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## The Jesus prayer guided meditation

To many, the word “meditation” often brings to mind Eastern religions. But from the earliest days of the Church, Christians have used meditation as an essential part of prayer along with offering intercessions, supplications, and praise. From a Christian perspective, meditation might be thought of as quiet prayer, a prayer without petition, since “he already knows your needs.” (Mt. 6:8) The prayer of quiet brings the soul into quiet rest, as well as the body. Many meditative practices have become perfected over centuries by countless believers, especially those in religious communities. I’m no expert on meditative techniques, and there are undoubtedly many which I’ve missed, but this list might be good for a start. I’ve arranged these meditation techniques from what seem to me to be simpler ways to more complex ways. I’ve also arranged them into three main categories, those which use music, those which use imagination, and those which are more traditional meditation methods. That said, there is a very great amount of overlapping, especially among the specific methods listed later in each group. I regret that I don’t have time or room to describe any of them in detail. I’ve limited this list to only those approaches which have a significant Christian history. However, there are any number of meditation methods from other traditions which are well-suited for quiet prayer, such as tai chi, qi gong, vipassana (insight) meditation, walking meditation, zazen, Self-inquiry and a host of others. some words on guidance and practice The serious pursuit of meditation as a spiritual discipline can be difficult, indeed. There are numerous distractions in the world, and even more within our minds. Simply developing the habit of meditation can be a significant challenge. For these reasons, a spiritual director can be essential. Spiritual directors are persons who are already well-traveled on the path of experiencing God, who know and understand meditation and other spiritual disciplines, as well as the workings of the Presence of God upon the soul. Spiritual direction usually takes the form of regular meetings, often about once a month. For the last four years, I’ve benefited immensely from the insight, objectivity, and encouragement of my director, a wonderful nun in my church. I cannot recommend having a good spiritual director highly enough. Seek a director who is compatible with you, but who also challenges you. You may have to “try out” a number of directors before you find one who is right for you. For example, St. Teresa of Avila suffered for a while from having a spiritual director who taught her to ignore her visions as distractions from the devil. When St. John of the Cross became her director, he encouraged her to explore them as the profound ways in which God was communicating with her. Meditation is always about Presence, and we have acquired many ways to not be present. As soon as you begin trying to simply be present to God and yourself, you will find yourself thinking about when you need to do the laundry, feed the cat, or any one of a thousand other thoughts which take you from Presence into the future or the past. The key is to come back gently. Do not in any way chastise yourself. Simply shrug off the distraction with an inner smile and return. You may have to do this a hundred times in a single sitting; no matter. In so doing, over time, not only will your ability to stay present in meditation increase, but the gentleness you’ve cultivated in dealing with yourself will carry over to a sustained gentleness in how you relate to all people, and your determination to be present will carry over, into greater focus and presence in the rest of your life. Similarly, it is also important to not to judge a sitting. It is not good nor bad, although some will seem to be easy or “successful,” and (many) other sittings may seem be frustrating because of the difficulty of staying present. But it is in doing the work that you grow, and the frustrating sitting may have been much more beneficial for your growth than the easy one in which resting in Presence seemed effortless. a survey of christian meditation methods Relaxation / Centering methods—These have been called recollection in Christian religious life. With recollection, you “re-collect” yourself to be fully present. These are the primary means of “centering down” to prepare for more deliberate meditation, and yet, they are effective meditative methods in their own right. Relax in a tranquil environment: Choose your spot, and savor the setting. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a waterfall or another natural setting, a park, watching a sunset, taking in a work of great art in a museum, quieting your soul in a church, or any other kind tranquil environment. Take time to savor peaceful sights, sounds, smells.Body scan: I feel.... my head feels...my chest feels... etc. Move throughout your body, simply noting your physical sensationsProgressive relaxation: (progressively tensing then relaxing muscle groups, etc.)Focus on the breath Feel the breath going in and coming out of out the nostrils. Or on the rise and fall of the abdomen or chest in conjunction with your breathing. (If it’s extremely quiet, you may be able to focus on your pulse.)Environment scan: I hear this, I see this, I smell this, I feel this, etc.Focus on a fixed object or sound. Concentrate on something outside of you: for instance, a flower, painting, candle, crucifix, icon, or the sound of water, wind, or traffic. Musical approaches : These usually aren’t thought of as as meditative techniques, but music can be a powerful way of making a meditative connection to God’s Presence. Listening to meditative music—There’s really no need to explain this one—it’s about as simple as it gets. Stop worrying, put down your work, sit down or lie down, and listen—really listen—to relaxing music. It can be a wonderful preparation for entering deeper into divine Presence. Chant—The earliest Jewish Christians worshipped God with chanted prayers in the synagogue. The gentle, exultant, undulating sounds of different styles of chant have been part of Christian worship ever since. A few forms: Ambrosian chantGregorian chantpsalmodyHildegardian chantByzantine chantRussian and Greek Orthodox chant. Most recently, Jacques Berthier of the ecumenical Taizé community in France has been developing a gorgeous modern style of chant which has enriched worship in Christian churches and communities throughout the world. Singing in the Spirit—in some Pentecostal and Charismatic congregations, “the Spirit flows” and people begin singing spontaneous praises, either in tongues or in their own language. When it’s done slowly and softly, it can be a profound meditative experience. Imagination methods. These techniques combine elements of the focusing techniques described above, as a starting point, but they intend to give the meditator an experience of something of God—for instance, a direct experience of His love, a message from Him, the experience of touching another in the communion of saints, bringing the Word to life, etc., through using the imagination as a portal to the sacred. Visualization—(This is an ingredient in most of the things that follow. Infinite variations are possible.)This is using the imagination to aid in a spiritual experience. All of the following methods use visualization as a key ingredient. Possible visualizations are virtually inexhaustible. Here a just a few possibilities: Imagine yourself in a peaceful scene.Put yourself in a scene from the Gospels.Visualize yourself sharing another’s suffering.Imagine yourself as a pebble, dropping into a lake, representing God.Imagine yourself with God.See God within you (perhaps as a fire, a pool of water, or a golden light). Or “picture” God within your heart, your blood, your breath, etc. Guided meditation—This is similar to the above, but with someone or something guiding you through it, helping you visualize. Guided meditations are often dynamic, as opposed to the previous meditation methods. For instance, in a guided meditation, you might progress from one place to another, or ask a question and listen for an answer. You might “meet” a person who is there to show you something, or face something which directs you to make a choice. Guided meditations often have a purpose in mind, such as inner healing, physical healing, or seeking God’s will, etc. Kything—this is lovingly experiencing your spiritual connection with the Lord, or with nature, saints, friends, etc. Often even mental dialoging or conversation is possible. In their excellent book on the subject, Kything: The Art of Spiritual Presence, Drs. Berne and Savary outline three simple steps: 1. Center yourself in God.2. Lovingly focus on God or the person or thing you want to kythe with, and3. Make contact through visualization. The practice of the Jesus Prayer is not the same as a far Eastern yoga, Hindu or Sufi practice. In Buddhism the use of a mantra that is constantly repeated is a common practice. One is “Om mani padme hum” which is important for its sounds and means “Jewel in the center of the Lotus.” The aim of Buddhism is to free oneself from all suffering and attain what the Buddha called Nirvana or the perfect peace of mind. This peace of mind is achieved through various meditation techniques. The Buddha never taught about any form of God. Many practice this form of meditation to gain calmness in their lives. Sufism is a branch of Islam that also employs forms of meditation. Sufi scholars define Sufism as “a science whose objective is the reparation of the heart and turning it away from all else but God.” In meditation they aim to reach an awareness of their oneness with the universe, believing that in doing so we can attain fundamental truths that are within us, but often remain hidden. They do not believe that Jesus is God, but view Him as only a prophet. In Hinduism the chief aim is to gain release from the cycle of reincarnation caused by karma—the consequences of past actions, in this or in previous lives! This is achieved though meditation techniques. This release leads to some kind of absolute Truth. Many of these approaches have been adapted by our modern culture to serve as means of relaxation or ways to lessen the stress of our over active lives. They form the basis of the “New Age” spiritual movement. They are taught without any specific aim of repentance, nor to do the will of God, or to seek union with Christ. In the practice of the Jesus Prayer with an attitude of repentance and humility we seek an encounter with the living Christian God, Jesus. We may gain benefits of relaxation or reduced stress, but this is not the aim of our effort. Union with God is. A Gerondas from the Holy Mountain Athos enumerated the following points about the difference of the Jesus prayer from Yoga. 1. The Jesus prayer express faith in God through His Son Jesus as part of a trinitarian God. It emphasizes that salvation is attained through God which is why we ask for His mercy. Salvation cannot be attained by our own efforts. 2. We are not attempting to find some impersonal God or absolute truth through the Jesus Prayer. The Jesus Prayer focuses on a personal relationship with the God-Man Jesus. 3. We cannot fall into the sin of pride through the unceasing prayer of Jesus because in the prayer we continually seek mercy for our weaknesses. We consider ourselves unworthy of God’s grace and recognize our sinfulness in His eyes. 4. Salvation is about union with God. In this union we do not eliminate our personality. The human factor is not denied as it is in some Eastern yoga practices. We are not assimilated in this union, but retain our personhood. 5. As we progress in the prayer we gain the ability to discern error. We learn the movements of the devil and enhance our ability to distinguish between good and evil. 6. The struggle in the practice of the Jesus Prayer is connected with the cleansing of our body and soul from the negative effect of passions. We do not seek apathy or to destroy our passions, but to transform them into help to seek a relationship with God. Our salvation depends on this struggle of transformation, which requires the help of God’s grace. 7. We do not try and attain absolute nothingness, but seek to turn our heart so it brings the grace of God into our soul, so it can be spread throughout our body. We make no effort to negate or destroy the body, but see it as the temple of the Spirit. We practice the prayer because we want to live with God eternally. 8. We are not indifferent to the world. We continually pray for all beings. Salvation is a union with Christ, while we are in communion with other persons. It is not an individual goal. 9. We do not put great emphasis on psychosomatic methods or on body postures. They can only assist us in concentration. The difference from “New Age” practices or Eastern yoga meditation has been described by using the analogy of a framed masterpiece. We can admire the beautiful frame of a masterpiece, but the frame is not the masterpiece. The similarities between the Jesus Prayer and various meditation practices can be considered to be like the frame of a masterpiece. The masterpiece in the practice of the Jesus Prayer is union with Jesus Christ. The frame is only the methods used. There may be similarities with postures, techniques and other acts of the outer form of this prayer, but the content and aim is totally different and uniquely Christian. See article The Jesus Prayer and the Hindu Mantra by Dionysios Farasiotis







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