Christian and Non-Christian Meditation

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Laurence Freeman, from *Relationship with Jesus*, Meditatio Talks series 2015 C

There is a difference between Christian and non-Christian meditation. The difference is the faith that we bring to our meditation as Christians, which is our faith experience of Jesus as Teacher, Saviour, and Lord – as Jesus living, through the Resurrection, in us. So we would see our meditation as prayer, as a very pure and simple kind of prayer. As with all prayer from a Christian point of view, it leads us into the prayer of Christ, into union with the humanity of Christ, and then joining him in his journey to the Father in the Spirit. So there is this Trinitarian Father-Son-Spirit dynamic that underlies our understanding and experience of meditation as Christians.

There are also a lot of similarities and parallels between meditation in different traditions. Basically, all meditation is about stillness, bringing the mind to stillness, going beyond mental activity (that means talking and thinking and imagining), moving beyond that to a deeper level of silence and pure attention. The Buddhist would describe that one way; we would describe it another. I would describe this pure attention as worship. It is worship 'in spirit and in truth' (Jn 4:23) as Jesus said. In one sense the experience of meditation is the same. If you or I sit down to meditate with Buddhists or any other religion, we will share with them the same challenge – the difficulty of sitting still, the difficulty of dealing with distractions, and falling asleep, and the difficulty of meditating every day. The challenge is the same, humanly speaking.

The fruits of meditation will be the same experientially. St Paul speaks about the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22) And there is a description in the Dhammapada, a Buddhist text, which is almost exactly the same as that. The Dalai Lama said that the purpose of any religion is to make nice people, and the test of any religion is: Does it produce good people, people of good heart, people who are forgiving, compassionate, tolerant, wise, kind and so on? So, experientially, meditation is the same.

Our understanding of that experience is going to be different. The way we describe it, the meaning that we give to it will be different. The basic difference for the Christian meditator is the centrality of the relationship with Christ; and the way we come into the meditation practice will be different. The most natural and best way really to come into your meditation practice is through a spiritual tradition. I don't think there is any realistic or desirable point where we would say all religions will become one, because God seems to be working through all these religions in different ways. So it isn't that

we are trying to create one universal religion, because there is a meaning in each of these. And certainly, to be pragmatic, there is not going to be one universal religion, by the time many of us die anyway. So we have to accept and rejoice in the diversity of religious expression. As Christians, that forces us to go much deeper into the meaning of our Christian faith. We are not just Christians because our parents were Christians or because we have a certain cultural identity, but because of a unique sense of being called.

The Divine Image, by William Blake,

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,All pray in their distress:And to these virtues of delightReturn their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,Is God, our father dear:And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,Is Man, his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart,Pity, a human face:And Love, the human form divine,And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man of every clime,That prays in his distress,Prays to the human form divine,Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,In heathen, Turk, or Jew.Where Mercy, Love, & Pity dwell,There God is dwelling too.