

The Spiritual Practice of Christian Meditation

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Practice makes perfect, so it is said. Is it however perfection that we need to seek or wholeness? The spiritual life after all is not about the practice of a technique or the attainment of a brilliant tennis serve.

Spiritual practice encompasses the whole human being and is not concerned with practicing for perfection, but is oriented towards becoming whole. And the journey of becoming whole includes the acceptance of our human imperfection. When we think we should be perfect, successful, always on top of things, better than others, then we will never really be 'good enough' in our own eyes. We will fail and judge ourselves as wanting or we will succeed much of the time, but exhaust ourselves with the effort.

Here I would like to briefly explore Christian meditation as a practice that bears the fruit of wholeness rather than straining us towards the idealism of perfection.

Whilst a spiritual practice, such as Christian meditation, requires discipline and commitment, just as learning to play piano or tennis do, it is not a practice that is concerned with perfecting our technique. That's not to say that practicing in order to

improve our technique in any pursuit is a bad thing. On the contrary such practice is obviously a valuable human pursuit. However, spiritual practice, meaning the observation of a regular prayer pattern, is not about perfecting a technique, or becoming perfect. The practice of prayer and meditation is about becoming whole rather than perfect. Meditation is a spiritual practice that enables us towards becoming loving, whole human beings. Through this practice we integrate our perceived shortcomings, our flaws, our wounds. In meditation we recognize that we need not 'polish up' those flaws but rather come to accept them and so be healed of the need to be perfect. We see our imperfections as part of our humanity and in accepting them are transformed. In this way the practice of meditation moves us towards wholeness. How?

To practice meditation is to set aside time each day to settle into a quiet place, sit, close one's eyes, place oneself consciously in the presence of God, relax the body and begin, silently and interiorly, to repeat a prayer word. And then to keep silently saying it for the whole time of our practice which is best at 20-30 minutes. That's it. That is all that the practice of meditation involves. What is the point of such a practice I can hear some ask! And that is a very reasonable question.

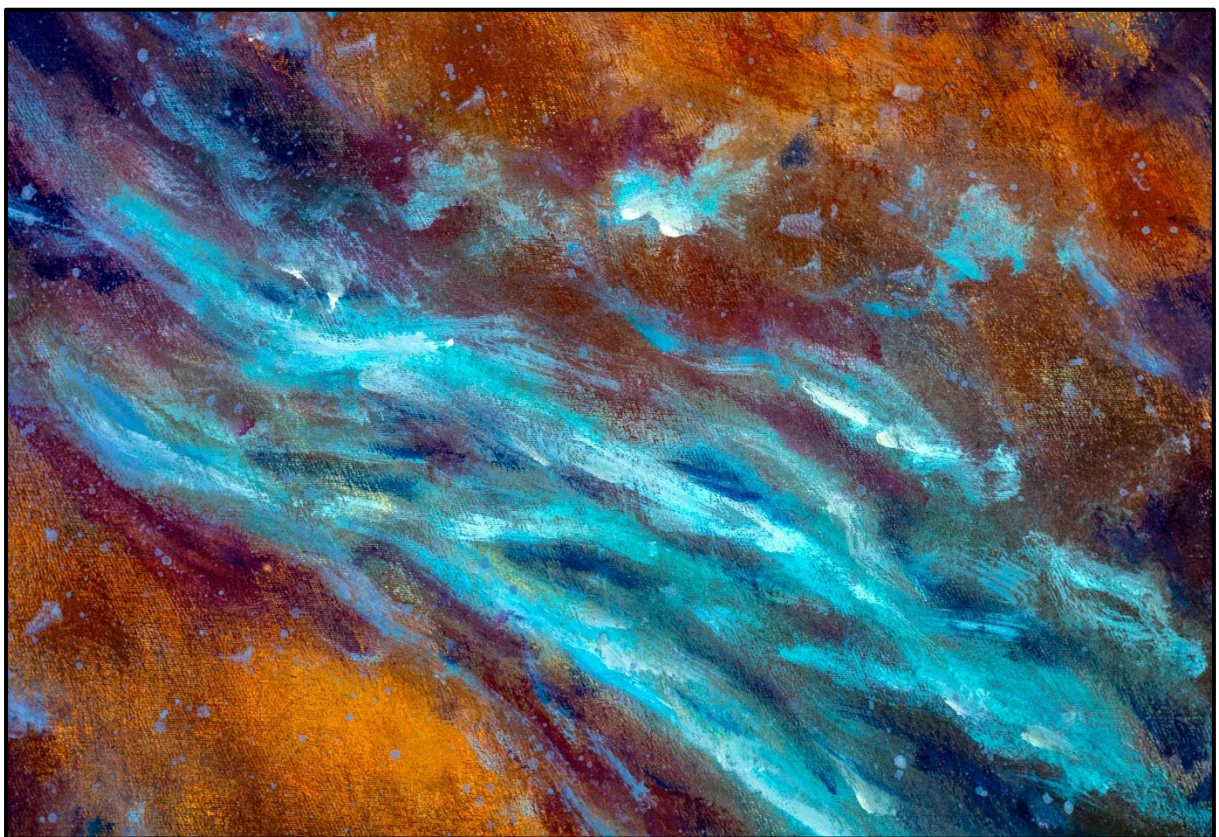
The practice of sitting silently and repeating a prayer word or mantra is an ancient form of Christian prayer going back to the early church. John Cassian, who in the 4th century went into the desert to seek a holy person to teach him to pray, was given this way of spiritual practice, of prayer that carries through to our day. It is a simple yet profoundly challenging way of prayer in that it is concerned with 'training' our mind to pay attention to one thing only so that our noisy mind may become still. And in that

quiet stillness so to perceive the reality of God in our midst. As John Main, the Benedictine monk who recovered this way of prayer for our times said, "The important aim in Christian meditation is to allow God's mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more, not only a reality but the reality which gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do, everything we are". Christian meditation is a way of practicing the presence of God. It is a way of simply being ourselves in that Presence. We ease into our true self rather than strain against ourselves to become someone else.

Meditation is just one practice of prayer in the Christian tradition. There are various way of praying. Meditation is a way of contemplative prayer. It bears the fruit of wholeness when practiced regularly. It does so by giving the busy and noisy self-conscious mind something, just one thing, to focus on. Our minds are like the proverbial tree full of parrots all squawking at once. We jump from one thought to another. We construct our own reality based on entrenched patterns of thinking and the whims of our ego. Meditation however is not what we think. Rather, by giving our attention to the one thing and returning to it whenever we drift or become distracted by a line of thought, or strong emotion, we gradually allow those multitudes of competing thoughts to settle. We might notice those thoughts and our own distracted-ness, but we do not get caught up and carried away by them. We don't judge them or ourselves we simply, gently return to the practice.

An image might help here. Imagine yourself sitting on a riverbank. There is a large flotilla of varying types of boats going by quickly on the rapidly flowing river. You are interested in all of them and your attention goes from one boat to another as

you watch some go down the river before trying to get sight of others coming along. After a time, you feel dizzy trying to keep up with them all! Now, imagine simply keeping your attention on one place in the river. You notice the boats going past but you don't get carried away with them. You keep your gaze constant, looking into the river, noticing that there is movement yet remaining attentive to the one place within that movement. So, it is when we practice the presence of God.



Meditation is simple yet challenging. Our thoughts tend to follow each other down the river. We get distracted and swept away. This may happen many times during each meditation. But when we become distracted, we need not judge ourselves. As Brother Lawrence said in his letters, when describing his practice of the presence of God, "I found no small trouble in this exercise, and yet continued it, notwithstanding all the difficulties that I

encountered, without troubling or disquieting myself when my mind had wandered involuntarily.”¹

Meditation is a journey towards wholeness that cures us of the driving need to be perfect. This happens, I think, because as we practice simply saying our word for the periods of meditation each day, we see our distractedness, our drama's, our anger, resentments, envy and so on for what they are without being carried away by them. We just notice and let them go as we return to the repetition of our prayer word. We don't reject or suppress our human 'failings', so called, but accept them and refrain from judging. Certainly we recognize the need for the healing or transforming of our 'baggage' because as the Franciscan teacher Richard Rohr says, 'what we don't transform we transmit.' However this process is a way of gentle healing that, over time, gradually and sometimes imperceptibly, brings us to greater wholeness. The need to become bigger, better, more than, is transformed into the quiet delight of simply being.

So, our distractedness and our various imperfections may well become more obvious to us as we continue our practice. However, this way of prayer will enable us to see them with compassion, to accept them and so to integrate them. In this way we become whole rather than perfect! As John Main says when answering the question as to why meditation is such a powerful practice, "because it gives us the space that our spirit needs to breath. It gives each of us the space to be ourselves. When you are meditating you don't need to apologise for yourself and you don't need to justify yourself. All you need to do is to BE yourself."

¹ Brother Lawrence, 'The Practice of the Presence of God', H.R Allenson, Ltd. London 1906 p 28

We need not strain towards perfection. We can simply be ourselves. The spiritual practice of meditation will not make us perfect. But it may help us become whole.