



Christian and Eastern Spirituality

The Fundamental Differences

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Today, many Christians are dissatisfied with mere religion and are searching for a deeper and more intimate spiritual 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 one's 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 fundamental ways: (1) Theologically, or our fundamental beliefs about God; (2) psychologically, or our understanding of human nature; (3) a Christocentric focus; and (4) the ultimate goal. The following briefly summarizes these basic differences.

Theology

Most forms of Eastern spirituality are based on a monistic and pantheistic worldview – the concept that all of nature (including humanity) is part of a unified divine essence, and that the goal of human existence is realization of this oneness and 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" and that "*Atman* (the human soul) is *Brahman*" (the Universal Soul, or God). We are not God, nor can we become one with God ontologically through self-awareness and the practice of certain esoteric disciplines.

Christian spirituality does teach the reality of the divine presence within the soul of every believer in Christ, but union with God is a mystical reality wherein we become progressively united with God in an intimate love relationship – not in the ontological sense that we lose our personhood and 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 (egoistic) self, the superficial level of reality that is manifest in one's 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 *moksha* ("salvation" or "liberation") and the transcendence of our ego limitations.

The Christian understanding of human psychology recognizes our egoistic self as our true nature, but declares that by divine grace our soul can be spiritually transformed through the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Christians believe that in our natural state we are separated from God by sin, which is manifest in self-centeredness. Therefore, although we possess an eternal soul, we are not innately divine beings, nor can we attain true spiritual enlightenment through our own

efforts – whether by good works, self-denial, meditation, or any other means. Only by divine grace – the gift of spiritual redemption and regeneration – can we be reconciled to 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 limitations of our humanity. This is why, by faith, we must open up our hearts and invite the Spirit of Christ to indwell 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 aspect of discipleship and the sanctification process, but in-and-of itself it not a pathway to justification – the process by which we are forgiven of our sins, reconciled to God, and spiritually reborn.

A Christocentric Focus

Christians do not deny that God can work through other religions and that he 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 foundational 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.*

Conversely, the primary purpose of Christian spirituality is to commune with God in the inner sanctuary of our heart via the internal presence of the Holy Spirit. In the process we deepen our love for God, for ourselves, and for 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].** Integral to love of God is obedience to Christ’s teachings as he taught his disciples: “If you love me, you will obey what I command” [John 14:15]. As Richard Foster notes in his modern contemplative classic, *Celebration of Discipline*, “It is this continual focus upon obedience and faithfulness that most clearly distinguishes Christian meditation from its Eastern counterpart.”

Throughout the ages contemplative Christians 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.” So whereas Eastern meditation seeks to empty the mind, Christian meditation clears our mind and opens it to receive the love and truth of our divine Creator, Sustainer, and Savior.

This is not a minor variance or simply a difference in emphasis. It is a fundamentally different understanding of reality. Furthermore, it is all the difference between spiritual light and darkness. Ultimately, it is the difference between spiritual life and spiritual death.



* This is true for much of Eastern spirituality but not all. For example, in Buddhism and some forms of Hinduism the goal is to empty one’s mind of all rational thought in order to “transcend” reason and normal sense perceptions altogether.

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

