

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES IN MEDITATIVE TECHNOLOGIES

By THOMAS KEATING

AS A MEMBER OF A COMMUNITY of Cistercian monks since 1944, I have had the rare opportunity to absorb the contemplative tradition of Christianity within the context of monastic practice and experience. Most Christians remain almost totally unaware of the spiritual potential contained in their own tradition. Some have turned to the East in the hope of finding a teaching and practice that would satisfy their hunger for spiritual experience. My own exposure to eastern methods of meditation began in the 1960s. They have expanded my understanding of the mystery of Christ and the message of the gospel. Moreover, they mirror aspects of Christian mysticism overlooked in recent centuries. The contemplative dimension of life is present in all the great religions; it is the common heart of the human family.

'In our time,' Pope John XXIII said on his deathbed, 'we should emphasize what unites rather than what divides.' The Second Vatican Council explicitly recognized the values of the non-Christian religions and the work of the Spirit in them revealing various aspects of the mystery of God.

The aspects of Eastern spirituality which could be of special value to Christianity today are: the experience of non-duality, the illusory nature of our subjective world-view, the importance of contemplation as the source of action, and the practice of techniques which help to integrate the mind and body.

In reference to the last point Cardinal Ratzinger in his *Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of Christian meditation*,¹ manifests significant concerns. While the *Letter* encourages the practice of contemplative prayer, especially the cataphatic approach of St Ignatius Loyola, it devotes most of its attention to contemporary Christian meditative practices that incorporate the methods of Eastern meditation such as Zen and the use of Hindu mantras. The *Letter* does not forbid their use, and after making some cautionary remarks, is careful to make the following clarifications:

That does not mean that the genuine practices of meditation which come from the Christian East and from the great non-Christian religions . . . cannot constitute a suitable means of helping the person who prays to come before God with an interior peace even in the midst of external pressures. (# 28)

If I understand the *Letter* correctly its primary concern is the integration of such techniques into the Christian faith. Catholics will be in a better position to accomplish this task if they first rediscover the forgotten richness of contemplative Christianity in both its cataphatic and apophatic manifestations. The transcendent as well as the immanent dimension of the Trinity must be recovered from ancient and medieval Christian sources. In the Middle Ages, *lectio divina* as a meditative practice was the way in which these two streams of contemplation were harmoniously integrated, especially by the Cistercian Fathers and the extraordinary women of their tradition.²

In our day many Christians have turned to the Eastern religions because the experience of the transcendent is lacking in the various denominations in which they were raised. Many have also turned away from their churches because an overly strict interpretation of their moral teachings was foisted upon them at an age when they were too young to understand them or to harmonize them with a barely established trust and love of God. As a result, words associated with the Christian religion, like 'sin' and 'salvation', have overtones that they cannot endure. From among these two categories of alienated Christians, significant numbers have been instructed in Eastern meditative techniques that have done them a lot of good. The technique succeeded in interesting them initially because it was presented in terminology against which they were not in reaction. At some point, however, as a result of the more disciplined life which these techniques inspired, they were sufficiently open to spiritual values to feel an attraction to return to the faith of their childhood. If somebody could show them how the spiritual experience they found in their Eastern method of meditation corresponds to experiences that are also normal for devoted Christians, this would give them the needed encouragement to consider continuing their spiritual journey in the framework of their early religious training.

A brief report of an actual experience of an ongoing interreligious dialogue might be helpful at this point. In 1984 I invited a group of spiritual teachers from a variety of the world religions – Buddhist, Tibetan Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Islamic, Native American, Russian Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic – to gather at St Benedict's Monastery, Snowmass, Colorado, to meditate together in silence and to

share our personal spiritual journeys, especially those elements in our respective traditions that have proved most helpful to us along the way. We kept no record and published no papers. As our trust and friendship grew, we felt moved to investigate various points that we seemed to agree on. The original points of agreement were worked over during the course of subsequent meetings as we continued to meet for a week or so each year. Our most recent list consisted of the following eight points:

1. The world religions bear witness to the experience of Ultimate Reality to which they give various names: Brahman, Allah, Absolute, God, Great Spirit.
2. Ultimate Reality cannot be limited by any name or concept.
3. Ultimate Reality is the ground of infinite potentiality and actualization.
4. Faith is opening, accepting and responding to Ultimate Reality. Faith in this sense precedes every belief system.
5. The potential for human wholeness – or in other frames of reference, enlightenment, salvation, transformation, blessedness, nirvana – is present in every human person.
6. Ultimate Reality may be experienced not only through religious practices but also through nature, art, human relationships, and service of others.
7. As long as the human condition is experienced as separate from Ultimate Reality, it is subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering.
8. Disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life; yet spritual attainment is not the result of one's own efforts, but the result of the experience of oneness with Ultimate Reality.

At the annual Conference in May, 1986, we came up with additional points of agreement of a practical nature:

- I. Some examples of disciplined practice, common to us all:
 1. Practice of compassion
 2. Service to others
 3. Practising moral precepts and virtues
 4. Training in meditation techniques and regularity of practice
 5. Attention to diet and exercise
 6. Fasting and abstinence
 7. The use of music and chanting and sacred symbols
 8. Practice in awareness (recollection, mindfulness) and living in the present moment
 9. Pilgrimage
 10. Study of scriptural texts and scriptures

And in some traditions:

11. Relationship with a qualified teacher
12. Repetition of sacred words (mantra, japa)
13. Observing periods of silence and solitude
14. Movement and dance
15. Formative community

II. It is essential to extend our formal practice of awareness into all the aspects of our life.

III. Humility, gratitude, and a sense of humour are indispensable in the spiritual life.

IV. Prayer is communion with Ultimate Reality, whether it is regarded as personal, impersonal, or beyond them both.

We were surprised and delighted to find so many points of similarity and convergence in our respective paths. Like most people of our time, we originally expected that we would find practically nothing in common. In the years that followed we spontaneously and somewhat hesitatingly began to take a closer look at certain points of disagreement. These became our main focus of attention. We found that discussing our points of disagreement increased the bonding of the group even more than discovering our points of agreement. We became more honest in stating frankly what we believed and why, without at the same time making any effort to convince others of our own position. We simply presented our understanding as a gift to the group. It is possible, as we continue to meet, that we may some day move beyond this stage of dialogue and discover an ultimate convergence that transcends our present insights. In any case, the fundamental differences that we discovered in our respective spiritual paths will be the focus of the rest of this paper.

When a Christian tries to extract one of the physical or psychological disciplines from an Eastern spiritual tradition and introduces it into his own religious practice, the question might be asked: 'Can one graft a branch from one kind of fruit tree onto the trunk of another and expect to produce the same fruit as the old trunk?' Biologically, the branch that is grafted onto the old trunk will continue to bear the fruit of its tree of origin. What effect a graft from an Eastern spiritual tradition may have on one's growth as a Christian seems to be the primary question raised by the *Letter* of Cardinal Ratzinger.

Much work has to be done to make the similarities between the spiritualities of the East and Christianity better known to the average Christian. This will require not only an intensive study of the spiritual disciplines of other religious cultures but above all a firm grasp of our

own. A great deal of experience in dialogue is presupposed in order to understand correctly the terms of another religious tradition, as well as the long-range effects of a bodily discipline from one tradition on the psyche of a person coming from another. In the case of the participants in the Snowmass Ecumenical Conference, all were long-term practitioners of their respective spiritual paths to the point of embodying their respective traditions in a remarkable way. Listening to the great benefits that particular practices had brought to them opened up, for me at least, the deeper meaning of the spiritual terminology (often poorly translated) of the world religions. Academic lectures in which spiritual teachers speak to an audience but not to each other, have only a limited value in grasping the profound riches of the spiritual traditions of the world religions. To be fully understood, they need to be explained by persons who have benefited the most from them and who actually embody them in their lives. Mutual respect and friendship is the door to this level of understanding.

In the Eastern traditions divine revelation is based on the observation of how the spiritual journey unfolds experientially. The essence of the enlightenment process is referred to by the term *lineage*. Lineage is the original state of enlightenment of the founder or founders of the religion, or one of its outstanding reformers. The lineage is the passing on of the enlightenment experience by way of transmission from master to disciple. It has a broad variety of expressions in the East. In Tibetan Buddhism the tulku is believed to be the reincarnation of one of the original disciples of *Gautama Buddha*. In Zen Buddhism the master authenticates the fully enlightened experience of the disciple that then entitles him or her to teach in the name of the tradition. The actual transmission of enlightenment may be more or less advanced, depending on the enlightened state of the teacher and the readiness of the disciple.

Lineage then, is the handing on of the fullness of enlightened consciousness after the disciple has passed through the earlier stages of enlightenment. Is there anything similar in Christianity? In the recent Charismatic movement there has sprung up a phenomenon called 'resting in the Spirit', which is a communication of true spiritual experience, though not of a permanent character. It seems to be an initial mystical experience. It suspends the sense faculties just enough so that the recipient sinks to the ground and stays there more or less lengthily depending on how deep the experience is. However strong it may be, it is always temporary and subject to the flaws of beginners. Mystical experiences that come before one is prepared for them by

preliminary disciplines tend to awaken the emotional programmes for happiness of the false self, which then transfers its instinctual desires to the spiritual plane. It is easy to get attached to the pleasant feelings of 'resting in the Spirit' or other forms of divine consolation. A few devotees may even become what might be called 'slaying-in-the-Spirit bums', going from healer to healer in order to enjoy more of the same delightful experience. This is not the purpose of divine consolation. Most mystical experiences that are dropped into one's life without preparation are really 'come-ons' or guilt-edged invitations from God to institute a serious practice of prayer and to open oneself to the contemplative dimension of the gospel.

The enlightened transmission of master to disciple in the Eastern traditions is not passed on by a spiritual master in the Christian scheme of things, but through the sacraments, especially the eucharist in which Christ transmits his consciousness of the Father, in so far as we are prepared to receive it by the practice of virtue and contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer, in the Christian scheme of things, is our 'lineage'. It is a participation in Christ's experience of the Father, Ultimate Reality as Abba, that is, the God of infinite concern and love for every living being. The Christian lineage is the Trinitarian life unfolding within our consciousness: union with the Father through Christ, in the Spirit.

Whether or not the ultimate experience of God in this life is the same in the world religions, the spiritual paths to the experience of unity are clearly not the same. Thus the spiritual energy we invoke by way of prayer or practice is important. If we mingle the energies of two distinct traditions, that is, if we take an Eastern discipline and lift it bodily out of its conceptual and ritual background and insert it into the practice of our Christian faith, this may prove valuable in the beginning in so far as it fulfils a need we had that was missing, namely, a method of spirituality. But as we deepen our grasp of the technique, we normally require a conceptual background to understand what is happening: e.g. one's relationship with one's master, the growth of interior freedom, and in some cases the unfolding of spiritual powers in the form of specific psychic gifts.

In reference to the latter, unless the process of interior purification has laid to rest the emotional programmes for happiness, psychic powers can become the ultimate satisfaction of one's instinctual need for power, approval and security. Hence, the need to purify the unconscious is an essential teaching that belongs to all the world religions across the board. Everybody, as every religion and spiritual tradition acknowl-

edges, is afflicted with the human condition, principally the instinctual needs of early childhood that become more demanding when denied by circumstances of that tender age.

Let us suppose that through a particular Eastern practice we begin to experience a certain spiritual attainment. Unless we are thoroughly purified and the dynamics of our unconscious motivation fully unmasked, the false self can allow this attainment to go to our heads. My impression is that the awareness of this danger is not as strong in the East as in Christianity where, because of beginning the spiritual quest in a dualistic place, we recognize, at least in theory, that everything we have is God's free gift. This latter principle is very strong among the Christian mystics. They realized that everything they enjoyed, even their desire for God, was sheer gift.

The deeper one moves into any practice, the more one normally needs whatever produced and sustains it by way of ritual, theology, metaphysics and cultural attitudes. If we advance in the use of a particular Eastern practice, there is eventually and inevitably the need for an ever broader conceptual background. A clash of belief systems may arise and one may no longer be able to put the two spiritual paths together. One may have greatly benefited from a discipline from the East, but at a certain juncture, one may have to let it go if one wants to remain within the Christian perspective. We must recognize however, that there are persons who claim to live equally well in two religious world-views at the same time. They regard themselves as both Christians and Buddhists, or as Christians and Advaitic Hindus. *Abhishikta-nanda*,³ who struggled for many years to resolve his experience of *Advaita* with his belief in the Trinity, is a classical example.

In our tradition Christ is the Master, the enlightened One, and the Teacher. The reason is that he has risen from the dead and now dwells in the midst of each Christian community as its living teacher. We make him present when we come together in his name. We celebrate his life, death and resurrection and our participation in them in the liturgy, especially in the eucharist. It is not enlightenment in general but *his* enlightenment – *his* consciousness of the Father – that is transmitted through the eucharist. The eucharist inserts us, every time we receive it, into the Trinitarian relationships, opening us to the inflowing of divine love. Of course the gift of grace carries with it the responsibility of sharing it with other people in appropriate ways. While we are not empowered to give the transmission, we must help in whatever ways we can to prepare people to receive it. The most important way is to embody the values of the gospel in our daily lives.

The sense of union with God, is of course, a highly personal experience, but it is not dualistic in the usual sense of the term, where one envisages oneself as 'here' and God as 'out there'. Rather, Christian transmission is an interpenetration of spirits. In the transforming union, according to the witness of the Christian mystics, this becomes a relationship that involves total self-surrender to God and forgetfulness of self, even of the new self that emerges out of the ruins of the false self in the night of spirit.

The specific spiritual energy of Christianity is the interaction that arises between God and the soul in love. There is no cause and effect relationship between personal effort and attainment, no technique which, if carried out correctly, leads to the desired goal. This is a different situation from the relationship of a master to a disciple who submits to a particular discipline in order to develop the level of consciousness that the master has attained. There is no doubt that there may be a transmission of enlightened consciousness. The point is, what is the nature of the transmission and how it is perceived?

In the Christian scheme of things there is such a strong emphasis on dependence upon God for everything that the importance of personal effort to dispose oneself for the grace of contemplation is sometimes underestimated. In the East, on the other hand, there is such a strong emphasis on method that the recognition that enlightenment is not the result of one's own efforts seems to be almost overlooked.

The attainment of enlightenment in the Eastern traditions may indeed be the result of grace, but it is also possible that the false self may interfere with the action of grace. In actual fact, if the false self has not been thoroughly dismantled in the night of spirit (or its equivalent in the form of tragedy, physical handicap, or prolonged illness heroically endured), the false self is likely to co-opt the enlightenment experience, and the recipient may succumb to spiritual pride.

The authority by which Jesus, while on earth, transmitted his enlightenment – indeed his unity with the Father – was always exercised in the spirit of humble service. As soon as one senses domination by any master, it is time to grab one's hat and coat and depart as fast as possible. If a particular master gives in to self-exaltation (which can happen in partial states of enlightenment), then the master begins to dominate his disciples and can seriously damage the very people who originally experienced the greatest benefit from his teaching. When the adulation of disciples goes to the head of any teacher, including Christian teachers, he may exploit students in one way or another, at times in ways that by every moral standard are a violation of a sacred trust. This is especially

the case in cult leaders of whatever kind. I know of no safety valve to forestall such tragedies except the night of the spirit, in which one is convinced by intimate experience that one is capable of every evil. One emerges convinced that whatever gifts one has are the sheer gift of God and must be exercised in complete submission to the divine inspiration.

St John of the Cross calls contemplation 'the science of love'. There is an erotic element in divine love. Not in the sense of genital energy as such, but in the broader sense of desire. Of course, desire has a selfish element, but the selfishness is gradually purified by the science of love which vigorously opposes those aspects of our desires, whether conscious or unconscious, that are selfish. That is why God takes off every now and then and tests our spirits in different ways, chiefly by apparent absences, but also through external trials, so that we can see what he sees as obstacles to total self-surrender and divine union. We can then manifest divine love through acts that are done under the influence of the Spirit rather than our own self-centred, even if secret, motivation.

The world religions have a special obligation to contribute to the cause of world peace. In the past their confessional differences have led to violence, injustice and persecution. Each major religious tradition has developed teachings and practices designed to foster the full spiritual development of the human person. These common elements cry out to be recognized as God's gift to the whole human family and made available to the world community as powerful means of promoting understanding and peace among nations and races. More and more, the world religions will have to give the witness of mutual respect and understanding to the world community if political, ethnic and nationalistic divisions are to be overcome or at least held in check. While emphasizing our common values and uniting in social action, however, the world religions must at the same time accept their diversity and cherish the integrity of each other's traditional spiritual paths. Genuine dialogue on this level is the catalyst that would facilitate harmony and co-operation on all the other levels of ever-increasing global interaction.

NOTES

¹ *Origins* 19 (30) (28 December 1989), pp 492-8.

² E.g. Beatrice of Nazareth, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Brabant.

³ James Stuart, *Swami Abhishiktananda: his life told through his letters* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1989).

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

1. Apophatic (darksome) – resting in God beyond concepts and particular acts, except to maintain a general loving attentiveness to the divine presence; the exercise of pure faith.

2. Cataphatic (lightsome) – the affective response to symbols, reflection, and the use of reason, imagination and memory, in order to assimilate the truths of faith.
3. Contemplative (or mystical) prayer – the development of one’s relationship with Christ to the point of communing beyond words, thoughts, feelings, and the multiplication of particular acts.
4. Divine union – a term describing a single experience of the union of all the faculties in God.
5. False self – the self developed to cope with the emotional trauma of early childhood, which seeks happiness by satisfying or repressing the instinctual needs of survival/security, affection/esteem, and power/control, and which bases its self-worth on cultural or group identification.
6. Human condition – an alternative term for describing the consequences of original sin: concupiscence, illusion and weakness of will.
7. *Lectio divina* – reading or more exactly, listening to the book we believe to be divinely inspired; the most ancient method of developing the friendship of Christ, using scripture as topics of conversation with Christ.
8. Method of contemplative prayer – any prayer practice that is deliberately designed to free the mind of excessive dependence on thinking to go to God.
9. Purification – an essential part of the process of contemplation through which the dark side of one’s personality, one’s mixed motivation, and the emotional pain of a lifetime stored in the unconscious are gradually evacuated; the necessary preparation for transforming union, called by St John of the Cross ‘The Dark Nights’.
10. Transformation (transforming union) – the stable sharing by all dimensions of the human person in God’s life and loving presence, rather than a particular experience or set of experiences.