The next time you read your Bible, make a little time to be still and to meditate. If you have stopped doing so, start again. The Lord's invitation still stands: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

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December 2008