



Christian and Eastern Spirituality

The Fundamental Differences

Jeffrey D. Breshears

Today, many Christians are dissatisfied with mere religion and are searching for a deeper spirituality, a direct and intimate relationship with God. Unfortunately, many shy away from the discipline of meditation because they associate it with Eastern religions or New Age metaphysics.

In fact, meditation (or contemplative prayer) has always been an integral part of Christian spiritual formation. It is simply the listening phase of the internal dialogue with God. Through meditation we learn to relax our bodies and clear our minds of distractions in order to hear the subtle and quiet voice of God within us: “Be still and know that I am God” [Psalm 46:10].

Christian meditation differs from Eastern meditation in four basic ways: (1) Theology, or our fundamental beliefs about God; (2) Psychology, or understanding of human nature; (3) The Christocentric focus; and (4) The ultimate goal. The following briefly summarizes these fundamental differences.

Theology

Most forms of Eastern spirituality are based on a monistic/pantheistic worldview – the idea that all of nature (including humanity) is part of a unified divine essence, and that the goal of human existence is reabsorption into God. Christian spirituality recognizes the distinction between the Creator and the created and the individuality of each person made in the image of God (the *imago dei*). Christians deny that all is one or that *atman* (the human soul) is *Brahman* (God). We are not God, nor can we become one with God ontologically through the practice of certain esoteric disciplines.

Christian spirituality does teach the reality of the divine presence (the *sensus divinitatus*) within the soul of every believer in Christ, but union with God is a mystical reality wherein we become progressively united with him in an intimate love relationship – not in the

ontological sense that we lose our personhood or our individual essence.

Psychology

Eastern psychology holds that we are innately divine. Our true Self, our real identity, is not our surface-level ego but our divine soul. However, most people are conscious only of the false (or egoistic) self, the superficial level of reality that is manifest in personality and experienced through the five senses. Through meditation and other ascetic practices we can learn to by-pass the superficial self and access our true nature which is divine. Therefore, meditation is an essential path to “salvation” and the transcendence of our ego limitations.

The Christian understanding of human psychology recognizes our egoistic self as our true nature, but declares that through divine grace our souls can be spiritually transformed

through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

Christians believe that in our natural state we are separated from God by sin, or egoism. Therefore, although humans possess an eternal soul, we are not innately divine beings, nor can we attain true spiritual enlightenment through our own efforts – whether by self-denial, meditation, good works, or any other means. Only through divine grace – the gift of salvation – can we be reconciled with God and experience oneness with him.

To Christians, spiritual enlightenment comes initially from without, not within. In our natural state, our unregenerate soul is powerless to transcend the egoistic limitations of our humanity. This is why we must open up our hearts and invite the Spirit of Christ to come and live within us – what Jesus likened to a New Birth: “I tell you the truth, no one can experience the kingdom of God unless he is born again.... Flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to spirit” [John 3:3, 6].

For Christians, meditation is a valuable and necessary aspect of discipleship and the sanctification process, but it has nothing to do *per se* with justification – the process by which we are redeemed of our sins, reconciled to God, and spiritually reborn.

A Christocentric Focus

Christians do not deny that God works through other religions and honors all who diligently seek him, but we affirm that Jesus Christ is God’s perfect and ultimate revelation to humanity. He is the universal Savior, the personification of divine Truth, through whom God offers spiritual reconciliation and eternal life.

As Jesus said, “I AM the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” [John 14:6]. The apostle Peter reiterated this basic Christian doctrine when he wrote, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven... whereby we must be saved” [Acts 4:12].

The Ultimate Goal

For the most part, Eastern spirituality focuses on increasing one’s self-awareness. The belief is that as we develop greater self-realization, we also acquire a greater sense of our own innate divinity.

The primary purpose of Christian spirituality is to deepen our love – for God, ourselves, and others. When asked, “What is the greatest commandment,” Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and... love others as yourself” [Matt. 22:37-38].* Throughout the ages, Christian mystics have often spoken of “the inner fire” of love that accompanies spiritual transformation. Bede Griffiths notes that “Perhaps the fundamental difference [between Christian and Eastern spirituality] is this: that the heart of Christian mysticism is a mystery of love, whereas in Eastern spirituality it is primarily the transformation of consciousness.”

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Jefrey Breshears, Ph.D., is a Christian historian, apologist, and the founder and president of The Areopagus, a Christian education ministry and study center in the Atlanta area.

JBreshears@TheAreopagus.org

* Note: The Christian emphasis on love does not preclude self-awareness, but it acknowledges that as we focus on God, our Source of life and truth, we gain clearer insight into ourselves and our true nature.