

Reflections on Exploring stillness: Non-theist Quakerism and Meditation

(Note in the PDF, hypertext links, which extend over 2 lines break, at the hyphen, so copy and paste them to make them work.)

We had a very interesting and well attended session for this topic on 4 January 2024.

I would like to set out some reflections and clarification and in particular to address David Boulton's and Mary Pagurelias's 'trouble with God' and challenge as to 'What is the point of meditation (if you don't believe in God)'.

Different forms of Meditation (or Contemplation in the Western Christian tradition as John Senior explained) have been widely practised by different religious groups throughout the world for several thousand years - in Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity and others.

Christian Meditation/Contemplation (or silent prayer/worship) began with the earliest Christians, especially those known as the 'Desert Mothers and Fathers' - hermits or anchorites who took Jesus at his word and went off into the desert (in the Middle East) in search of silence and to seek the 'presence of God' individually or in communities (monks and nuns) who often took vows of silence.

How does this relate to present day Meditation and non-theists (or 'Christian Atheists' for example)?

I tried to explain that despite identifying as a nontheist Quaker (and I don't believe in God in any ordinarily understood meaning of that term), nonetheless I have found James Finley's 'Christian Meditation - Experiencing the Presence of God' the best book on meditation of the many that I have read. Much of what Jim Finley says speaks to me clearly based on my own experience of meditation (TM) over nearly 50 years.

When Finley speaks of God, I can usually mentally delete the 'of God', 'with God' or whatever and as I don't believe in the existence of God, to me it makes no difference to what Finley says. Clearly this would not be the case for a 'theist' who might conclude that I'm mistaken or crazy.

I have no 'experience of the presence of God' but believe that some people do have experience which THEY are happy to describe in those terms - where I would probably look for a psychological/physiological explanation. Neither in meditation (over 50 years) have I ever (yet) had an experience that I could imagine describing in that way. In this context I often reflect on David Parlett's 'Theist cuckoo in the nontheist nest': <https://nontheist-quakers.org.uk/events/new-nfn-monthly-meeting-for-worship-and-creative-conversation/> and scroll down to the last recording for David's talk.

So even if some people meditate in order to draw closer to God, what is the point of it for a 'non-believer'?

Meditation from the Eastern traditions (especially Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Sufism) was brought to the west by various 'gurus' (teachers) or 'sheikhs' over the last 150 years or so and especially since the 1950s perhaps most famously by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (born Mahesh Prasad Varma, 1918-2008 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maharishi_Mahesh_Yogi) with a little help from the Beatles but also by 'Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh' (later known as 'Osho'), Paramahansa Yogananda (1893 – 1952 - in the 1920s), the Hare Krishna movement (promoted by George Harrison) and others.

The practice of christian meditation (originally referred to as contemplation) is attributed to the Desert Fathers and Mothers (see above) and has been a practice of silence (including silent prayer) widely practised in monasteries and similar institutions mainly in the Catholic tradition. Contemporary Christian meditation practices (outside of the monasteries and abbeys) and silent prayer (including Centreing prayer) have been developed by, for example, the WCCM (World Community for Christian Meditation) (initially by John Main of Ealing Abbey and Laurence Freeman - <https://wccm.org/about/>) since the 1970s; The Centre for Action and Contemplation (CAC) in New Mexico led by Richard Rohr (<https://cac.org/about/our-teachers/>); Contemplative Outreach (<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/history>) and others.

As a result of these different traditions and their modern interpretations, it is now possible to join a meditation or silent prayer group online (or sometimes in person) at any time of day or night around the world - there are thousands of such groups from most religious traditions including many Christian ones. Perhaps Quakers are now a tiny minority amongst silent worship groups?

But to return to the question of what is the point of it for a 'non-believer'? TM ® (Transcendental meditation) (TM is a registered trade-mark!) was and is 'sold' in the west (for a fee) on the basis of 'reducing stress, improving focus and clarity of mind, strengthening immunity and much more.' The claims were and are claimed to be supported by scientific research, particularly of the effect of meditation on brain activity and rest (brain waves) <https://uk.tm.org/benefits-of-meditation>

The mantra meditation offered by the WCCM (World Community for Christian Meditation) - see above - is virtually identical and from the same source (Jyotir Math in north India) as TM so even if the intention is different, one might expect the results to be similar. (see <https://wccm.org/people/john-main-osb/>)

From my own experience I can say that meditation offers a similar level of 'peace and quiet' as Quaker meeting, but on a daily basis. Some people find TM and similar types of meditation (including WCCM Christian meditation and Centring Prayer or prayer of the heart) instantly transformative but that is not my experience.

For some people, and in some traditions, the purpose of meditation is to find 'enlightenment', union with God, or higher states of consciousness/awareness. George Fox wrote that he was raised into a state that Adam was in before his fall and from which he (George Fox) could also fall but then was raised into a higher state (that Christ was in?) and from which he could not fall. These sound like grandiose claims to be Christ-like or perfect but perhaps they are no more and no less than higher states of awareness. Whatever George Fox's experience was, it seems he charismatically invited or persuaded others to carry out the same 'experiment' and know it for themselves. An experiment/experience which in the 17th century Fox and others would describe in Christian and godly terms. Rex Ambler has explored Fox's experience through his writings (Journal and others) and from this developed the Experiment with Light meditations. From my limited experience of EwL (the introductory weekend course at Glenthorne and some follow-up courses) I do not think that EwL is comparable to the kind of meditation John Senior and I spoke about and referred to above but might be a useful psychological process for the purposes described by Rex Ambler and perhaps as a way to 'clear the path' in preparation for Meeting for Worship.
(<https://experiment-with-light.org.uk/meditations/>)

I believe that both Quaker meeting (and silent prayer) and meditation lead to changes in awareness (or consciousness and perhaps conscience) which are beneficial to both the individual and the communities to which they belong.

As a nontheist, I also believe that God is optional - there is no point in emphatically denying God (I might be mistaken) and if others have experience which they are happy to describe in godly terms then I should respect that, even if I would suspect an alternative psychological explanation. Meditation (or contemplation/silent prayer) and perhaps chanting, ecstatic dance and trance practices I think very probably change brain function in ways which in the extreme may be likened to the effects of hallucinogens or other drugs. Meditation is often recommended for 20 minutes twice a day but on some extended courses or retreats it is possible that some might meditate for many hours a day and this might induce either 'rapid progress' or untoward effects.

Most 'schools' of meditation suggest that mind altering drugs (including alcohol and tobacco) should be avoided before and immediately after meditation. It is also usually recommended that meditators come out of their meditation slowly (for example by slowly opening the eyes) and perhaps lie down for 5 minutes

afterwards or at least not jump up and start rushing about immediately. It is often further suggested that meditation can have unwelcome effects on individuals experiencing psychological difficulties and that if 20 minutes meditation proves unsettling, then perhaps to do it for only 5 or 10 minutes.

Despite all the 'god-talk' from some meditation groups, I think it is always possible to find a nontheist perspective. Jennifer Kavanagh in Quaker Quicks 'Practical Mystics - Quaker Faith in Action' writes (p9) "Underhill's use of the word 'Reality' is significant. There are many who find the word 'God' uncomfortable. Mysticism can be found in people of all religions and none, from both inside and outside the framework of institutional religion." and, on the same page, quotes Dorothee Soelle (Sölle); "It makes no difference - and this point has been confirmed by everyone who has ever reported on mystical experience - whether these experiences are interpreted with the aid of a personal God or nontheistically, as in oriental mysticism. Whether we see these experiences in terms of the Tao or of God is not central to them."

Joanna Godfrey Wood in the Quaker Quicks 'In Search of Stillness - Using a simple meditation to find inner peace' offers the simple meditation I read out in our meeting on 4 January and writes: (p9) "But how can you find this stillness? It comes unbidden in flashes of awareness, though simply knowing about it and thinking about it is helpful. You start from a place of silence, which may not mean complete quiet, which is impossible, and move to a different place, where there is nothing." Or, as John Senior put it "Nothing happens" (no, it just happens). Joanna also writes (p15) "A good place to start trying to find, develop or increase, the stillness in life is to go to a Quaker meeting. This is a place ... where you can search freely for stillness within and find it individually and in community too, as a connected group. You will feel part of the group even if you do not know the people individually yet. It is the stillness that binds you and creates the group." This seems to answer John's question "Is meditation an acceptable practice for 'Worship'?" in the affirmative, at least for Joanna.

John seems to find, in his quotations from Geoffrey Hubbard, Advices and Queries, James Nayler, George Fox and William Penn, the same kind of basis for a Quaker meditation as Rex Ambler claimed to find from his analysis of Fox's writings. To know the difference between Experiment with Light and other forms of meditation (Contemplation), you would need to try them and judge for yourself. Over the last couple of years, I have found sitting (online) in silent prayer with a mixed group of Anglicans, Methodists and others and joining a Centring Prayer Group (online) organised by Quaker Richard Eddlestone for Quakers every three weeks an instructive experience. There are many ways, places, methods and techniques to experience silence, stillness and meditation, and Quaker Meeting is not unique in this regard EXCEPT for the possibility of 'spoken ministry'.

John's other question was "Is meditation distinguishable from 'Worship'?" I think, even if you confine this to silent Quaker meetings, the answer is yes because there is more (and sometimes less) going on in a Quaker Meeting. We know from surveys and our own experience that Friends do many different things in meeting. We might be reflecting on scripture, our Christian roots or the teachings of Jesus (ie. 'discursive meditation - see above), we might be sleeping, praying, reading, looking out the window, meditating (some do, at least some of the time), listening in silence or for or to spoken ministry, speaking ourselves (from wherever that might come) and certainly, at least some of the time, thinking. So this is much more open and varied than 'merely' meditating but it may also be 'less than' meditating if meditating is deep contemplation - perhaps experience of unity or non-duality. Perhaps the sense of a 'gathered meeting' arises when all or most feel themselves to be in the same place (of deep prayer or meditation?). Whether spoken ministry might flow from the gathered meeting, or instead through individuals at other times is perhaps a point to ponder.

Answering my own questions, I think 'Spirit' is a feeling, impulse or 'life force' (uniquely human??) which, according to Jesus, we should not deny: Jesus says, in effect, you may 'blaspheme against the Son' (and in one case 'the Father') but not against the Spirit; Mark 3:28-30 "28 Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme: 29 But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation." (KJV); Luke 12:10 "And whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but unto him that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven."; and non-canonical Thomas logion 44 "Jesus said, "Whoever blasphemes the Father will be forgiven, and whoever blasphemes the Son will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, neither on earth nor in heaven." I've always taken these to mean that there is some 'spirit' behind everything which might be 'the light of pure reason' (Winstanley) or the life-force found in everything which is alive.

At very least, I take these sayings attributed to Jesus to mean there is something vitally important somewhere (in us, in each human being?) that we should not deny - perhaps what Quakers have often called 'that of God in everyone' or the Light (and many other terms) and we might choose to call the wholly (holy?) human spirit.

Try a search on the NFN website for 'Jesus' and you will find currently 23 links (24 when this is added) to various posts and articles between 2015 (or 1997) and 2023 including David Boulton's 'Faith of a Quaker humanist' which has interesting humanist/nontheist references to Faith, Jesus, Worship, Prayer, Mysticism (including meditation) and Spirituality, the last quoting William Blake and "Thus men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast."

Michael Wright (clerk of NFN for 3 years 2016-2018) wrote of Meeting for Worship: "There may also be times when we feel absolutely nothing and wonder if it has been a pointless exercise. It can be disheartening to have a succession of experiences like this. However, when something changes, either in our meeting or in ourselves and we experience something of the best that a Quaker gathered meeting can be, then we know we have 'a pearl of great price'." <https://nontheistquakers.files.wordpress.com/2019/07/jesus-today-book.pdf> (page 29).

We might say something similar about Meditation. Sometimes, nothing happens. James Finley writes: (CM p219-220) "Sometimes our fatigue and distractions prevail. But no matter, for the more seasoned we become in this simple practice, the more we come to realize that, regardless of what we are experiencing at the moment, we can know and trust that nothing is missing in it. Our times of restless fatigue and our times of sublime rested alertness have an absolute and equal value. This awareness grants the peace that surpasses understanding. This peace is accompanied by a sense of quiet awe in realizing that our experience in the present moment, just as it is, *is* the fullness of God, one with us just as we are." (and similar passages elsewhere in the book). Now, if I just delete 'of God' from this passage I am left with 'fullness, one with us just as we are'. That sounds remarkably like the Upanishads which often enough manage without 'God'.

I would sum up by saying that meditation is a useful practice for peace and rest and preparation for meeting and it is (in my opinion - and others see above) irrelevant whether you believe in god or indeed what you believe at all. Perhaps i could add to John's various quotations, QF&P 20.11; "Love silence, even in the mind... Much speaking, as much thinking, spends; and in many thoughts, as well as words, there is sin. True silence is the rest of the mind; and is to the spirit, what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment."
William Penn, 1699

Meditation may provide that 'True silence' and 'rest of the mind' on a regular (or daily) basis between weekly meetings for Worship. i hope that answers David's and Mary's question and would certainly recommend giving it a try.