

# Inter-Faith Seminar

*(Talks on Meditation)*

**Date: 6 October 2022 . Time 7pm to 9.30pm\***

**Place: Church of Divine Mercy (main hall – level 1)**

**Address: 19 Pasir Ris St. 72, Singapore 518771**

*from the*

**Hindu perspective**

**Buddhist perspective**

**Muslim perspective**

**Christian Perspective**

*Speaker for*

**The Christian Perspective of Meditation**

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# The Christian Perspective of Meditation

PETER NG KOK SONG

My brothers and sisters, and friends, I'm so delighted to be here this evening on this very special occasion where we have the opportunity of being with our brothers from the other religious traditions to talk about meditation.

Meditation can be found in all religions. You might say it is the contemplative dimension of religion. And being here tonight reminds me of a similar event which our community of Christian meditation had the privilege of organising with the Archdiocesan Council for Inter-Religious and Ecumenical Dialogue (IRED) in 2012. Our community organised the seminar called Common Ground. We had representatives from five other religious traditions, and our own teacher of meditation, Benedictine monk, Fr Laurence Freeman. That was a very special occasion in fostering a sense of oneness, of unity, where we can celebrate our diversity. Celebrating our diversity is a must, not only in Singapore but throughout the world. So this event here tonight, is no small occasion. It is an example for the world, for the world which is badly in need of people to come together to share with each other our faith. The 2012 event was called Common Ground: The Contemplative Dimension of Faith, and we had six representatives. We had Fr Laurence Freeman speaking about the Christian tradition, we had the Jain tradition by Ashvin Desai who was then the President of the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) in Singapore, the Buddhist tradition by Venerable Chuan Guan, the Muslim tradition by Habib Syed Hassan Al-Attas, the Taoist tradition by Master Huang Xin Cheng with Master Chung Kwang Tong, the Hindu tradition by Mother Mangalam.

*What is Christian meditation?*

So brothers and sisters, in essence, if we go to the fundamentals of our Christian faith, what were the two great commandments that Jesus gave us?

*Love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your soul. This is the greatest commandment. It comes first. The second is like it. Love your neighbour as yourself. (Mt 22:37-40)*

Now when we talk about meditation, it is probably simplest to describe it as a form of prayer. And when we talk about prayer, I think it's best to understand it as loving God. Meditation, prayer, is loving God with my whole heart, with my whole soul, my whole mind. Our whole person, body, mind and spirit comes to prayer. That is what we mean by meditation in our Christian tradition, in the teaching that WCCM (The World Community for Christian Meditation) shares, it's the whole person at prayer. And the reason why meditation is about loving God is because in meditation, in deep prayer, what we offer to God is our entire consciousness, our consciousness. There is nothing more beautiful that we can offer God than our whole being, our whole consciousness. God wants your love, God wants to be loved. And in our Christian faith, God created us out of love. And therefore, what we have to do is to love God in return. And I think prayer and meditation is how we do that, loving God.

The second commandment is 'Love your neighbour, as yourself.' When we come together, like tonight, to talk about prayer, to share with one another how we pray, and to help our brothers and sisters to pray more deeply, we are loving our neighbour. Because we do not want God all for ourselves, we want all our brothers and sisters to join us in being with God. So I think sessions like this, where we come together to pray together, to encourage one another to pray together, to pray better, is how we love our neighbour. So tonight's gathering is very significant if you think about the two great commandments of Jesus.

### *The essence of Christian meditation*

Let me share with you in a few words the essence of Christian meditation, in other words, how do we as Christians understand meditation? The ultimate goal is the same, union with God. That is the purpose of all religion. Because the word 'religion' comes from the Latin word, *religare*, and *religare* means 'to relink', to relink human beings, humanity with God. That is the purpose of religion. And our brothers and sisters in the other religious traditions, they have their way of helping people to relink with God. In our Christian tradition, our faith is that our union with God is through Jesus. That is the unique feature of Christianity, that we Christians believe our union with God is through Jesus, with Jesus, and in Jesus. We believe that God incarnated himself in Jesus to relink us back to God. That is the significance of the Incarnation. And therefore, when we are talking about union with God, which is what eternal life is about, eternal life is union with God, our way to this union is through the living Spirit of Jesus, present within us. So when we talk about meditation in the Christian context, we refer to it as a Christo-centric form of prayer, because it's focused on the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, the indwelling Holy Spirit within us.

Now when you ponder on that, that our way to union with God is through Jesus, then we have to listen to what Jesus says about following him. What did Jesus tell us about following him?

*If any man wishes to follow me, he must leave self behind. He must take up his cross and come with me. Whoever cares for his own safety is lost. But if a man would lose himself for my sake, that man is safe. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world at the cost of his true self? Or what will he give to buy that self back? (Mt 16:24-26)*

Meditation is how we leave our self behind. So in our teaching of meditation, we suggest the use of a prayer word, a mantra, and we choose a Christian mantra because it expresses our faith. We sit still, we sit comfortably, sit with our back straight so that we can be alert and attentive. That's how we bring our body to prayer. And then we bring our mind and our spirit to prayer by taking this word and faithfully reciting this word continuously from the beginning to the end of the meditation. And as you all know, in our Christian community, we recommend the word 'maranatha', the word which Fr Damien used just now in his opening prayer. 'Maranatha' means 'Come, Lord.' And what you do is to bring your mind to attention. To leave yourself behind, we simply repeat this word as faithfully as we can throughout the time of meditation, whether it's 10 minutes, 15 minutes, or 20 minutes. One word, in order to focus the mind, in order to help us leave behind all the distractions that are bound to challenge us at the time of meditation.

It is very simple. But is it easy? It is not. We know it's not because, as someone once said, our mind is like a tree full of monkeys jumping from one branch to another. So when you sit down to pray and with all your best of intentions you say, 'Lord, I'm going to give this time to you,' you end up thinking of one thing after another. You're preoccupied with yourself, with your problems, with your ideas, with your desires. So just repeating this word is how we renounce all these things, how we leave our self-preoccupation behind, so that during the time of prayer, of meditation, we can give ourselves totally to God. In our community, we are all lay people, not monks, so we suggest to meditate twice a day, in the morning, and in the evening, for between 20 to 30 minutes. And during the time of meditation, sit down and say the mantra.

Now, what is the purpose of the morning and evening meditation? Why not three sessions, why not four sessions? To ask that question is to miss the point. Because the ultimate objective, the goal of our life, is union with God, but on a day-to-day basis, what we hope is to live in the continuous presence of God. To be constantly aware of the presence of God every moment of our life, not just at the time of prayer. One of the Desert monks told his students, 'Always breathe Christ.' With every breath that you take, be aware of the presence of God. Now, in order for us to live as many moments of the day as possible in the presence of God, we need to have special training sessions. So that's what the morning and evening times of prayer are for. For us lay people who have to work, we have got a family, I think twice a day is already quite challenging. People who are in monasteries and temples, they have more times of prayer. But we as lay people share the same desire to try to live every moment of our day conscious that we are sustained in existence by the life of God, by the love of God. So that's the goal of prayer, of meditation.

### *Why Meditation is Important*

Let me conclude this evening by sharing with you why meditation is so important for interfaith friendship. The five fingers of our hand, notice that these five fingers are apart from one another. If you look at the tips of the fingers, you notice that the five fingers are separate – this Christianity, this is Hinduism, this is Buddhism, this is Islam, this is Jainism, you might say. On the surface, these religions are separate, they're all different. But if we through deep prayer and meditation can go deeper in our respective religions, you travel to the centre of the palm. That is our common ground. In other words, if we truly practise our faith, if we're really deep in our faith, we travel to the point of our unity, despite the diversity of our different religions. I think that is the value of meditation, that in the depth of our prayer, in the depth of our spiritual practice, we can come to experience our unity. And this is the great Priestly Prayer of Jesus in his farewell discourse.

*May they all be one as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, so also, may they be in us that the world may believe that thou didst send me. The glory which thou gavest me, I have given to them that they may be one as we are one; I in them and thou in me, may they be perfectly one. (Jn 17:21-22)*

Thank you.