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BODY AND PRAYER: COMPARING TAOIST AND CHRISTIAN METHODS OF MEDITATION

Paulin Batairwa Kubuya, SX

ABSTRACT

This article explores the problems arising from the cross-cultural setting where these eastern and western meditative traditions meet. It further suggests that every interpretation and expansion of methods of meditation has to bear in mind the broadness and complexity of the new multicultural environment where the old techniques are being practiced. Such awareness will enable the birth of appropriate methods inspired by old traditions and yet fit for today's spiritual needs. Within overviews of the Taoist and Christian practices of meditation, we focus on the body—its role and place in meditation—to understand how Taoist and Christian meditations are related.

Introduction

The influx of eastern methods of meditation into Christian countries and the reactions they have aroused point at the importance of spirituality and mysticism in our day. The challenge is how to evaluate the methods and techniques used to access the depths of human longing. Taoism has developed its own methods of meditation or inward cultivation to answer that question.¹ Likewise, in the Christian spiritual and mystical tradition, meditation and contemplation are not new concepts. However, the meeting of these traditions deals with curiosities and challenges that, if not addressed properly, will affect the reception and efficiency of meditative methods. This article explores the problems arising from the cross-cultural setting where these eastern and western meditative traditions meet. It further suggests that every interpretation and expansion of methods of meditation has to bear in mind the broadness and complexity of the new multicultural environment where the old techniques are being practiced. Such awareness will enable the birth of appropriate methods inspired by old traditions and yet fit for today's spiritual needs. Within overviews of the Taoist and Christian practices of meditation, we focus on the body—its role and place in meditation—to understand how Taoist and Christian meditations are related.

Meditation in the Taoist Spiritual Tradition

Either as a philosophy or a religion, the teaching and praxis of Taoism revolve around three interconnected goals, namely, good health, longevity,

1. According to Liu Xiaogan, Taoist meditation stems from ancient Chinese culture, before the institutionalization of Taoist religion by masters (Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Guanzi) who lived during the Warring States Period, ca. 4th century BCE. From then on, classics such as *Taiping Jing* and *Baopuzi* collected methods and doctrines related to meditation, and they have inspired other masters until our day. Meditation has always been very much part of Taoism. *Neigong*, *jinggong*, and *qigong* are all contemporary forms of Taoist meditation.

Liu Xiaogan, "The Taoist Tradition of Meditation: History, Transformation, and Comparison," in *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions*, eds., Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong, (New York/London: Continuum, 2001), 192.

and immortality.² While philosophical Taoism is concerned with the rationale of human life and the causes that might hinder its growth and preservation, practical Taoism deals with appropriate techniques directed towards the essence of life and making sure that it is protected from any disruption. The mechanism of tending to that life involves a practice which has been referred to as “keeping the one.”³ It entails the development of ways to generate, increase, and nurture the sources of life as well as techniques to monitor those causes that in the end might harm qualitative growth. In traditional language, these life-tending techniques or methods have been classified either as inward or outward. This distinction has much to do with the focus or starting point of meditation and the techniques used to enhance the generation and nurturing of vital energy. Taoists classify meditation among the inward forms of cultivation (內丹). It was taught and transmitted by such great masters as Zhuangzi, Liezi, and even the hybrid Taoist–Buddhist Fifth Patriarch Huineng.⁴ It was seen as a means for acquiring insight into the art of uniting with the *Tao* (Way). Meditation is now used to generate and retain vital energy by “developing an inner tranquility and an inner power associated

2. Herlece G. Creel, *What Is Taoism? And Other Studies in Chinese Cultural History*, (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 13-20.

3. According to Liu Xiaogan, “keeping the one” is the expression that old Taoist masters Laozi, Zhuangzi, and the alchemist Baopuzi used to refer to meditation. Liu, *The Taoist Tradition*, 181-82.

4. Thanks to the translation work of people such as Harold D. Roth, Thomas Cleary, Lu K’uan Yu (Charles Luk), and Kristofer Schipper, we now have access to the philosophy and methodological teaching of meditation found in classics such as the *Book of Changes (I-Ching)* and the teachings of masters such as Zhuangzi and Liezi.

Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism, Translations from Ancient Classics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999);

Taoist Meditation: Methods for Cultivating a Healthy Mind and Body, tr., Thomas Cleary, (Boston/London: Shambhala Publications, 2000);

Lu K’uan Yu (Charles Luk), *Taoist Yoga: Alchemy and Immortality*, (London: Boomount House, 1988);

Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1993).

with attaining the numinous ‘mind within the mind,’ the non-dual awareness of the Way.”⁵ But how is this tranquility obtained?

A General Description of Taoist Meditative Methods

The meditative approach consists in sitting quietly and, through guided breathing and visualization, observing the rising up and growth of an inner fire and a continuous regeneration and expansion of life.⁶ Meditation is a re-enactment of the cosmic process of continuous regeneration of life.⁷ In other words, there is something cosmic in the practice of meditation. The one meditating is united to the inner cosmos where life starts and grows unendingly. The process could be enhanced by the silent recitation of a hymn or sacred texts (repeated as mantra) or by visualizing the restoration of harmony or unity inside the microcosmos, which in fact is the body of the one meditating. Another form of visualization could be witnessing the development and birth of a spiritual baby.⁸ The spiritual baby is the maturation of the life energy emitted at the beginning of the meditation and carefully contemplated on throughout the stages of its growth. It heals as it goes through the life channels (*chakras*) of the meditating body. When it is ready, it assumes the form of a baby and places itself a little above the top of the head of the one meditating. It serves both as spiritual expansion of the self and a link with the outer psychospiritual world.

When the body and mind are inclined, you should seek stillness. Close your eyes and mouth, sit upright, and be aware and alert. You can cross your legs or sit in a position that you find comfortable. Forget about forms and do not be attached to thoughts. When you hold on to the One within, you should be focused and not grasping. Be mindful, but at the same time, let

5. Roth, *Original Tao*, 109.

6. For a concise historical overview of the Taoist tradition of meditation, see Liu, 181-196.

7. Eva Wong, *Nourishing the Essence of the Tao: The Outer, Inner, and Secret Teachings of Taoism*, (Boston/London: Shambhala Publications, 2004), 53.

8. Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 131.

emptiness be your guide. With time, you will become adept at quiet sitting and your thoughts will be still. When thoughts are still, *yang* will emerge. When the vapor of *yang* emerges, it will rise and fall. The vapor rises from the base of the spine and ascends to the area between the shoulder blades. Driven by the wind, it will rumble and roar and rise to the top of the head. The two vapors of the *yin* and *yang* will interact and merge and then descend to the palate in the mouth. When you taste sweetness, you should swallow the saliva and let it sink into the central palace. The classics of internal alchemy call this “blowing the winds of spring” or “blowing hard in the beginning and not feeling the breath at the end.”⁹

Masters of meditation want to be certain that the practitioners are clear about the purpose of meditation, namely, that through stillness they generate and develop the seed (of immortality) that leads to unification with the Way. All the instructions, which at times could be very detailed and illustrative, are aimed at helping the students to assess their own progress in accordance with the finality of their meditation.¹⁰

The use of special terms or jargon, coupled with the range of emphases and interpretations that various masters have taught to achieve the Way, has created different schools of Taoist meditation in the long run.¹¹ Different

9. Wong, *Nourishing*, 55-57.

See similar instructions in Cleary, *Taoist Meditation*, 101-102 and Luk, *Taoist Yoga*, 116-122.

10. Despite the jargon, the pedagogical setting of these instructions can be studied either through the question-answer form in which they are presented or through their titles. The dialogical formats of *The Secret of Cultivating Essential Nature and Eternal Life* and the subtitles of the works of 王力平 『古典 灵宝 通知能 内功 犬 (根據 王力平 講課 記錄 整理)』 are illustrative cases.

11. The fondness for esoteric language and the numerous interpretations of the same things have turned Taoism into a real conundrum for scholars. Roth mentions the exchange of criticisms between two Taoist schools of Inward Training meditation who, though apparently similar in their methods for achieving health and longevity, were still criticized by the other schools because “they only cultivated the physical and not the numinous.” See Roth, *Original Tao*, 4.

Liu makes a similar observation when he speaks of the various emphases in the interpretation of Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s “keeping the One.” He justifies the ambiguity and divergence found in Chinese culture as evolving therefrom.

See Liu, *The Taoist Tradition*, 182.

masters or schools have clear but diverse indications on the preparatory stage, the meditation itself, and what might be experienced at different stages of meditation (the quieting of the body and mind, the formation of vital energy, its transmutation into a spiritual energy, etc.).¹² Another term for this process is mastering the workings of the “three gates.”¹³

Most important to note is that despite the variations, there are basic affinities among these formulations. To a certain extent, a synopsis could be elaborated from these instructions. There is a common pattern or thread among all of them. From the syntheses made by various interpreters,¹⁴ the Taoist traditions present a sequence of instructions on what a practitioner should observe before, during, and after meditation so that he/she could maintain the benefits of the whole practice. Cleary describes the preparatory stage as the positing of an act of faith in the possibility that one could be united with the Way, an act that calls for a resolve to submit to the discipline required.¹⁵ In Wong, that stage requires the practitioner to grasp the principles of meditation and transmutation of energy, or again, a preliminary understanding of the anatomy of the meditating body.¹⁶ Simply put, the preparatory stage simply refers to relaxing the body and getting it ready.¹⁷ In the second stage, the practitioner should cut off all entanglements with the mundane, i.e., schemes, feelings, and thoughts that could profoundly impede proper practice. He or she should be inclined to cultivating the right attitude

12. Common patterns revolve around the creation of vital energy, its refinement, and its firming up or transmutation to enhance immortality.

See Zhang Sanfeng in Cleary, *Taoist Meditation*, 117-122.

13. Old masters said that “if you want to attain immortality, you need to understand the wondrous workings of the three gates: in the first gate, generative energy (*ching*) is transmuted into vapor (*ch’i*); in the second gate, vapor is transmuted into spirit (*shen*); in the third gate, the spirit is returned to the void.” See Wong, *Nourishing*, 53.

14. See Cleary, *Taoist Meditation*. ; Luk, *Taoist Yoga*. ; Wong, *Nourishing*. and Schipper, *The Taoist Body*.

15. In Zhuangzi’s terms, this involves “mortifying the body, dismissing intelligence, detaching from form, departing from knowledge” (Zhuangzi, quoted in Cleary, *Taoist Meditation*, 82).

16. Wong, *Nourishing*, 28, 51.

17. Luk, *Taoist Yoga*, 1.

for stillness—the collection of the mind, which “is the master of the body and the captain of the entire nervous system.”¹⁸ The collection of the mind has two basic functions: to disconnect or detach from any defilement and to open up to the conscious spirit. Sitting in stillness requires simplicity so that the harm that multiplicity causes to the power of the mind could be avoided.¹⁹ Stillness in the Way also means and implies true seeing, which is the capacity to foresee or predict the outcome of an act even before it is enacted.²⁰

By means of these instructions, one is led towards a tranquil stabilization, which is the transitional step to union with the Way. By tranquil stabilization, the body becomes like “a withered tree, the mind like dead ashes, without reactivity, without seeking anything.”²¹

Union with the Way is similar to a loving relationship, with no tension but only consuming assimilation. The body is lost in the very spirit it shelters and thus becomes a true body.²² Old masters spoke of that union in the following terms:

When you refine the body to gain access to subtleties, merging with the Way, then you disperse one body into myriad things and merge myriad things into one body. When the spirit does not leave the body, it lasts as long as the Way. When the body is assimilated to the Way, then it never ceases to exist. When the mind is assimilated to the Way, there is nothing it does not penetrate. When the ears are assimilated to the Way, there is no sound they do not hear. When the eyes are assimilated to the Way, there is no form they do not see.²³

18. Cleary, *Taoist Meditation*, 85.

19. *Ibid.*, 87.

20. *Ibid.*, 89.

21. *Ibid.*, 95.

22. *Ibid.*, 99.

23. *Ibid.*, 100.

The benefits of inner cultivation are multiform. An ancient saying claims that by cultivating the Way, “the mind can be broadened, the body can benefit, sickness can be cured, and death can be avoided.”²⁴ Those who practice inner cultivation will naturally generate and preserve vital essence; they will also have an excellent circulation of vital energy that will help them always keep their mood good.

The Meditating Body or the Dialectic of the Body in Prayer

Meditation as a way of cultivation is not a monopoly of Taoism. It is a constant found in different religious groups. The term constant implies that there are affinities in the methods and goals that religions attach to meditation, although there might not necessarily be objective criteria for evaluating it. In the case of Taoism, Huai-Chin Nan notes that “visualization” of concepts/realities such as God, Spirit, and heaven is the closest to the methods used by western mystics. He explains that it is an old method “supposed to have been handed down from immortals since ancient times [and that it] seems to be too advanced for easy acceptance by students who are zealous for quick achievements.”²⁵ Unfortunately, Nan did not elaborate more on the reasons for this closeness between Christian and Taoist meditation but his observation is revealing enough. The commonality perhaps consists in the abstraction that visualization as a method presumes. The difference consists not only in what is being visualized but also in the discernment it imposes on the evaluation of methods. Finally, this observation might provide criteria for a delicate appreciation of the essence of meditation in the East and in the West. The accommodation of the body during meditation is the clue to deciphering the affinities existing among the methods and practices of eastern and western meditation. In other words, can

24. Ibid., 8.

25. Huai-Chin Nan, *Tao and Longevity: Mind-Body Transformation*, tr. Wen Kuan Chu (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1984), 23.

the physical body be neglected? Can sensations, emotions, mental states, and thoughts associated with it be completely abandoned?

Hermeneutic of a Meditating Body: The Question

The importance of this question points at the different interpretations given to the high demand for forms of prayers or meditation involving the body in old Christian environments. This phenomenon is being perceived by some as a manifestation of the failure of Christian meditative methods to integrate the body in one's spiritual quest. It criticizes the foundation of Christian prayer as too spiritualized, neglecting that we are corporeal beings. Even the mitigated position of those aware of the Church's condemnation of Origen's body phobia still points to the mistrust of the physical body as an impediment or simply inadequate to engage in the partnership that spiritual emancipation requires.²⁶ All these interpretations, coupled with the present fascination and high demand for eastern forms of meditation, are hinting at a serious questioning of the existence or not of "body prayer" in the Christian tradition of meditation.²⁷ These interpretations have furthermore triggered a state of alert among certain Christian circles that feel challenged to produce techniques similar to those spreading throughout the old Christian world.²⁸ To a certain extent, the atmosphere is not really conducive for enriching cross-fertilization. Christianity would sometimes prefer to play it safe, ensuring that borrowed techniques do not bring in alarming consequences that eventually might shake its theological foundations.

26. Lanfranco Rossi, *I filosofi Greci Padri dell'escasmo: La Sintesi di Nikodemo Aghiorita*, (Torino: Il Leone Verde, 2000), 151-152.

27. Daniel Maurin, *Sept Leçons sur l'Oraison du Coeur*, (Paris: Médias Paul et Paulines, 1990), 9.

28. Though not directly addressing Taoism, such an alert is obvious in the explanation the Vatican provides as a response to those asking for practical guidelines or prayer techniques like those developed by eastern spiritualities.

See Joseph Ratzinger, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith); available also at www.wtn.com/libreria/curia/cdfmed.htm.

Nan observes that most people meditate in order to achieve longevity, avoid illness, and eventually reach immortality, understood as eternal spiritual life. He furthermore claims that the key to all these is sitting quietly or stillness, for which there are ninety-six postures.²⁹ Taoism insists on holistic cultivation, that is, that body, mind, and spirit must all be involved in meditation. This insistence derives from the Taoist conviction that the “cultivation of life without the cultivation of nature is a major mistake.”³⁰ The opposite would equally be a mistake. In fact, early Taoist masters have been suspicious of any reductionism. They are very critical of those who give too much importance to the physical benefits and thus forego the spiritual cultivation through which body, mind, and spirit can really be integrated.³¹

The goals of inward training, namely, longevity, good health, and immortality, are all interconnected and closely related to the body. They cannot be achieved without paying attention to the first of the “fourfold aligning,”³² namely, the taming or alignment of the body. Physical alignment is the first step of any meditation. It consists in giving the body any stable posture that enables the circulation of vital energy. The alignments of the vital force and of the mind depend on how successful this first step is.³³

If you still the body and quiet the mind, then myriad illnesses will all vanish. If you dread death, you should think of your body as the abode of the spirit; this physical deterioration in old age is like a house that is rotting away

29. Nan, *Tao and Longevity*, 12.

30. This is the meaning of the old saying: “By cultivation of nature only without the cultivation of life, the *yin* spirit will not become a saint in ten thousand *kalpas*.” See Nan, *Tao and Longevity*, 22.

31. Roth mentions the practitioners of “macrobiotic hygiene” who were criticized by the early Taoist authors of the *Chuang-Tzu* and the *Huai-nan Tzu* as cultivating only the “physical” and forfeiting the “numinous” or spiritual.

See Roth, *Original Tao*, 4.

32. The “fourfold aligning” are 正形 or the alignment of the body; 正四體, 肢 or alignment of the four limbs; 正氣, or the alignment of the vital energy (breathing); and 正心 or the alignment of the mind. See Roth, 109.

33. Roth, *Original Tao*, 134.

and no longer fit to inhabit. It will be necessary to abandon the house and find another place to rest. This is how it is when the spirit goes and the body dies; if you cling to life and abhor death, trying to avoid change, then your spirit's consciousness will become confused and no longer operate correctly...If you can manage to be dispassionate about living and un-fazed by death, that will put life and death in order and also take care of preparations for the afterlife. If you crave all sorts of things, every craving produces an illness...All craving or hatred is forgetfulness of life. When accumulated illusions are not cleared up, they interfere with perception of the Way.³⁴

The Christian Tradition of Meditation

The Christian tradition counts meditation among its oldest forms of prayer or communication with the divine. Although spiritual in its end, this activity engages the whole person in his/her aspiration to an inner transformation often referred to as growth in the likeness or image of God, or again, as union with God.³⁵ “Our real life,” writes Dom Celsus Kelly, “has to be within the heart where God dwells. Thus, the whole spiritual life turns on two hinges, as it were. These are contemplation of oneself and contemplation of God.”³⁶

Christian Nuances on Methods of Meditation

Christianity insists that this union is not merely a result of a method; it could not be achieved through the sole determination of one's cultivation. It is a gift that God rewards to those who through their attentiveness or waiting

34. Cleary, *Taoist Meditation*, 93-94;

See also a quote from Zhuangzi in Liu, *The Taoist Tradition*, 183.

35. A. Carthusian, *The Prayer of Love and Silence*, (Wilkes-Barre: Dimension Books, 1962), 125;

Maurin, *Sept Leçons*, 26;

Rossi, *I Filosofi Greci*, 54.

36. Dom Celsus Kelly, in the “Introduction” to André Louf, *The Cistercian Way* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 12.

are prepared to recognize and receive it. Traditional language uses the terms “contemplation,” “inner prayer,” or “heart prayer” to refer to that moment when the divine touches or unveils itself to the one meditating. The “waiting” moment is a constant stressed throughout the Christian meditative tradition and it should be viewed as the peak moment of any meditation.

Throughout history, Christian spirituality has insisted that union with God is the ultimate goal of a human being and that meditation is a path predisposing the person to have a grasp of that union.³⁷ It has also reflected on the understanding and interpretation of the nature of that union. Union with God per se presupposes a relation with the divine as the key to comprehend and interpret what occurs during meditation.³⁸ This is why strong warnings are given not to interpret that union as being merely the result of an efficient method. The autonomy of divine action could not be conditioned or restricted by some practices. All these considerations are not exactly good news for one determined to develop effective methods. In fact, they may also dampen enthusiasm for concrete and detailed descriptions of the role and place of the body during meditation.

Furthermore, the reference to contemplation as the peak moment of meditation bears similar implications. Contemplation is equal to a “waiting” moment with no specific actions or steps that could be elaborated into a method.³⁹ “Waiting” by nature is a pre-disposition and not an action. Nuances of this kind, of course, complicate the interpretation of Christian methods of meditation and explain the apparent paradox found in certain

37. Ratzinger, *Letter to the Bishops*, 3.

He summarizes these nuances as follows: “Christian prayer is always determined by the structure of the Christian faith, in which the very truth of God and creature shines forth. For this reason, it is defined, properly speaking, as a personal, intimate, and profound dialogue between man and God. It therefore expresses the communion of the redeemed creatures with the intimate life of the Persons of the Trinity.”

38. Emma Shackle, *Christian Mysticism*, (Butler, Wisconsin: Clergy Book Service, 1978), 13.

39. Even the *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio* of traditional monastic prayer do not refer to any particular action. They just refer to spiritual enjoyment and waiting for a possible insight or the warmth that the Holy Spirit might offer to the heart. See André Louf, *The Cistercian Way*, (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 74-79.

manuals of meditation and prayer. While dealing with indications and techniques, they still insist that there are no specific methods of meditation.⁴⁰ The emphasis on no specific method, however, does not do justice to the stories of hermits, the lifestyles of monks of all ages, and the tales of Christian mystics such as Catherine of Siena, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, and many others who in their humility inspired people to know and interact intimately with the divine. Each of these traditions appears to develop ways of discerning the will of God and the readiness to answer it.

The Heritage of Greek Philosophy

In Christianity, meditation has evolved within the monastic tradition⁴¹ as part of the efforts of acculturating Christianity to a predominantly Greek culture that exalted philosophy as the highest quality of knowledge. Taking after the Platonic tradition that defined the primary task of philosophy as contemplating the truth, early Christians referred to their knowledge of Jesus as a philosophy. Furthermore, to set themselves apart from pagan philosophers, those who felt more attracted to that knowledge of Jesus spoke of it as real gnosis or “true philosophy.”⁴² Practitioners or followers of the way of Jesus were referred to as “true philosophers,” and the monasteries where many of these philosophers lived came to be known as real philosophical schools. The development of Christian methods of meditation was part of Christianity’s enculturation within the Greek philosophical world.

As we said earlier, contemplation as the highest moment of meditation reminds us of the Platonic description of the contemplation of ideas or truth as the primordial task of philosophy. Although this affinity bridged philosophy and spirituality, Christians need to be aware of the negative

40. Dom Jean Leclercq has an intriguing chapter on “Mental Prayer without a Method” wherein he specifies *lectio, meditatio, oratio* as three basic steps in prayer. Ironically, this three-step structure overshadows his argument that “not to have a method” is the “best method.”

See Dom Jean Leclercq, *Alone with God*, (London: The Catholic Book Club, 1961), 118-129.

41. Rossi, *I Filosofi Greci*, 36-37.

42. *Ibid.*, 31.

appreciation Platonic philosophy gave to the body and how this could expose Christianity to some risks. Elements of Greek Platonic philosophy seeped into early Christian thought and were accountable for the negative way some Christians looked at and treated the body.

How does one ascend to the highest form of knowledge? Through meditation, asceticism, and the control and submission of the senses, one aimed at clearing the self from any handicaps that could prevent it from being united with the spirit (*nous*). The body was viewed as a prison, a cage, a tomb that engulfs the soul. Theologically, after the Fall, the body is only oriented to physical pleasures that hinder the soul's aspiration to spiritual pleasures.⁴³ Hence, Greek philosophers and the hermits who followed their interpretations tended to view the body as opposed to the path of perfection. It could not be trusted and should instead be subdued and kept under a strict discipline.⁴⁴

The Body: A Sanctified Dwelling for the Divine

Because of its roots in diverse cosmogonies and anthropologies, the original Christian view of the body differs from that of the Greek philosophers. Even though Christianity speaks of the human person as a composite of body-mind-soul, the emphasis is rather on the harmony and indissolubility of that union which the person receives as a divine gift. The body is not some material stuff separated from a high spirit; it is rather the physical expression of a spiritual "I."⁴⁵

In the case of Jesus, he was aware of the discrepancy between the willingness of the spirit and the weakness of the body (Mk 14:38), but he never set them as complete opposites. Instead, he used his body to convey his inner self. It is the metaphor for the dwelling of the Holy One or the temple

43. Ibid., 152.

44. This assessment of the role of the body and its practical implications for cultivation are quite different from that set by Taoism. Though demanding discipline, Taoist meditation is also for the benefit of the physical body (good health and longevity).

45. C. Rochetta, "Corpo," in *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità*, ed. Ermanno Ancilli (Roma: Città Nuova, 1990), 635.

that will be rebuilt in three days (Jn 2:19); it is also the bread of life (Jn 6:35) offered to believers (Lk 22:19-21).

St. Paul uses the very metaphor of the body to express the relation between the community of believers and Jesus Christ, who is the head of the Church (Rom 12:12; Col 1:18). In other instances, Paul addresses individuals as parts of the “body” (Rom 12:24) and their bodies as “temples of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19). Paul warned and criticized Christians who were drifting away because of their obsession with mystical experiences. Their longing to experience some physiological presence of the Holy Spirit in their bodies, such as speaking in tongues, performing miracles, contemplating the angels, and partaking of heavenly meals, induced them to a life of immorality and pride that led them away from the Christian spirit and divided the community.⁴⁶ Paul tried to make them more aware of the real foundation of Christian mysticism: faith, hope, and love in the Spirit that Jesus Christ has poured into their hearts. He is the immanent presence of God within us, so much so that there is no need to search for other special divine manifestations or forms of union.⁴⁷

There is no doubt as to the persuasive rhetoric behind these addresses. Paul sets a framework for an adequate appreciation of the human body and wants to impart to the believers a code of conduct that is consequential to the divine origin and mission attached to it. Hence the Christian assessment of the role and place of the body in meditation should be viewed within this teleological framework that is meant to put the body in its right place. Balance in interpretation is again required; otherwise, the practitioner might fall prey to one of the extremes of either despising the body or making it the end of meditation.

46. Paul complains because the supposedly spiritual banquets ended up in drunkenness and immorality (1 Corinthians 10:1-8) and the spiritual gifts became sources of contention within the community (1 Corinthians 12:1-26).

47. See Romans 5:1-5.

Christian Meditation and Asceticism

When Christianity recalls the practice of asceticism, it aims at avoiding any extremes. As already acknowledged by other spiritual traditions, asceticism enhances spiritual progress⁴⁸ because it is particularly geared towards the silencing of the body and the control of the senses, so much that they no longer experience pain from being deprived of the satisfaction of the pleasures they continually long for and which, at times, are opposed to spiritual enhancement. Radical ascetics will consider the perfect collaboration of their bodies as consisting in behaving as if it did not exist; that is, by completely submitting to the silencing of its senses, in delighting in the dead responses given to its perennial requests.⁴⁹ The rationale is simple: spiritual cultivation means returning to the real self, which is naturally oriented to God and finds its pleasure in uniting with God. This real self is not the body but the spirit. The admonition is that the pleasure of the body is the death of the soul and thus the one who controls these pleasures remains in union with God.⁵⁰ The striving for union with the divine could be compared to the peeling of an onion: its heart could not be reached without removing the different layers of skin. This process of death to the body-senses could consist in mental exercises. However, radical ascetics take it as a literal war with one's body, submitting it to flagellation and inattention. But a practical question remains: can the physical body attain union with the divine, or what is the actual role of the body in spiritual meditation?

48 Mayeul de Dreuille, *From East to West: A History of Monasticism*, (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1999), 125;

Wong, *Nourishing*, 17;

Livia Kohn, *The Daoist Monastic Manual*, tr. Fengdao Kejie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5, 122-123.

49 Rossi, *I Filosofi Greci*, 47-50.

50 "Il godimento del corpo è morte dell'anima, e viceversa colui che in tutto e per tutto domina il piacere resta stabile nell'unione con Dio" (Ibid., 247).

Hermeneutics of the Meditating Body: East and West

All those engaging in meditation are after an ultimate goal whose expression is limited to a given context. They all submit to a method or methods that are believed to lead them to that goal. A Christian assessment of Taoist methods in today's context might bear an apologetic refinement due to the Christian teleological views on human origins and the nature and role assigned to the body. It is also affected by the traditional definition Christians give to the goal of meditation as purely spiritual.⁵¹ On the one hand, Christians will agree with Taoists that the Way sought is in the self.⁵² Christians also believe in the immanent presence of the divine, always present, faithful even when we are unfaithful (Rom 8). On the other hand, the insistence on the inaccuracy of methods is a result of the belief in the transcendence of God who cannot be restricted or manipulated by any human trickery.⁵³ Finally, there are disparate emphases on the ultimate principle sought through meditation, and these arise from different hermeneutics of the human person. The Taoists see the person as a small cosmos while Christian anthropology stresses that the person is created out of love and with an inner aspiration for union with the Creator. The Taoists look at the *Tao*, the final goal of meditation, emphasizing its immanence, whereas Christians are inspired by the transcendence of God, who humbly and out of love accepts to dwell in the heart of the practitioner. Though Christians recognize other benefits meditation can offer to the body, they constantly affirm its spiritual finality.⁵⁴ All these differences call for clarification.

51. Liu, *The Taoist Tradition*, 194.

52. "Those who study the Way study what is in the self" (Cleary, *Taoist Meditation*, 8).

53. "The love of God, the sole object of Christian contemplation, is a reality which cannot be 'mastered' by any method or technique. On the contrary, we must always have our sights fixed on Jesus Christ, in whom God's love went to the cross for us and there assumed even the condition of estrangement from the Father"

Ratzinger, *Letter to Bishops*, 31.

54. Ratzinger, *Letter to Bishops*, 28.

"Some physical exercises automatically produce a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth, which resemble well spiritual

The vital ways, from antiquity to the present, all claim that keeping the One promotes longevity and prevents growing old. That one knows the way of keeping the One is called the infinite way. Man has his body that always combines with its spirit. Keeping them permanently together indicates fortune, while separation signals ill omens. Keeping the physical and the spiritual permanently together is the so-called One, which leads to longevity. Thus says the doctrine of keeping the One, that suggests you should focus on your body. Being always preoccupied with it, spirit comes automatically and corresponds [with body] perfectly. Hence, all kinds of diseases and ailments will disappear. This is the very symbol of longevity with good eyes and ears.⁵⁵

Spiritualized Body: Uniting with God, the Source of Life

The central role of the body in Taoist meditation is rooted in the conception of the body as a small cosmos and the description of meditation as an inner revolution aimed at its spiritualization. Old Taoist Masters taught that “the body is a material residue, yet it can still reach immaterial subtlety.”⁵⁶

Christianity does not completely deny that meditation can have an impact on the body. However, for reasons discussed earlier, it does not pay much attention to those phenomena. The Catholic tradition does recognize the physiological transformations resulting from meditation. Cases of levitation,⁵⁷ *transverberazione*⁵⁸ (usually associated with St. Teresa of Avila), and stigmata such as those of St. Francis, Padre Pio, etc.—all these are physiological changes resulting from spiritual practice but few people talk about them. They occur, but their importance is relative for the enhancement

well-being. To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving spiritual life.”

55. *Taiping Jing Hejiao*, 12-13, quoted in Liu, *The Taoist Tradition*, 185.

56. Cleary, *Taoist Meditation*, 99.

57. The best illustration of this kind of ecstatic manifestation is Giuseppe da Coppertino, a Franciscan monk who lived in the 17th c. and was called the “flying monk” because he was seen lifted on high and flying as a result of his meditation. For more details, see <http://www.comune.osimo.an.it/gicom/vita.htm>.

58. *Transverberazione* refers to a state of religious ecstasy characterized by greatly reduced external awareness and expanded interior mental and spiritual awareness. It is frequently accompanied by visions and emotional, intuitive, and sometimes physical euphoria.

of spiritual life. They cannot be developed into a method and there is no school where one can learn how to acquire them. All these imply that the lack of emphasis on the role of the physical body and spiritual techniques is a deliberate choice. “Genuine Christian mysticism,” says Theresa of Jesus, “has nothing to do with techniques. It is always a gift of God, and the one who benefits from it knows himself to be unworthy.”⁵⁹

Fostering Spiritual Methods in a Cross-cultural Context

The demand for methods of spiritual cultivation is especially felt in the West. The failure of the scientific revolution to satisfy fully the deepest human longings is driving more and more people to explore areas that until now have been exclusively for special social classes. Indifferentism and atheism, both expressions of the devaluation of religious language, are not the only challenges to religion in traditional Christian countries. There is also the need for novelty, especially in terms of techniques that facilitate easy access to experiencing the divine. Enthusiastic lay Christians no longer perceive mysticism and spirituality as the protected area of a few initiates. Their quest is that of the Russian pilgrim Mikhail Kozlov.⁶⁰ But a Church that insists on the non-existence of any effective method has disappointed many westerners. They thus flock to eastern schools of meditation, not knowing how these are related to their own structural quests and psyches.⁶¹ However, for a few, such as Master Bee,⁶² the

59. Theresa of Jesus, quoted in Ratzinger, *Letter to Bishops*, 23.

60. Mikhail Kozlov is the main character in *The Pilgrim's Tale*, an account of the spiritual journey of a Russian pilgrim who is searching for an effective school where he could learn how to pray continuously. Having knocked in vain at the doors of all those who by profession or fame were supposed to be specialists in prayers, he finds his soul at peace with a mantra known as the “Jesus Prayer.” His story is not only about his search. It is also, especially in the second chapter, a description of the physiological effects caused by his inner prayer. See Aleksei Pentokovsky, ed., *The Pilgrim's Tale*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

61. Taoism evolved within a largely polytheistic system and thus some of its imageries and concepts do not find any parallel in Christian monotheism. Thus, the fear of Ratzinger, who would rather ensure that Christians are aware of the discrepancies in worldviews between monotheism and polytheism. Liu, 195, also refers to this.

experience is very enriching since it reveals basic affinities between eastern and western meditation practices. Westerners engaging in eastern meditation methods, such as those provided by Taoism, might be delighted by their variety, precision, and efficiency, but they might also be bewildered by the differences in worldviews and hidden meanings.

The spread of eastern meditative methods and the challenges they pose to Christianity have found different responses from different groups of Catholics.⁶³ The official Church is concerned that this might endanger the spiritual basis of Christianity and revive past heresies and syncretistic trends. As a safety measure, it recommends a cautious and thorough examination of the content and method of those practices.⁶⁴ What the Church forgets, however, is how difficult it is for many to grasp the sophisticated language of its apologetics. What they need are practical instructions and methods, just like those found in eastern traditions. Besides, as Liu points out, Taoist meditation, though using a mysterious language, claims to be neither a religious nor a sacred system. It deals with techniques that do not require any faith commitment to be posited before one can benefit from it.⁶⁵

Many Christians prefer not to engage in any kind of abstract polemics or apologetics. They rather suggest studies and courses that are well entrenched in the Christian tradition. They recognize the basic assumptions of Christian mysticism and stress the three common Christian ways of mysticism, namely, purgative, illuminative, and unitive. The expectation is that Christians searching for methods of meditation could find a fitting one among their suggestions.⁶⁶

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62. Master Bee is an Italian philosopher-artist whose mystical call led him to venture in eastern spiritualities. He has practiced yoga, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhist meditation and has since returned to his Christian roots, where he now expresses his mysticism through religious art. See F. Catelli, "Storia di un medicante di luce," in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 158 (April 2007) 3728-38; also available at <http://www.masterbee.com/index.html>.
63. See Jean Vernet's "Introduction" to Maurin, *Sept Leçons*, 9-12.
64. Ratzinger, *Letter to Bishops*, 2.
65. Liu, *The Taoist Tradition*, 192-193.
66. Among these studies, we note, for instance, that of Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1976);

Affinities create space for cross-fertilization. This is only possible for those who are knowledgeable not only about the limits of each form of meditation, but also of their richness. Practically speaking this requires clarity about the ultimate goal of meditation and continuous vigilance regarding how helpful the means chosen to reach that goal are. Some Christian critics, though defensive, are quite provoking. They have posited intellectual foundations that cannot be easily put aside. Methods of meditation cannot be an end in themselves; a creature cannot be identical to the Creator.⁶⁷ These and many other similar comments cannot be faced only with silence. A Taoist response would surely be beneficial for both sides and enlighten the multicultural context of today's spiritual quest.

Conclusion

Regarding the involvement of the body in spiritual cultivation, Taoism is very practical and goes straight to the point, stating that the goal is enhancing good health, longevity, and spiritual immortality. Christians, noting how closely related these goals are to the body, are suspicious about the spiritual attainment such a body-centered meditation could convey. Their approach is philosophical; it makes an analysis of the essence of the human body, tracing its origins and its mission.

There are some evident differences between the two religious traditions. But the different approaches should not pose any problem to one who understands the teleology of the human body. Besides, eastern and western schools are already engaging in dialogue and in the future, there will be more interaction between the Taoist and Christian methods of spiritual cultivation.

See also Shackle, *Christian Mysticism*.; Maurin, *Sept Leçons*.

67. The Christian way to union with God must always “bear in mind that man is essentially a creature, and remains such for eternity, so that an absorbing of the human self into the divine self is never possible, not even in the highest states of grace”

Ratzinger, *Letter to Bishops*, 14.

Still, some characteristics specific to each tradition need to be studied and understood further in order to make that interaction smoother and more mutually enriching.

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