

Practicing Meditation:

A Christian-Buddhist / Buddhist-Christian Approach

Frances Tong

Frances has practiced yoga and meditation for over 20 years. She has received teachings and transmissions from meditation masters across disciplines including Mingyur Rinpoche, Tsoknyi Rinpoche and also Thich Naht Hahn. She is a Certified Dharma Yoga and Universal Yoga teacher. All is One and One is All. Born and raised in a Catholic family, Frances has studied Buddhism as a spiritual practice for years and she seeks to help her students deepen their meditation practice regardless of their religious beliefs.

"Silence"

I started learning meditation when I was in my late teens and continue practicing since then for over 25 years. Because of my Christian upbringing, I have always been interested in integrating my understanding of Buddhism and Christianity which is the main focus of this article.

I am a born Catholic and was baptized when I was only a few months old. My parents are fervent Catholic and they brought me to mass every Sunday. While I was accustomed to church practices and Gospel readings, there was a yearning to go beyond dogmas and traditional teachings and seek for a deeper connection with God.

Soon after I left home and went to the United States for college, I started following a few Jesuit Catholic priests who taught Zen-Christian meditation. I was fascinated with the concept of applying Zen in a Christian setting and was happy to learn about that "God" goes beyond the church. All is One and One is All. God is in all things and in all things we can see God. There is no one correct spiritual path, but instead there are many paths and they all lead to the same direction. I was fortunate to learn about Buddhism and through its teachings and meditation practice, I have gained a deeper understanding of Jesus's teachings.

Many people, including myself, have used meditation as a stress reduction tool. As I suffered from anxiety disorder at a very young age, the mental torture led me to seek for all kinds of self-healing methods including meditation. Often times people learn meditation with the "agenda" of wanting to get something out of meditation, be it peace, calmness, stability, bliss etc. Or they wanted to remove something through meditation. It could be fear, anxiety, sadness, anger etc.

After over 10 years of using meditation as an antidote or a "cure", I realize that meditation can only offer short-term relief if the practice is based on such intention alone. In fact, not only will the issue linger, meditation can even prolong and reinforce the detriment.

When we try to get rid of thoughts or emotions through meditation, we are fixating our mind onto the act of removing them. In doing so, we are in fact holding onto the thoughts or emotions instead of letting them come and go. The fixation can solidify the thoughts and even multiply them.

So what is meditation?

The essence of meditation is awareness. Awareness

is the essence of our existence and it is within our reach all the time. In simple words, awareness can be understood as “knowing”. The practice of meditation starts with “knowing” relatively “explicit objects” such as the breath, thoughts and emotions. Being aware is like watching TV in which the TV programs are our internal displays of perceptions, feelings and physical experiences. The practice of awareness or mindfulness serves as the preliminary step to the advanced practice of recognizing who we really are - our true nature.

Many people feel that when we meditate, there should be “no thoughts” and we should try to “not think”. We set the goal of reaching the “gap” or a certain level of blank consciousness when the mind is crystal clear and empty of thoughts. We feel that we should be grounded or at peace during meditation and hence attempt to cut off all thoughts and feelings of discomfort when meditating. We want to control our mind and arrive to the “blank state”. This can be compared to us using meditation as a blanket covering ourselves from all external phenomena. We shut out ourselves from the world and use meditation as a “block” or “cover”. We struggle with the goal of having a blank mind and criticize our practice when we “think” or when “feelings” arise during meditation.

My teacher, Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche in his book “In Love With the World”, commented,

“There was no need to get rid of thoughts. Do not make thoughts your enemy. The problem is not thoughts, it is following them. When you feel yourself moving toward an image, an idea, a past event, a plan for later or tomorrow, that is what you have to watch out for, not the thoughts themselves. When you get lost in thought, or hooked by the story, then bring the mind to the breath as a way of coming back to yourself. If you forget awareness, then you are no longer meditating. The breath is like an anchor that helps you to stay connected to awareness. As long as you do not forget awareness, then you can allow thoughts to come in and out like a swinging door. No problem.”

I have always wanted to find God in Buddhism and at the same time, integrate Buddhism with my Christian upbringing. The salvation that Jesus proclaims to all

human kind, irrespective of who you are and what you do, is essentially the teaching on unconditional love. In the Gospel, Jesus gave up his life and was crucified on the cross out of love and mercy for all humans. There was no discrimination to who this salvation is given. The disciple who betrayed Jesus received the same salvation as the one who followed him to the very end. This love is already given to all for free, without any requirement nor effort needed. In Buddhist teachings, there is the notion of non-duality and going beyond subject and object, good and bad and life and death. It is about a state where one goes beyond the relative level and where concepts become irrelevant. The unconditional love that Jesus’s salvation exemplified is in a way the actualization of non-duality in which love is given to all irrespectively. The love is unconditional, boundless and unlimited by time and space.

While the teachings on love rests in the heart of Jesus’s teachings, the teaching on compassion resides in Buddhist traditions. In the Gospel, Jesus taught that the greatest commandment is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and



“Seeing”



with all your mind". And the second commandment is to "love your neighbor as yourself". By giving his life to all, Jesus was showing us the path to love abundantly, completely and wholeheartedly. This goes in parallel with the Metta Sutta (Discourse on Love) that Buddha taught:

"May everyone be happy and safe, and may their hearts be filled with joy.

May all living beings live in security and peace, beings who are frail or strong, tall or short, big or small, visible or not visible, near or far away, already born or yet to be born. May all of them dwell in perfect tranquility.

Let no one do harm to anyone. Let no one put the life of anyone in danger. Let no one, out of anger or ill will, wish anyone any harm.

Just as a mother loves and protects her only child at the risk of her own life, we should cultivate boundless love to offer to all living beings in the entire cosmos. Let our boundless love pervade the whole universe, above, below and across. Our love will know no obstacles, our heart will be absolutely free from hatred and enmity. Whether standing or walking, sitting or lying, as long as we are awake, we should maintain this mindfulness of love in our own heart." (Teachings on Love, Thich Nhat Hahn)

Emptiness is one of the most profound teachings in Buddhism. What is emptiness? In the Heart Sutra, it says "form is emptiness and emptiness is form." In the book *Turning Confusion into Clarity*, Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche says, "when we break apart an object, for example, a table or a tree, form loses solidity. If we reassemble the parts, we recreate the form. What initially appears to be solid and stable is actually just a collection of atoms colliding into each other." Hence, there is no one single atom that is known as a table nor a tree. Instead each object is made up of a combination of smaller particles and the smaller particles are made up of even smaller sub-atoms. In this sense, a tree is "empty" because there is no one single particle or atom that we can call it a "tree".

Emptiness is Form. Emptiness is not nothingness, in fact, it allows for all possibilities to happen. Yongey

Mingyur Rinpoche continues and says, "The mutability of form – whether we are constructing or deconstructing – could not exist without the reality of emptiness.... Things are - and are not - what they appear to be. Objects of great density and weight, such as boulders, doors, or airplanes, demonstrate accumulations of very small pieces or particles that are themselves filled with space. We assign value and identity to everything we experience, thinking that our limited perception is an accurate representation of the world, but these perceptions are just mental constructs empty of intrinsic value." When we recognize that "form is emptiness", we recognize that the tree is "empty" and it exists only at a relative level. The same applies to time and space which exists only at the relative, conceptual level. When we realize that time and space don't exist beyond the conceptual level and they are "empty", we are not limited by time and space. Form can be interpreted as concepts. When concepts are essentially empty, we go beyond them and all possibilities can take place.

When we see emptiness as fullness, emptiness can be compared to the abundant unconditional love that Jesus was proclaiming. Jesus didn't give his life expecting a reward. He gave his life indiscriminately to all and it was "empty" of conditions or requirements. Martin Laird, in his book *Into the Silent Land*, says "But for those whose thinking mind has expanded into heart-mind," when we are not limited by the relative conceptual level, "it is an encounter brimming over with the flow of vast, open emptiness that is the ground of all. This 'no-thing', this 'emptiness' is not an absence but a superabundance." In the Gospel, Jesus said that he has come that we may have life and that we may have it abundantly. On one occasion, Jesus, with only five loaves and two fishes, fed 5000 people. According to the Gospels, a large crowd gathered following Jesus. He called his disciples to him and said:

"I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."

His disciples answered:

"Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?"

"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked.

"Five," they replied, "and two fishes."

Jesus told the crowd to sit down on the ground.

Then he took the loaves and fishes, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people.

No one was left out. They all ate as much as they wanted and were satisfied. Not only were they abundantly fed, the disciples picked up twelve baskets full of broken pieces that were leftover. Jesus was full of love for the hungry crowd and was not bounded by the amount of only five loaves and two fishes. He was full of love, "empty" of limitations and turned a fast to a feast. Emptiness is the base where all possibilities can happen. Because of emptiness, there is abundance.

The foundational practice of meditation is to be aware of our emotions, thoughts and body sensations. Without awareness, we can become entangled with thoughts and emotions, often identifying ourselves with them and becoming distressed. When we are aware of them, it is like sunlight shining through darkness. Not only does our vision become clear, but the sense of space arises and we become aware that we are NOT the thought, emotion nor sensation. We become an observer of such internal phenomena in which they come and go. An emotion or a thought can be very strong in any one given moment, but it can also die down in the very next second. There is no thought nor emotion that can exist perpetually. Hence, their nature is also "empty" in which there is no thought nor emotion that is forever solid and permanent. Recognizing impermanence in all circumstances allows a

sense of space to arise and helps us to let go of our grasping and attachments. Many people when meditating shut off all senses, try to stop all thoughts and strive to prevent external disturbances. Yet the sense of "space" or awakening doesn't exist in the absence of thought, emotion nor sensation. In fact, meditation is the practice of "looking at" a thought face-to-face or "staying with" an emotion. Freedom takes place when we recognize that thoughts and emotions, as powerful and solid as they can be, are essentially impermanent and empty in nature.

True liberation happens when we realize our true nature is boundless and infinite. In Christian terms, this state can be described as being One with God or the Divine. In Buddhist teachings, our nature of mind is also known as the luminous mind, "empty" and goes beyond all concepts. It is a state of Pure Awareness beyond words can describe. When we recognize our true nature, when we are one with God, there is a sharp sense of clarity and expansive spaciousness. Some practitioners describe this experience as the entire "Universe is within you". All possibilities and happenings are allowed and they are embraced without discrimination. God is in all things - good and bad, up and down, in and out. It is a state of Omnipresence in which the all-encompassing space embraces all. Meditation is in many ways the practice of non-duality. It is the experience of recognizing the boundless space within, watching and allowing whatever thoughts and emotions to surface, and, letting them come and go without judgments. Dwelling in Unconditional Love no longer becomes an act of faith, but it is a living reality that we can all experience anytime and anywhere.

Bibliography

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"Softness"

Photographs taken by Frances Tong in Fukushima