



默觀之身：道教與基督教
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The Meditating Body
— The Affinities within Taoist
and Christian Methods of Meditation

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Abstract

Every religion deals with appropriate body involved methods to facilitate and stimulate spiritual experience. The present paper compares the role and advantages Taoism and Christianity assigned to the body during meditation. Whereas Taoist methods of cultivation aim at good health and longevity, union with the Dao and immortality, Western Christianity, due to differences in the understanding of the meditating body, is reluctant to affirming the efficiency of any method. It insists that spiritual experience is a grace and warns against the risk of psychic hunger devoid of concrete actions of love which are the manifested signs of a life at the heart of the divine.

Keywords: Mysticism East-West, Body and Meditation, Christian-Taoist Spirituality, Spirituality and Health.

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摘要

為了達到人與神感通經驗，所有宗教靈修皆發展了一套跟人的身體有著密切關係的法門。此文章內容針對道教以及基督教對默觀修習的看法、實踐以及目標；同時也比較在兩種靈修默觀中身體所扮演的角色，以及其對身體所帶來的正面效果。道教認為人藉由默觀的修練，能享受到身體健康、長生不老，更能與道合一、進而成仙。基督教卻由於對人身有著不同的理解，而很難認同任何修練途徑所稱的效果，反而強調人與神感通是屬於神恩的領域，何必因為特別追求而忽略了實踐愛的精神。神的臨在乃由愛的行動表露出來。

關鍵詞：東西神秘經驗、默觀修練、道基靈修對話、靈性生命健康整合

A. Introduction

The afflux of Eastern methods of meditation in Christian countries and the different reactions they have aroused point at the importance of spirituality and mysticism in our present day. The challenge is felt in terms of evaluating the methods and techniques to access the depth of human longing. Taoism has developed its methods of meditation or inward cultivation to answer that need.¹ Likewise, meditation and contemplation are not new concepts in the Christian spiritual and mystical tradition. However, the meeting of these traditions in the contemporary context deals with oddities and challenges that, if not addressed properly, will affect the reception and efficacy of future meditative methods. This article explores the problematic rising within the cross cultural setting where these Eastern Western meditative traditions are meeting. It further hints that every interpretation and expansion of methods of meditation bears in mind the broadness and complexity of the new multicultural environment wherein 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.

After an overview of the Taoist practice of meditation, we focus on the

1 According to Liu Xiaogan, Taoist meditation stems from ancient Chinese culture, before the movement of institutionalized Taoist religion related to masters who lived during the Warring States (Laozi, Zhuangzi and Guanzi) 4th B.C. And from then on, other classics such as the Taiping Jing and Baopuzi collected methods and doctrines related to meditation. From then on, neigong, jinggong, qigong all these are present day forms of Taoist meditation. See Liu Xiaogan (2001). *The Taoist Tradition of Meditation: History, Transformation, and Comparison*. In Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong (Eds.), *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions* (p.192). New York / London: Continuum.

body — its role and place as a particular element to grasp how Taoist and Christian meditations are related.

B. Meditation in the Taoist Spiritual Tradition

Either as a philosophy or as a religion, the teaching and praxis of Taoism evolves around three interconnected goals, namely good health, longevity and immortality.² While philosophical Taoism is concerned with the rationale of human life, the reasons that might hinder its growth and preservation, practical Taoism deals with appropriate techniques tending toward 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 and it did entail the development of ways to generate, increase and nurture the sources of life as well as techniques to monitor those factors that in the long run might hinder or disrupt the continuous growth of a meaningful life.

In traditional language, these life nurturing techniques or methods have been classified either as inwards or outwards. 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 the vital energy. Taoists classify meditation among the inward forms of cultivation (內丹), taught and trans-

2 See Herlece G. Creel (1970). *What is Taoism?* Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, pp.13-20.

3 According Liu Xiaogan, “keeping the one” is the expression that old Taoist masters; Laozi, Zhuangzi, the alchemist Baopuzi used to refer to meditation. See Liu Xiaogan (2001). *The Taoist Tradition of Meditation: History, Transformation, and Comparison*. In Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong (Eds.). *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions* (pp.181-182).

mitted by great masters such as Chuang-tzu, Lieh-tzu, and even the Hybrid Taoist—Buddhist Fifth Patriarch Hui-neng.⁴ Meditation for them is a way of acquiring insight into the art of uniting one's life with the Dao. Since then, it has been seen as a way to generate and retain vital energy by “*developing an inner tranquility and an inner power associated with attaining the numinous ‘mind within the mind’, the non-dual awareness of the way.*”⁵ But how is that tranquility obtained?

(A) A General Description of Taoist Meditative Methods

Generally speaking, the meditative approach consists in a quiet sitting during which, through guided breathing and visualization, one observes the rising and growth of an inner fire, and a continuous regeneration and expansion of life.⁶ Meditation is, then, a re-enactment of a cosmic process that continuously regenerates life.⁷ In other words, there is something cosmic to the practice of meditation in that the one meditating is united to the inner cosmos where life starts and grows endlessly. The process could be enhanced by a silent recitation of a hymn or sacred texts (repeated as mantra), or by visualiz-

4 Thanks to the translation work of people such as Harold D. Roth, Thomas Cleary, Charles Luk and Kristofer Schipper, we now have access to the philosophy and methodological teaching on Meditation found in classics such as the *Book of Changes (I-Ching)* and the teachings of Masters such as Lieh-tzu, Chuang-tzu.

5 Harold D. Roth (1999). *Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.109.

6 For a concise historical overview of the Taoist tradition of meditation see Liu Xiaogan The Taoist Tradition of Meditation: History, Transformation, and Comparison. Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong, (Eds.) (2001). *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue Between Christian and Asian Traditions*. New York/London: Continuum, pp.181-196.

7 Eva Wong (2004). *Nourishing the Essence of the Tao*. Boston & London: Shambhala, p.53.

ing the restoration of harmony or unity inside the micro cosmos which in fact is the body of the one meditating. A similar process of visualization could be witnessing the birth of a spiritual baby or fetus.⁸ The spiritual energy emitted during meditation assumes the form of a baby and takes its place a little above the top of the head where it serves both as spiritual expansion of the self and a link with the outer psycho spiritual world.

*When the body and mind are inclined, you should seek stillness. Close your eyes and mouth sit upright and be aware and alert. [...] 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 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

8 Kristofer Schipper (1993). *The Taoist Body*. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, p.131.

9 Eva Wong (2004). *Nourishing the Essence of the Tao*. pp.55-57. See a similar instruction in Thomas Cleary (Trans.) (2000). *Taoist Meditation: Methods for Cultivating a Healthy Mind and Body*. Boston & London: Shambhala, pp.101-102; Charles Luk (1988). *Taoist Yoga: Alchemy and Immortality*. London: Boomount House, pp.116-122.

about the purposefulness of meditation, namely that through stillness they generate and develop the seed (of immortality) that paves the path to the unification with the Way (Dao). All the instructions, which at times might be very detailed and illustrative, are aimed at facilitating the student to assess his own progress in accordance to the purpose of his meditation.¹⁰

The usage of a specific jargon coupled with the range of emphasis and interpretations masters give to achieve the Way, has created in the long run various schools of Taoist meditation.¹¹ Different masters or schools would then have different but clear indications on the preparatory stage, the meditation itself and a description of what might be experienced at different moments of the meditation: the quieting of the body and mind, the formation

10 Despite the jargon, the pedagogical setting which witnessed to the birth of these instructions can be noted either through the question-answer they are presented in, or through the titles proving that they are a later compilation by some disciples. The dialogical formats of *The Secret of Cultivating Essential Nature and Eternal Life* and the subtitles of the works on 黃沐麗、王式健（1990），《古典靈寶通智能內功術：根據王力平講課整理》（瀋陽：遼寧省氣功科學研究會編印） are illustrative cases.

11 The fondness for secret languages, and the emphases of layers of interpretations of the same things have turn Taoism in a real conundrum for scholars. Harold D. Roth mentions the mutual critics of two Taoist schools of *Inward Training* meditation, who though apparently similar in their practicing for achieving health and longevity, were still criticized by other silent sitters that “they only cultivated the physical and not the numinous.” See Harold D. Roth (1999). *Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-Yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism. Translations from Ancient Classics*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.4. Liu Xiaogan makes a similar observation while speaking of the various emphases in the interpretation of Laozi and Chuangzi’s “keeping the one.” He justifies the ambiguity and divergence found in Chinese culture to evolve from that interpretation. See Liu Xiaogan (2001). *The Taoist Tradition of Meditation: History, Transformation, and Comparison*. In Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong (Eds.), *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions* (p.182).

of a vital energy and its transmutation into a spiritual energy, etc.¹² Another jargon for that process is mastering the workings of the “three gates.”¹³

Noticeably, despite the distinctions, there are basic affinities among these formulations. To a certain degree, a synopsis could be elaborated out of these instructions. A synopsis is only possible where there is a consistent pattern of similarities of forms or thread of thinking. From the synthesis made from the translation and compilation by Thomas Cleary,¹⁴ Charles Luk,¹⁵ Eva Wong¹⁶ and Kristofer Schipper,¹⁷ it appears that most instructions follow a sequence of advices on things a practitioner should observe before, during and after the meditation so that he or she can safeguard the benefits of the whole practice.

Thomas Cleary’s preparatory stage is equated with the postulating of an act of faith in the possibility that one can be united with the way, an act that calls on a resolve to submit to the discipline required.¹⁸ In Eva Wong, that stage requires the practitioner to grasp the principles of meditation and trans-

12 Common patterns evolve around the creation of the vital energy, its refinement and the sealing or transmutation to enhance immortality. See Zhang Sanfeng (Tomas Cleary, Trans.) (2000). *Taoist Meditation: Methods for Cultivating a Healthy Mind and Body*. Boston: Shambhala, pp.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 Eva Wong (2004). *Nourishing the Essence of the Tao*. p.53.

14 Thomas Cleary (Trans.) (2000). *Taoist Meditation: Methods for Cultivating a Healthy Mind and Body*. pp.81-105.

15 Charles Luk (1970). *Taoist Yoga: Alchemy and Immortality*. London: Rider.

16 Eva Wong (2004). *Nourishing the Essence of the Tao*. pp.55-57.

17 Kristofer Schipper (1993). *The Taoist Body*. pp.132-159.

18 A discipline which in Chuang-tzu’s terms is “mortifying the body, dismissing intelligence, detaching from form, departing from knowledge,” Chuang-tzu quoted in Thomas Cleary (Trans.) (2000). *Taoist Meditation: Methods for Cultivating a Healthy Mind and Body*. p.82.

mutation of energy, or again a preliminary understanding of the anatomy of the meditating body.¹⁹ Simply put, the preparatory stage could refer to relaxing the body and getting it ready for the sitting.²⁰ In the second stage, the practitioner should cut off all entanglements with the mundane, schemes, feelings, and thoughts that could profoundly obstruct proper practice; he/she should be inclined to third moment namely cultivating the right attitude for stillness: the collection of the mind, which “*is the master of the body and the captain of the entire nervous system.*”²¹ 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, multiplicity causes to the power of the mind, can be avoided.²² 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 posed.²³

These instructions deal with the three levels of Taoist meditation, which in Taoist esoteric language are known as “Three Treasures” namely essence (body), energy (breath) and spirit (mind) through which one is led to stillness or tranquil stabilization. By tranquil stabilization, the body becomes like a log, “*a withered tree, the mind like dead ashes, without reactivity, without seeking anything.*”²⁴

Union with the Way is similar to a loving relationship, with no tension

19 Eva Wong (2004). *Nourishing the Essence of the Tao*. pp.28, 51; Charles Luk (1988).

Taoist Yoga: Alchemy and Immortality. p.1.

20 Charles Luk. *Ibid.*, p.1.

21 Tomas Cleary (Trans.) (2000). *Taoist Meditation: Methods for Cultivating a Healthy Mind and Body*. p.85.

22 *Ibid.*, p.87.

23 *Ibid.*, p.89.

24 *Ibid.*, p.95.

but only consuming assimilation. The body is lost in the very spirit it shelters and thus becomes a true body.²⁵ 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.*”²⁶

The benefits of inner cultivation are multiform. Its physical aspect is more remarkable, perhaps unique feature. It indicates eliminating ailments and diseases, improving physical health, promoting vitality, prolonging life, and even pursuing physical immortality in early age. An ancient saying claims that by cultivating the Way, “*the mind can be broadened, the body can be benefited, sickness can be cured, and death can be avoided.*”²⁷ Those who practice inner cultivation will naturally generate and preserve vital essence; they will also have an excellent circulation of vital energy which will help them keep their mood always tempered. Thus, Taoist meditation is more practical, and easy to be incorporated into daily life.

25 Ibid., p.99.

26 Ibid., p.100.

27 Ibid., p.8.

C. The Christian Tradition of Meditation

The Christian tradition regards meditation among its eldest 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.²⁸ “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.*”²⁹

However, Christianity insists that this union is not a mere result of a method; it could not be achieved through the sole determination of one’s cultivation. It is a gift that God rewards those who through their attentiveness or waiting recognize it and receive it with humility. The 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 in meditation. The “waiting” moment is constantly highlighted throughout the Christian meditative tradition and it should be viewed as the climax of any meditation.

Throughout history, Christian spirituality insisted that union with God was the ultimate goal of a human being and meditation was thought to be a

28 A Carthusian (1962). *The Prayer of Love and Silence*. Wilkes-Barre: Dimension Books, p.125; Daniel Maurin (1990). *Sept Leçons sur L’Oraison du Coeur*. Paris: Medias Paul, p.26; Lanfranco Rossi (2000). *I Filosofi Greci Padri dell’esicasmò: La Sintesi di Nikodemo Aghiorita*. Torino: Il leone Verde, p.54.

29 Dom Celsus Kelly in the Introduction to Andre Louf (1983). *The Cistercian Way*. Michigan: Cistercian Publications, p.12.

path predisposing the person to attain that union.³⁰ In the meantime, it also insisted on the way to understand and interpret 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.³¹ That is why, strong warnings are given so as not to interpret that union as a mere result of an efficient method. The warning stresses the autonomy of the divine action that could not be conditioned or restricted to some practices. Noticeably, all these considerations cannot be good news for one determined to develop effective methods. In fact, they not only water down any compulsion to developing good methods but also downgrade any impetus for concrete and detailed description of the role and place of the body during meditation.

Moreover, referring to “contemplation” as the climax of meditation bears other unspoken implications. In fact, contemplation³² alludes to a “waiting”; that is, time spent in “idleness”, with no specific actions or steps that could be elaborated into a method. “Waiting” by nature is a predisposition more than

30 Joseph Ratzinger summarizes those 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.*” See Joseph Ratzinger (1989). “Letter to Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation.” Retrieved 05/30/2007 from <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/CDFMED.HTM>.

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

32 Even the step of the *lectio, meditatio, oratio* of the traditional monastic prayer, still does not refer to any particular action, since most of the job has been done during the previous steps. It just refers to a spiritual enjoyment and waiting for a possible insight, warmth the Holy Spirit might offer to the heart. See Andre Louf (1983). *The Cistercian Way*. pp.74-79.

an action. Nuances of this kind, of course, complicate the interpretation of Christian methods of meditation and explain the apparent paradox found in certain manuals of meditation and prayer, which, while dealing with indications and techniques still insists that there are no specific methods of meditation.³³

Emphasizing the absence of specific methods raises a question of giving due justice to the stories of Hermits, the lifestyle of monks of all ages, to the tales of Christian mystics such as Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, the Carmelite tradition, Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Spiritual Exercises, and many others who in their humility initiated people to answer the felt need to know and interact intimately with the Divine. Each of these traditions appears to develop ways of discerning the will of God coupled with the promptness to answer it. In other words, they develop analogous paths leading to the discovery of the divine, and the resolve to follow it to the end. The process culminates in the union with the divine, but that union is very much associated with a “mysticism” that leaves less room for the bodily or the physical world.

The history of Christian mysticism developed several ways aimed at

33 Dom Jean Leclercq in his *Alone with God* has an intriguing chapter on “Mental Prayer without a Method” wherein he specifies *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* as three basic steps of mental prayer. Ironically, these three steps structure overshadows his argument that “not to have a method” is the “best method.” See Dom Jean Leclercq (1961). *Alone with God*. London: The Catholic Book Club, pp.118-129.

fostering union with the divine.³⁴ However, the most prominent classification has used the terms “purgative, illuminative and unitive” ways, which rather than describing different methods, are tantamount to three moments or stages of meditation. The instructions of St. Bonaventure in this regard can shed light on the intricacies of this threefold movement. He names this movement: being led in the path of God, entering the truth of God and finally rejoicing in the knowledge of God and in reverent fear of his majesty. He writes: “*In order to contemplate the first Principle, who is most spiritual, eternal and above us, we must pass through his vestiges, which are material, temporal and outside of us. [...] We must also enter into our soul, which is God’s image, everlasting, spiritual and within us. [...] We must go beyond to what is eternal, most spiritual and above us, by gazing upon the First Principle.*”³⁵ There are other similar imageries that could be affiliated with the above mentioned description. For instance, the Carmelite tradition, where John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila stand in a league of their own, uses the metaphor of the “Ascent of the Mount”³⁶ to relate to the three moments leading to Christian contemplation. The summit of the mount itself is a poetic rendering of the union of the soul with the divine. To reach that stage, John insists

34 In his latest review of Christian spirituality, Stefano identifies nine different spiritual itineraries leading to “union with God.” These are namely: 1. the two ways, 2. the Gnostic ideal, 3. Progress in Charity, 4. the triple way, 5. itinerary of the mind towards the Divine, 6. Ascension of the Mount Carmel, 7. way to perfection, 8. apostolic mysticism, 9. the small path. See Steffano di Fiores (1994). *Itinerario Spirituale. Nuovo Dizionario di Spiritualita*. Milano: San Paolo, pp.796-799.

35 Bonaventure (Ewert Cousins, Trans.) (1978). *The Soul’s Journey into God. The Tree of Life. The Life of St. Francis*. New York: Paulist Press, p.60.

36 John of the Cross (1979). *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Kieran Kavanaugh, Trans.). Washington: ICS Publication, pp.68-69.

that the person needs to journey through a triple night: the night of the senses (body), followed by that of the intellect and finally that of the memory and the will.³⁷ On the ground of the three steps noted in all these methods, one could recall the three levels of the “Three Treasures” of Taoist meditation.

The irony of the appraisal of Christian methods of meditation and contemplation becomes more eloquent in the light of the above clarification. How could one, without prejudice to the prolific writings of these spiritual masters and many others not mentioned, sustain a lack of efficient methods enhancing union with the divine? The answer touches several dimensions revealing the commonalities among the so called spiritual itineraries. They all affirm the primacy of grace and down play their capability to be effective means that can automatically bring about “union with the divine.” Furthermore, in the “union with the divine” the body remains an outsider to be tamed and taken under the strictest control. It is seen and treated as a potential threat that hinders the spiritual unfolding.³⁸ As a result, the role of the body is either played down or simply omitted. It is almost as if the subject entering in union with the divine changes into an angel deprived of his physical aspects.

37 John of the Cross (1979). *The Ascent of Mount Carmel. The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Kieran Kavanaugh, Trans.). Washington: ICS Publication, pp.66-292.

38 Of all these itineraries listed above, a closer look could be taken at that prompted by the *Ascent of the Mount Carmel* and that dealing with the *way to perfection*. These two itineraries read seriously in the bodily dimension of the subject in meditation. The initial part of the meditation addresses the body which needs to be purified, through ascetic praxis. Illumination and union with the divine can only take place once this stage has been properly taken care of. See Steffano di Fiore (1994). *Itinerario Spirituale. Nuovo Dizionario di Spiritualita*. pp.796-799.

D. Meditation and Spiritual Cultivation

Meditation as a way of cultivation is a constant feature found in several religious groups. The aforementioned description, elaborated at length on the privileged place given to meditation in Taoist and Christian tradition. It has furthermore signaled some similarities and variations deriving from the understanding of the final goals of meditation and their direct implications on the appraisal of the methods designed to bring about the effects of its praxis. As a result, while we affirm meditation as a constant praxis present in Taoist and Christian tradition, we need also to recognize the remaining and perhaps unbridgeable distance between the two traditions. Reflecting on the praxis of meditation in these two traditions opens up a field that can be best grasped in terms of affinities. The concept of affinity can concurrently assert the similarities existing in the two traditions without losing sight on the undeniable differences. Using the term affinity to qualify the relationship between Taoist and Christian methods of meditation in today's cross cultural context bears the challenge to recognize its two constitutive poles. In other words, the challenge consists in pondering not only on the similarities but also elaborating on the differences.

(A) The Importance of Visualization as a Method

Speaking of Taoist methods of meditation, Huai-Chin Nan notes that “visualization” of such concepts/realities as God, Spirit, and heaven is the closest to the methods used by Western mystics. He elaborates that it is an old method “*supposed to have been handed down from immortals since ancient times. [...] that seems to be too advanced for easy acceptance by students*

who are zealous for quick achievements."³⁹ Unfortunately Huai-Chi Nan says little about this closeness. Yet, this observation can be considered as a major breakthrough in defining the nature of the affinity between Taoist and Christian meditations. By affinities we affirm that there are not only similarities but also differences among the two traditions. They might resemble or look alike but are still different. Following Huai Chi Nan, the unity is rooted in the importance given to the mental activity involved in meditation. We will argue that the other pole of the affinity is the intensity given in either tradition to abstraction. Vivid imagination embraces the person as a whole and makes meditation a holistic celebration. This would not be the case once meditation is defined as asceticism or any kind of training compounded to the realm of the soul and mind. We would further suggest that the two poles of this affinity provide criteria for a delicate appreciation of the essence of meditations in both the East and the West.

The accommodation of the body during meditation is the clue to decoding the affinities existing between the methods and praxis of Eastern and Western meditation. Can the physical body be neglected? Can sensations, emotions, mental states or thoughts associated with it be completely abandoned?

(B) Hermeneutic of a Meditating Body

Huai-Chin Nan observes that most people cultivate themselves through meditation in order to achieve longevity, avoid illness, and eventually reach immortality understood as an eternal spiritual life. He furthermore claims

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

that the key to all those achievements are quiet sitting or stillness for which there are ninety-six kinds of meditation postures.⁴⁰ Taoism insists on the holistic dimension of cultivation; the “so-called ‘three treasures’ namely”, body, mind, and spirit, all must be involved in the meditation. This insistence derives from the Taoist conviction that the “*cultivation of life (命) without the cultivation of nature (性) is a major mistake,*”⁴¹ the opposite would equally be a mistake. In fact, early Taoist masters have been suspicious of any reductionism for as far as the goals of meditation are concerned. One of the stigmas would be on those who would give too much importance to the physical benefits and thus forego the spiritual cultivation through which body, mind and spirit can really be integrated.⁴²

The goals of inward training, namely longevity, good health and immortality, are all interconnected and tightly related to the body. They cannot be achieved without a previous attention to the first of the “fourfold aligning.”⁴³ Physical alignment is the first step of any meditation. It consists in giving the body a stable posture that enables the circulation of the vital energy. From

40 Ibid., p.12.

41 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.*” Huai-Chin Nan. (1984). *Tao and Longevity: Mind-Body Transformation* (Wen Kuan Chu, Trans.). p.22.

42 A mention of the practitioners of “macrobiotic hygiene” who, Harold D. Roth says, were criticized by early Taoist authors of the *Chuang-Tzu* and the *Huai-nan Tzu* as cultivating only “the physical” and forfeiting the “numinous” or spiritual. See Harold D. Roth (1999). *Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-Yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism. Translations from Ancient Classics*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.4.

43 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 last 正心 or the alignment of the mind. See Harold D. Roth. (1999). *Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-Yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism*. p.109.

then on, the alignments of the vital force and of the mind are the outcome of how successful the first step has been.⁴⁴

The map is thus clear for as far as Taoist methods are concerned and it gives a unique space to the body. The terminology is friendlier and accommodating. In the end, most of the benefits of meditation are closely related to the body.

*The vital ways, from antiquity to the present, all claim that keeping the One promotes longevity and prevents from 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 so-called One, which leads to longevity... Thus sages the doctrine of keeping the One, which 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.*⁴⁵

Regarding how the body relates to the spirit during meditation, Chuang Tzu uses the metaphor of the body as the abode of the spirit. He said: “you should think of your body as the abode of the spirit; its physical deterioration in old age is like a house that is rotting away and no longer fit to inhabit. It

44 Ibid., p.134.

45 Wang, *Taiping Jing He Jiao*, 716 quoted by Liu Xiaogan (2001). *The Taoist Tradition of Meditation: History, Transformation, and Comparison*. In Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong (Eds.), *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions* (p.185).

will be necessary to abandon the house and find another place to rest.”⁴⁶ This metaphor can bridge the gap between Taoism and Christianity, for it is closer to the anthropology of early Christianity that later on was washed away by the influence of Hellenism.

(C) The Body as a Sanctified Dwelling for the Divine

Because of its emerging from diverse cosmogonies and anthropologies, the original Christian view of the body differs from that of the Greek philosophers. Even though Christianity speaks of the 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”.⁴⁷

In the case of Jesus, he was aware of the discrepancy between the spirit soul—the willingness of the spirit—and the weakness of the body (Mk 14:38), but he never set them as completely opposites. Instead, he used his body to convey his inner self. It is the metaphor for the temple or the dwelling of the Holy One to be rebuilt in three days (Jn 2:19); the bread of life (Jn 6:35) offered to the 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

46 Thomas Cleary (Trans.) (2000). *Taoist Meditation: Methods for Cultivating a Healthy Mind and Body*. pp.93-94; see also a quote from Zhuang zi in Liu Xiaogan (2001). *The Taoist Tradition of Meditation: History, Transformation, and Comparison*. In Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong (Eds.), *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions* (p.183).

47 C. Rochetta (1990). Corpo. In Ermanno Ancilli (Ed.), *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualita* (p.635). Roma: Citta Nuova.

of the Mystic Body, the Church (Rm 12: 12; Col 1:18). In other instances, Paul addresses individuals as parts of the “Body” (Rm 12:24) and their bodies as “temples of the Holy Spirit” (1Cor 6:19). Paul warned and criticized Christians who were drifting away because of their obsession for mystical experiences. Their longing to experience in their bodies some physiological presence of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, performing miracles, contemplating the angels, partaking in heavenly meals, induced them to a life of immorality and pride that shied them away from the Christian spirit and divided the community.⁴⁸ For Paul they had better be aware of the real foundation of Christian mysticism: Faith, Hope and Love in the Spirit who Jesus Christ has poured in their hearts and who is the immanent presence of God in the believer’s heart, so much that there is no need to search for other special extraordinary divine manifestation or forms of union.⁴⁹

There is no doubt of the persuasive rhetoric behind these statements. Paul sets a framework for an adequate appreciation of the human body and wants to exert from the believers a code of conduct that is consequential with the divine origin and mission attached to their bodies. Hence the Christian assessment of the role and place of the body in meditation should be viewed

48 Paul complains because the supposedly spiritual banquets ended up in drunkenness, immorality 1Cor. 10:1-8; and the spiritual gifts as sources of contention within the community. 1Cor 12.1-26.

49 *“Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope that does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been poured in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”* Rom 5:1-5.

within this framework. Balance in interpretation is again required, otherwise the practitioner might fall prey to one of the extremes consisting in either despising the body or making it the end of meditation.

(D) The Heritage of Greek Philosophy

In Christianity, meditation has evolved within a monastic tradition⁵⁰ as part of the efforts of acculturating Christianity in a predominantly Greek culture that exalted philosophy as the highest quality of knowledge. Following 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 indicate a demarcation line with pagan philosophers, those who felt more attracted to that knowledge, spoke of it as real gnosis or “true philosophy.”⁵¹ Followers of the way of Jesus came to be referred to as “true philosophers”; the monasteries where they lived were known as real philosophical schools. Christian methods of meditation evolved from this environment.

The early mention of contemplation, as the highest moment of meditation, reminds us of the Platonic description of the contemplation of ideas as the primordial task of philosophy. Although this affinity bridged philosophy and spirituality, Christians needed to be aware of the negative appreciation Platonic philosophy made of the body and how this could expose Christianity to some risks.

Elements of the Greek Platonic philosophy sipped into the early

50 Lanfranco Rossi (2000). *I Filosofi Greci Padri dell'escismo: La Sintesi di Nikodemo Aghiorita*. Torino: Il leone Verde, pp.36-37.

51 *Ibid.*, p.31

Christian thought and were accountable for the cheap way some Christians looked at and treated the body. How to accede to the highest form of knowledge? Through meditation, asceticism, the control and submission of the senses, one aimed at clearing the self from any handicaps that would prevent it to be united with the spirit nous. The body is viewed as a prison, a cage, the tomb that engulfs the soul; the theological reason was that after the fall, the body is only oriented to physical pleasures which hinder the soul's aspiration to spiritual pleasures.⁵² Hence, Greek philosophers, and the hermits who followed their interpretations, tended to view the body as an obstacle to perfection. It couldn't be trusted and should instead be subdued and kept under a strict discipline.⁵³ For this purpose, philosophers practiced asceticism.⁵⁴ Monks in search for higher knowledge also practiced it. In later development, even the mitigated position of those aware of the Church's condemnation of Origene's body phobia, did not completely erase the perception of the body as an impediment or as being inadequate to engage in the partnership spiritual emancipation requires.⁵⁵

Radical ascetics will consider the perfect collaboration of their bodies as consisting in behaving as if they did not exist; that is, submitting completely to the silencing of their senses; delighting in the dead responses given to

52 Ibid., p.152.

53 This assessment of the role of the body and its practical implications for cultivation are quite different from that set by Taoism which, though demanding a discipline, still meditate for the enhancement of the benefits of the physical body—good health and longevity.

54 Asceticism is known to be practiced in almost all religious traditions as capable of facilitating spiritual experiences. See Walter Kaelber (1987). Asceticism. in Mircea Eliade (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* (p.441). NY: Macmillan.

55 Lanfranco Rossi (2000). *I filosofi Greci padri dell' esicasmo: La Sintesi di Nikodemo Aghiorita*. Torino: Il Leone Verde, pp.151-152.

their perennial requests.⁵⁶ The rationale is simple: spiritual cultivation means returning to the real self, which is naturally oriented to the divine and finds its pleasure in uniting with it. 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. Hence, one who controls these pleasures remains in union with God.⁵⁷ 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. The process of the death to the body-senses could consist in a mental exercise. However, radical ascetics took it as a literal war with one's body. They neglected it, submitted it through flagellation and other forms of penance. But a practical question remained: can the physical body attain union with the divine, or what is the actual role of the body in spiritual meditation? Taoist practitioners would say yes, and Christians will remain mumble.

E. 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 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 origin, and the body. It is also affected by the traditional subscription Christians give to the goal of meditation as

56 Ibid., pp.47-50.

57 “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” Antonio quoted in Lanfranco Rossi (2000). *I filosofi Greci padri dell'escicismo: La Sintesi di Nikodemo Aghiorita*. p.247.

purely spiritual.⁵⁸ On the one hand, Christians will agree with Taoists that the Way sought for is in the self.⁵⁹ For Christians also believe in the immanence of the divine, always present, faithful even when we are unfaithful (Rm. 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.⁶⁰ Finally, there are disparate emphases on the ultimate principle sought for meditation which arise from different hermeneutics of the person.

The Taoists see the body as a small cosmos,⁶¹ while Christian anthropology stresses that the person is created out of love and with an inner aspiration to union with his Creator. The Taoists look at the Dao, the final goal of meditation, emphasizing its immanence, whereas Christians are triggered by the Transcendence of God, who humbly and out of love accepts to dwell in the heart of the practitioner. Though they recognize other benefits meditation can offer to the body, they continue to affirm the importance of the spiritual final-

58 Liu Xiaogan (2001). *The Taoist Tradition of Meditation: History, Transformation, and Comparison*. In Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong (Eds.), *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions* (p.194).

59 "Those who study the Way study what is in the self." See Thomas Cleary (Trans.) (2000). *Taoist Meditation: Methods for Cultivating a Healthy Mind and Body*. p.8.

60 "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." Joseph Ratzinger, # 31.

61 Isabelle Robinet (1997). *Taoism: Growth of a Religion* (Phyllis Brooks, Trans.) California: Stanford University Press, pp.94-95.

ity.⁶² All these differences call for a clarification that would result in uplifting the benefits of practicing a method.

(A) Spiritualized Body

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.*”⁶³ But in the end, what is that “immaterial subtlety” if not a way of saying. A body refined through contemplation and asceticism can still be conceived. But refinement does not abstract the physical body to the normal destiny of every living matter, sooner or later it has to face death and decay. Should that “immaterial subtlety” be understood as “immortal body” such as those of the immortals? Here again, there is a need to specify the literary genre related to the stories of the immortals. Immortality cannot always be interpreted in terms of non-deterioration of the body. This could be supported by the implication of Chuang Tzu’s metaphor of the body as the abode of the spirit or as a house that needs to be parted with once it becomes unfit to be a dwelling. Hence, the most convincing interpretation of that “immaterial subtlety” could be one stressing the spiritual dimension, as result of which the physical body

62 Joseph Ratzinger writes: “*Some physical exercises automatically produces a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth, which resemble well spiritual well-being. To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving spiritual life.*” See Joseph Ratzinger, #28.

63 Thomas Cleary (Trans.) (2000). *Taoist Meditation: Methods for Cultivating a Healthy Mind and Body*. p.99.

reaches a level of tranquility and peace so much that it leads without effort to the spirit. That kind of body lives as if it did not exist; it is as light as the spirit. It can indeed be addressed as a spiritual body.

Christianity does not completely deny that meditation can impact the body. However, for reasons discussed earlier, the importance of those phenomena for cultivation is played down. The Catholic tradition does recognize the physiological transformations resulting from the praxis of meditation. Cases of levitations,⁶⁴ cases of “trasverberazione”⁶⁵ usually associated with St. Teresa of Avila, stigmata such as those of St. Francis, P. Pio, etc. All these are physiological changes resulting from spiritual praxis of which few people talk about. They occur but their importance is very relative for the enhancement of spiritual life. They can't be developed into a method and likewise there is no school where one can learn how to acquire them. All these elements are hinting to the fact that the lack of emphasis on the role of the physical body and 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.”*⁶⁶

64 The best illustration for this kind of this form of ecstatic manifestation is Giuseppe da Copertino, a Franciscan monk who lived in the 17th Century and came to be nicknamed as flying Monk because he was seen lifted in height and flying as result of his meditation. For more details see <http://www.comune.osimo.an.it/gicom/vita.htm>.

65 “trasverberazione” refers to a state of religious ecstasy characterized by greatly reduced external awareness and expanded interior mental and spiritual awareness which is frequently accompanied by visions and emotional/intuitive and sometimes physical euphoria.

66 Theresa of Jesus quoted in Joseph Ratzinger (1989). “Letter to Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation”. #23.

(B) Fostering Meditation Methods in a Cross Cultural Context

The demand for methods for spiritual cultivation is opening up a market for real practitioners. In the West, the failure of the scientific revolution to fully satisfy the deepest human longing is turning more and more people to explore areas that up to now were restricted to some particular social groups. Indifference and atheism, both expressions of the devaluation of religious language, are not the only challenges religion faces in traditional Christian countries. There is also the search for novelty, especially in terms of techniques that facilitate an easy access to experiencing the divine.

Today's world is filled with people who like the Russian Pilgrim. Mikhail Kozlov⁶⁷ are searching for mysticism and faster ways to experience the divine. Those searching for methods of meditation might be willing to try and embrace any method without previously checking how it relates to the structure of one's background.⁶⁸ For instance, westerners engaging in Eastern meditation methods, such as those provided by Taoism, might be delighted by

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

68 See Liu Xiaogan. (2001). The Taoist Tradition of Meditation: History, Transformation, and Comparison. In Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong (Eds.), *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions* (p.195).

their concision. However, they might also be bewildered by the world views and meanings hidden beyond what they are taught to practice. Likewise, eastern masters while introducing their methods of meditation and spiritual practices should be aware of layers and cultural baggage of their students. That would save from unnecessary impasses, even though integration is always possible.⁶⁹

F. Conclusive Remarks

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 are these goals to the body, suspect the spiritual attainment such a body centered meditation could attain. Their approach is philosophical; it makes an analysis of the essence of the human body tracing its origin and its mission.

Affinities create space for mutual enrichment which is only possible for those who, knowledgeable of the confines of each of the forms of the meditation, can recognize both the richness and limitation found in either method. Practically speaking, this requires clarity of the ultimate goal of meditation, and a continuous vigilance on how helpful are the means chosen to reach that goal. Methods of meditation cannot be an end in themselves.

69 Master Bee, an Italian philosopher and artist whose mystical call led to venture through eastern spiritualities can be offered as a most recent example of such an integration. He has practiced yoga, Zen and Tibetan Buddhist meditation and turned back to his Christian roots where he now expresses his mysticism through religious arts. See F. Catelli (2007) *Storia di un medicante di luce. La Civiltà Cattolica*, April, 158(3763), pp.28-38.

There are some evident affinities between the two religious traditions that leave ample room for mutual enrichment and cooperation. However, differences in emphasis and observation necessitate the need for further dialogue. For instance, Christians maintain that no matter how effective a method is, a creature cannot be identical to the Creator.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the new cross cultural interaction taking place in our globalized world is challenging Taoist practitioners to use different terminology to explain the inner energy which is proper to the Taoist cultivation. The new terminology should facilitate a better appreciation for what remains hidden and of which western practitioners still can't fully partake.

Finally, Eastern and Western schools of meditation have already been interacting in the present time. The future will offer even more chances for interaction. Still, characteristics specific to each tradition need to be further studied and understood in order to render that interaction smooth and mutually enriching. Hermeneutics of these specific traits will be highly graded by whoever is interested in enhancing body-soul integration through spirituality.

70 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*” See Joseph Ratzinger (1989). “Letter to Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation”. #14.

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