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Abstract

In spiritual discipline (asceticism) people seek to transform themselves so as to become virtuous and holy, and hence more pleasing to the gods as well as closer to ultimate reality. Perhaps one seeks to become a saint, a buddha, or an immortal. Various techniques are available for people to use as part of their discipline: meditation, scripture study, pilgrimage, and so on. To better understand the goals and the techniques of spiritual discipline, and to differentiate them, this is the purpose of my research into “Taiwan’s Spiritual Disciplines.”

修行幫人改變自己（成聖）讓神高興。一些人想要成爲一個聖人，一個佛，或是一個仙人。在修行的是候人用不同的方法：像打坐，讀經，朝聖等等。我計劃的目的就是多瞭解這些宗教目標和不同的方法，並且區分它們。

Key Words

spiritual discipline; qigong; mediation; silent retreat; dream interpretation.

Foreword

During the academic year of 2004/2005 my research focused on techniques and traditions of spiritual discipline. Building on prior experience and research in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Protestant Christianity, I sought out opportunities for first-hand knowledge in three new areas: dream interpretation, an ancient technique used in many traditions; qigong (氣功) as practiced in Daoism; and a silent retreat with members of the Society of Jesus, following the “Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola.” This research is part of a long-term project exploring contemporary spiritual discipline. It is too early to reach any conclusions. Instead, I hope to deepen my understanding of this religious phenomenon. In this respect, the year was remarkably helpful. For example, the nine-day silent retreat gave me a concrete sense of the value that silence has in contemplative life, so that I am more able to understand the choice of silence as a tool for spiritual discipline: “Silence, the contemplative knows, is that place just before the voice of God. It is the void in which God and I meet in the center of my soul. It is the cave through which the soul must travel, clearing out the

dissonance of life as we go, so that the God who is waiting there for us to notice can fill us. Any day without silence is a day without the presence of the self.”¹

Purpose of Research

During the past ten years my thinking and teaching has been directed towards understanding the human experience of revelation that lies at the heart of every religion. Indeed, it is revelation—the human experience that is interpreted subjectively as a message from the spirit world—that distinguishes religion from ideology. The latter can also consist of a lifestyle following a system of values and beliefs, similar to religion, but an ideology is based on ideas, human notions about truth. It rejects any belief in revelation, or guidance from spirits.

As I developed my analysis of revelation and its various types, I found myself thinking about the ways in which people seek to build their lives around the experience of revelation and the spiritual reality that revelation signifies for them. I thus distinguished two basic aspects of what we call “orientation” in the religious life: worship and spiritual discipline. In worship people seek to cultivate a relationship with the gods, ancestors, or divine reality—however they envision the spirit world. This parallels relationship among human beings: time is set aside; gifts are given; there is entertainment and expressions of love and appreciation. Spiritual discipline is complementary to but different in purpose from worship: in spiritual discipline people seek to transform themselves to become more pleasing to the gods, to draw closer to the spiritual reality.

Every religious tradition presents a vision of the spirit world and the goal of the tradition: for example, Christians seek to become like Jesus “children of God” and thus experience an intimate, loving relationship with God; the followers of Siddhartha Gautama seek to attain enlightenment and become like him buddhas—free from the cycles of birth, suffering, and death. The goal is realization of absolute spiritual peace and joy. These and other traditions provide guidelines and techniques as well as teachers to help those who seek to reach such goals.

Sometimes the techniques are confusedly identified with the traditions as a whole: for example, many people incorrectly think that meditation is a religion—that practicing meditation opens one up to the experiences of Hinduism or Buddhism, where it is such an important technique. However, meditation is found in multiple religious traditions. And the goals are likewise quite diverse. Meditation, like chanting, silence, retreat, fasting, and so on, is a technique found in spiritual discipline; it is not a tradition.

So the purpose of my research is to clarify through analysis the nature of spiritual discipline. What are the techniques and what are the goals? In addition, it is important to illuminate specific examples to see how the traditions play out in history.

Resources

During 2004/2005 I had the opportunity to explore several historical examples of practice related to spiritual disciplines. Three of these were rather new to me: (1)

¹ Joan Chittister, Illuminated Life: Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light (Orbis: Maryknoll, New York, 2000), 107-108.

Montague Ullman's Experiential Dream Workshop; (2) Daoist qigong with Master Gu Li Neng (古立能); and (3) a nine-day silent retreat at Manresa House, a spirituality center in Chang-hua belonging to the Society of Jesus, a religious order of Roman Catholic Christianity.

In addition, I continued to deepen my knowledge of India's Raja Yoga and Chinese Buddhism, particularly Chan Buddhism (禪). I visited the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist monastery in northern Taiwan and participated in a meditation class as well as their daily group meditation. I had already been to the group's center in New York City on numerous occasions and had there participated also in a meditation class. As for Raja Yoga, I found various ways to explore yoga in Taiwan: visiting a newly opened yoga center in Taichung; participating in regular hatha yoga classes; and working with a Chinese teacher to prepare together a Chinese translation of an Integral Yoga class at the beginner's level.

Method

My method is the comparative-historical method, which combines focus on a theme found in more than one religious tradition with historical methods. Thus, I begin with the conventional research into sacred writings, history, and secondary scholarship concerning the traditions I am investigating.

In addition, after twenty some years as a student in the classroom followed by thirty some years as a teacher and editor, I am somewhat familiar with the literature found in the study of religion: both the scriptures and the scholarly literature. At this time, I seek to integrate this kind of learning with more practical experience: a kind of fieldwork as participant-observer.² Since my topic is spiritual discipline, book learning is not sufficient. I feel like a historian of music, who in addition to reading the scholarship, must also listen to the music!

Conclusions

This project is the first step in a long-term research. During this one year of study, however, a few new insights have emerged: among them, (1) the importance of physical practice for spiritual discipline; and (2) the need for a "neutral," or "secular," presentation of various techniques in a multi-faith, or multicultural, setting.

I have a black belt in Aikido, a Japanese martial art that emphasizes moving with the flow of energy (ki = qi/氣) in order to dissolve conflict situations. My training took place in New York City at a Buddhist temple in northern Manhattan. The sensei (teacher) emphasized the martial aspect of the art; most of the students were young men. Although there was no real teaching on internal qi cultivation, through regular practice the student gained awareness of the body. Mental awareness and physical awareness became unified.

² A good example of the value of this kind of research is to be found in Karen McCarthy Brown's excellent study of Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1991). Brown was a participant-observer in the ritual life of this African-American form of Christianity developed in Haiti. My work differs only in that I focus on a theme found in more than one religion.

In hatha yoga there is no mention of qi. However, all of the poses if practiced correctly develop in the student an awareness of qi and how to direct it to different parts of the body. Some of the practices actually serve to cultivate internal qi: for example, deep relaxation. One begins by focusing on the body and what is sensed in the body in various poses; then the awareness (or consciousness) moves through the body naturally. Every hatha yoga class in the Integral Yoga tradition ends with meditation as its goal.

Earlier in my experience of Chan I found the absence of any physical movement in preparation for meditation a real drawback. Indeed, the first Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was originally a practitioner of Raja Yoga. So he must have had a daily hatha yoga practice. His called his teaching the Middle Way, because it was not as strict as Raja Yoga nor as casual as having no discipline at all. His modifications lay in easing the strictness of Raja Yoga: allowing for fewer physical austerities and permitting householders to practice. Knowing the background of the historical Buddha, I have always wondered why Buddhists didn't practice hatha yoga. So I was happily surprised to discover that today at the Dharma Drum Mountain monastery here in Taiwan a shorter form of hatha yoga is being taught. It is called Dharma Drum's Eight-Form Moving Meditation.³ Still, it is like re-inventing the wheel when there is already a perfectly good wheel in front of you. The poses developed in India's Raja Yoga comprise a technique that could easily be adopted by Buddhists anywhere.

I do know that movement is an important part of qigong. However, Master Gu, who teaches in Taichung, does have students who have no regular physical practice, although he does encourage them to take up Taichi (Tai Ji Quan) . He himself began as a martial artist. Without the help of a physical practice most of the students cannot direct their mental awareness sufficiently into the inner sensations of the body in order to perceive and cultivate the energy within. Eventually they give up altogether. Some get lost in fantasies of the imagination.

Perhaps for most of us the body and its activities (such as breathing) provide us with our first masters in any spiritual discipline. Bringing the mind's awareness into the present is an essential ingredient in all traditions of spiritual discipline. Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh reminds his students of this with the simple meditation that focuses on the breath: "Breathing in, I calm; breathing out, I smile. Living in this present moment, I know it is a beautiful moment."

The second insight that has emerged during the past year concerns globalization and the flowering of multicultural communities. For example, dream interpretation is a technique found in many traditional cultures. Recently, in Western culture dream interpretation has been largely neglected except by the psychiatrists. The result is that ordinary people cease to consider their dreams as having any relations to their religious life. Montague Ullman is a psychiatrist who lives in New York. He was invited to Sweden to teach a group of psychiatrists how to approach the dreams of their patients. So he decided to teach them through "participant-observation." He developed a process allowing a group of ordinary people to work together on the meaning of a dream. The process is totally without religious or ideological influence.

³ See Dharma Drum's Eight-Form Moving Meditation (A Learner's Handbook) published by the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Foundation: Taipei, 2004.

It can be used easily in a multifaith group. At the same time, there is nothing that excludes the “technique” from being used also in a faith setting. Like hatha yoga (a set of physical poses) Montague Ullman’s Dream Workshop provides a neutral technique that can be used in any context.

In Taiwan as in the United States of America many people are drawing on traditional religions—especially their spiritual disciplines—for help in daily living and for finding meaning in life. People may joke about the so-called New Age Movement (which is nothing more than ancient Asian religions being discovered by ordinary Westerners), but my study demonstrates that the benefits derived from religion can and do extend into the community as a whole.

Public Presentations

“Is C. G. Jung’s Process of Individuation a Spiritual Discipline?” Presented on 28 May 2005 at Tunghai University’s Conference on C. G. Jung and Contemporary Spirituality.

Self-Evaluation

In the past the university has sought to provide an open forum for knowledge about the world we live in. All methodologies should be attempted; and all areas of human experience, included. Today, we academics are becoming more and more in danger of creating our own substitute for the real world: our theories, our organizations, our conferences, our literature alone receive our attention. We begin to talk about each other rather than direct our gaze at the world around us. This project, which combines for me the scholarly training that I have had in universities as well as experience gained through “participant-observation,” has helped me to turn my face again in the direction of what is so important in the lives of many religious people, their struggles to make their lives truly meaningful.