

Aberdeen Unitarian Church

THE CHALICE SCHOOL OF CONTEMPLATIVE MEDITATION



SESSION No. 5

MEDITATION IN THE WORLD RELIGIONS

Introduction

In nearly all the Great World Religions there is some system of meditation. But the practice of meditation also covers and very often includes a wide range of other religious practices, such as ritual, chants, singing and prayers. And with this there is often an overlapping of these practices so that the actual meditation or contemplative side is either obscured or left to a few devotees or monks. In addition to this there is also confusion and often a misunderstanding between meditation as practiced in the East and meditation as practiced in the West, and a kind of mish mash or mingling between both types. In this session we would like to look at some of the better known of those meditation practices together with some of the differences between the East and the West.

CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

When we hear of meditation we sometimes associate it with meditation as practiced in the East - that is with Hindu and Buddhist monks sitting in a lotus position chanting or reciting some mantra. In Christianity however, there has always been the practice of meditation in one form or another - but it has not been given the same emphasis for ordinary people as we find say in both Hinduism and Buddhism. In the East it seems that the main object was the elevation and the raising of consciousness - to achieve a state of super-consciousness or enlightenment. In the West, certainly since the sixteenth century, the tendency has been on the value of meditation to become a better or holier person - a growth in moral virtue.

Some Forms of Christian Meditation

Meditation on sin

In some forms of Christian meditation, the stress is sometimes laid on the sense of sin. This kind of meditation can be a benefit only if it leads one to becoming a better person - but it can also have a demoralising effect if it just stops there - that is, if it's a kind of wallowing in one's own shortcomings producing a guilt trip so to speak. On the positive side, there can be a healthy sense of sin, that is, when it produces a genuine sense of humility and enables one to rise up from a state of ignorance and a sense of one's own littleness. As was said it should lead to a greater sense of humility, and with it perhaps the sentiment, that is when we compare ourselves with the misfortune of others: 'there for the

grace of God go I'. So although some forms of Christian meditation may place an emphasis upon 'sin', if it is used in a positive way, can act as lever to push one on to have a healthier attitude towards life in general.

Meditation on things as they really are.

Also it is good to sometimes feel that when one looks at oneself and ones own littleness - that is compared with the vast expanse of the universe - of how small we are compared with the Infinite - it puts everything in perspective. F. C. Happold outlines a kind of meditation practice, which I can highly recommend. He writes: "Go out on a starlit night. Gaze up at the heavens studded with stars. Bring to your mind all that modern astronomy has to say about the vast extent of the universe. However much it may hurt, however much you may feel lost and annihilated, let that immensity sink into you, even though it overwhelms and crushes you, and you cry with the Psalmist: 'When I consider the heavens, the work of thine hands, and the firmament which Thou hast made, what is man that Thou regardest him the son of man that Thou visitest him?'

He says: "What you are doing is meditating on things as they really are. If it ended there, however, it would not be complete. Carry the meditation further and ask the question: 'What is there in the nature of man, an insignificant atom of an insignificant planet in an insignificant solar system, that enables him to comprehend this vast universe, to hold it all in his mind?' And then pass on to the consideration of another not conflicting but complementary aspect, also within the totality of human experience, the sense of some Power upholding it all, a Power that he cannot know through his intellect, but with which man may have intimate communion, and whose nature is Love." This exercise certainly makes one feel humble when we compare ourselves with the vast expanse of the universe.

Sometimes however, too much emphasis can be given to what we believe is a kind of obsession with sin - this tends to be true in some forms of fundamentalist Christianity.

Meditation on the Christ within.

The whole point of true Christian meditation however, is a development and a transformation of character. One of the key features of this kind of meditation is found in the words of St. Paul 'I live, but it is no longer I, my own little self, but Christ who lives in me.' And again a well known quote, 'Christ in you the hope of glory'. Some have interpreted this as the Spirit within us - or the God within - the Divine Immanence.

Images and forms of meditation.

At the moment there seems to be a vast amount of meditation groups and societies springing up - one only needs to look at the Internet to get an idea of the number. Some have taken the form of the mantra method, and some are a mixture of both Eastern and Western methods of meditation. But in Christianity the real emphasis is upon Jesus Christ as a Divine Incarnation - or Image of God. This kind of meditation takes as its starting point a personalised relationship with the object of ones meditation, but then it develops into what is rightly named 'contemplative meditation'. For example it can begin with a meditation on some form or image - an icon, an image of the crucifix, the child Jesus - the babe in the manger, the Sacred heart of Jesus, perhaps an image of Mary, or even a participation in the Eucharist. The images are many.

In other forms of meditation the starting point is very often a form of prayer - a kind of personalised conversation with God or Christ. It can be a combination of words, symbols, thoughts and images. And when taken together they eventually merge into a form of contemplative meditation. When this takes place all imagery and talking give way to a

silence, a waiting in the stillness to hear the voice of the God within - a kind of 'waiting on God.'

Practice of the Presence of God

Another well known Christian meditation is based on the Practice of the Presence of God - that is being constantly aware of the presence of God in ones everyday life. We have been made aware of this kind of meditation through the letters and conversations of Nicholas Herman of Loraine. He was a man, we are told, "of lowly birth who after having served as a soldier, and then as a footman, was admitted as a lay brother in a community of Carmelites at Paris in 1666. He was afterwards known as Brother Lawrence" Apparently he spent most of his time in the monastery kitchen. But he was noted for his wisdom and many would go to him for spiritual guidance. In a book on his Spiritual Maxims he writes: 'that practice which is alike the most holy the most general, and the most needful in the spiritual life is the practise of the presence of God. It is the schooling of the soul to find its joy in His Divine Companionship, holding with Him at all times at every moment humble and living converse, without set rule or stated method, in all time of our temptation and tribulation.' And then he adds: "We should apply ourselves unceasingly to this one end, to so rue all our actions that they be little acts of communion with God..." This kind of Christian meditation then is an act of a constant remembrance of God in every part of our lives. However it is not only in Christianity where we find this 'Practice of the Presence'. This is also clearly expressed in the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita where Krishna says to Arjuna: Apply thyself to action, which is duty, without attachment ... I And then in another section Krishna continues: 'Even though constantly engaged in all action, taking refuge in Me, by My grace he attaineth the Eternal, immutable Abode.'-56. 'Renouncing in the heart and mind all actions unto Me, intent on Me, following after union through soul-vision (Buddhi-yoga), fix thy thoughts ever on Me' - 57.

Meditation on the Lord's Prayer

Another well-know meditation practice, which is common to Christianity, is the use of the Lord's Prayer. Each section is divided up and used as a separate subject of meditation. For example: 'Our Father', first part, 'Who art in Heaven', the second part, 'hallowed be thy Name', third part, and so on. This exercise can be quite lengthy as one goes through the whole prayer section by section. Again this form of meditation can lead to a state of contemplative meditation and each part being complete on its own. I think that we can say that the goal of meditation within all the main Christian denominations is the realisation of the Kingdom of God within, and the actualisation of it in the world. But like all forms of meditation whether it be Christian, Buddhist, Hindu or Islamic - it is often coloured by the particular group, sect, or branch of the religion in question.

BUDDHIST MEDITATION

Like Christianity Buddhism is also divided up into various sects and sub-sects, and with this of course there has also developed a variety of meditation practices. Again we will look at the best known of these and the differences. The two most important divisions however are the Hinayana and the Mahayana groups. We cannot go into this in any real depth at this stage because we are concentrating more on the different meditation practices, except to perhaps point out that the Buddhism of the Hinayana ("The Little Vehicle"), the Southern School developed in the region of Ceylon, Burma and Siam; and the Mahayana ("The Great Vehicle"), the Northern School, developed in China, Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia and Japan. The Hinayana School has been more conservative and has tried to preserve the original teaching of the Buddha, whereas the Mahayana School has been more progressive and has developed a broader more intellectual approach - but still

keeping to the spirit of the original teachings of Buddha.

Mindfulness

The great goal of Buddhism is of course the attainment of Nirvana - enlightenment - where the mind is released from the cycle of birth and death. And one of the basic methods of meditation in achieving this state is that of **mindfulness**. This is one of the main meditation practices that is common to both Schools.

One Buddhist monk says: "The immediate purpose of meditation is to train the mind and use it effectively and efficiently in our daily life. The ultimate aim of meditation is to seek release from the wheel of Samsara - the cycle of birth and death." (K. Sri Dhammananda, Meditation: The Only Way p.33) It is said that the purpose of meditation is therefore threefold: "To dominate the lower separate self, to develop the mind's own higher faculties towards a vision of life's essential unity, and to unite this dual process in one continuous spiritual unfolding". (Concentration and Meditation p. 75). So clearly the development of the mind and the way of mindfulness is important in all forms of Buddhist meditation. But how is this done? It begins with breathing and being aware of each breath. Each breath is then counted, and gradually one learns to control the breathing. And once this has been learnt then gradually one advances to the watching of one's thoughts. A great deal of concentration is needed for this kind of meditation. "The Buddhist should at all times be 'mindful and self-possessed', refraining from mental and emotional attachment to 'the passing show'. This increasingly watchful attitude to circumstances, which he knows to be his own creation, helps him to keep his reaction to it always under control'. (Buddhism - Christmas Humphreys p75.)

And the Buddha himself gave this advice: "Work out your own salvation with diligence". But with this advice there is also the emphasis upon love and compassion towards all beings. This has been said to be the chief motive of Buddhist meditation. But this arises from a realisation of the essential unity of life. "According to the Buddhist point of view in order to love a man must become love." (Happold, Prayer and Meditation, p 114)., (There are various other aspects of Buddhism that I haven't gone into, such as Zen, Tibetan and Taoist - but this outline I hope gives a basic idea of what is involved.)

ISLAMIC MEDITATION

Islamic meditation is based upon the fundamental longing for and union with the Divine (Allah) - and the teaching of what we would call the mystical aspect of Islam - namely that of Sufism. Many of the Sufi aspects of spirituality have sprung from similar aspects found in other religious traditions. There is a self-purification and renunciation of the world, but it is not so much of turning of oneself back on the world but rather a merging of oneself in it. It is a surrender of the 'I', and a vision of God as Absolute Beauty and Love. This is very similar to some of the philosophic mystics.

The main features then that stand out in Islamic meditation is:

1. The love and deep longing for union with God (Allah)
2. The use of certain objects of beauty, and spiritual ideas as focal points for meditation.
3. The use of poetic and symbolic language. The Sufi mystical poems are full of such language, and
4. Let's not forget about the trances and the ecstasy that the whirling Dervishes are said to produce. It's not a method that would appeal to many Westerners.

It is interesting to note that Muhammad is "said to have led a very ascetic (meditative) life in the earliest stage of his ministry; he was reputed to have fasted and prayed much, and to have spent lonely vigils in a cave on Mount Hira". (Brackets my own) (The Way of the Mystics - Margaret Smith p. 125)

Al-Ghazali, an Islamic mystic, in describing the Sufi teachings says: "The aim of their doctrine is to cut off the passions of the soul, and to purge it of its evil tendencies and bad qualities until one arrives thereby at disengaging the heart of all save God, and occupying it only with the remembrance of Him." (Margaret Smith p. 170)

HINDU MEDITATION

In Hindu meditation the main object is union with God. It is based on the true nature of self in the world. According to Hinduism man's true self - his greater Self, is the Atman - the Divine within him. This is the same as the Divine Immanence or the Spirit. Meditation therefore is based on this fundamental belief. However it varies in emphasis according to the different Paths of Yoga - that is Ways (or Margas) in which one can do this. (All this is achieved by a variety of spiritual disciplines: - such as concentration, meditation, contemplation, sacred rites and ritual, breathing (pranayama) exercises, mantras and concentrating on the Chakras or spiritual centres said to be found in various parts of the body. This is a vast subject and we cannot hope to go into this in any real depth at this point). However we will outline those main Yogic Paths or Margas. These are: 1) Dharma Marga, the Path of Duty; 2) Karma Marga, the Path of Action; 3) Bhakti Marga, the Path of Devotion; 4) Jnana Marga, the Path of Knowledge and 5) Raja Marga, the Path of Perfective Union (the Royal Path). And perhaps we should also mention the well-known Hatha Marga - commonly referred to as Hatha Yoga - the Path of Bodily Health. In the practice of meditation many of these paths overlap.

1. **Dharma Marga** is the path of duty or the path of moral virtue - the fulfilling of obligation. It emphasises all that pertains to the justice of life and the living of life in accordance with right ideals and principles. Meditation in these respects follows very closely to the Practice of the Presence of God as outlined in Christian Meditation and the doing of one's duty wherever one is. It is a life lived in accordance with spiritual Ideals.
2. **Karma Marga**, the path of action. Karma means 'action'. This is very much linked with duty; however, it also entails the law of 'cause and effect'. The idea behind this path is that man cannot get away from action. He is subject to a revolving wheel of causation, which is bound to the limiting chain of transiency. But through right meditation, and right intention - that is action without attachment - one can gain liberation by means of action - that is when all action is characterised by 'sacred intentions and become sacred works and sacrifices'. (Shri - Gita p.30) All action in this sense is dedicated to a higher Principle. In the Gita we read: "Wherefore, apply thyself to actions which is duty, without attachment; for he who performeth work with non-attachment, that one reacheth the Supreme" - 19.
3. **Bhakti Marga** is the path of devotion - the surrender of oneself in an act of love and faith. It is the way of the heart - which is also very similar to certain aspects of Christianity and Islam. The Hari Krishna movement follows the path of Bhakti. And one can see how this path would attract many people - but only if the heart side is truly awakened. One is reminded however that 'Love without knowledge is blind, even as knowledge without love is lame.' In this meditation then appeal is made to the opening up of the heart centre or chakra.
4. **Jnana Marga**. Jnana means knowledge, therefore Jnana Marga is the way to union

through Spiritual Knowledge. But what is equally important in the following of this path is the systematic and orderly unfoldment of the faculties of the mind. It is said that the mind must come to know things as they really are, that is to know Reality - the Indwelling Light. The Path of Jnana Marga attempts to distinguish the real and the unreal - not mistaking the rope for the snake - bringing the light of spiritual intellect and vision so that one can see clearly in a world of darkness.

5. **Raja Mariza** is the Royal Path - the fullness and highest attainment of the soul. Raja (King) implies the idea of self-mastery over body, will, and mind. It seeks the highest peak of the spiritual mountain. All pathways eventually merge and unite in this Royal Path - Duty, Action, Devotion, and Knowledge all blend into a mystical unity.
6. And last but not least we have to mention the way of **Hatha Mariza** or **Hatha Yoga** (Yoga means Union) - that is self-mastery through health of body, correct breathing and bodily posture. Having a good sound healthy body is always regarded as the starting point of all spiritual discipline - especially meditation. Most people, if you were to ask them about yoga, will only be aware of this type of yoga i.e. posture - not realising that there are indeed other aspects such as Dharna, Karma, Bhakti, Jnana and Raga.

These then are the essential elements behind the various forms of Hindu meditation - having said that there are many other branches of Hinduism that we haven't touched. We haven't even scratched the surface of meditation as practiced by many of the other religious faiths but perhaps we can get a better idea of what is involved.

GUIDED MEDITATION - BRINGING THE LIGHT DOWN

1. **We begin again by breathing slowly - by paying attention to our breath**
2. **As we breathe in we mentally say 'peace', and as we breathe out we say 'be still'. We breathe in 'peace', we breathe out 'be still'. Don't force your breathing, keep it gentle and easy.**
3. **As your breathing gets deeper, with each breath in we mentally say, 'peace, peace, peace; and as we breathe out we say, 'be still', 'be still', 'be still'.**
4. **We keep breathing this way for a few minutes.**

PAUSE

5. **Now focus your attention just above your head - still breathing slowly and steadily. Visualize a ball of glowing white light just above your head. And with each inhalation breathe the light down over your body. And with each breath out we mentally circulate the light around the body. Continue this for a few more minutes.**

PAUSE

6. **Now go back to your breathing again - keep it steady and simple. We breathe in and say 'peace', we breathe out, 'be still'.**

PAUSE

7. **Now focus on your surroundings again - take a few deep breaths. Think of where you are. Take your time, and start becoming aware of your surroundings.**

Breathing deeply, and when you are ready we gradually focus on where we are and open our eyes. Do this in your own time.

In our next session we will be looking more closely at the differences between prayer, meditation and contemplation, and how they blend into each other. We will also look at some spiritual exercises.
