

Burbank Leader

In Theory: Dealing with the holiday hustle

December 2, 2010

The busiest weeks of the year are approaching, as people hustle and bustle to get ready for the holiday season. Then there is Lobsang Tenzin Negi, a former Buddhist monk who presides over a Buddhist monastery in Atlanta. He teaches a form of meditation that he says enhances certain skills like compassion, attention, love. It is called compassion meditation, a type of meditation that is at the heart of contemplative practice.

As we approach the holiday season, what tips can you offer such that we become more contemplative so that we don't run the risk of getting caught up in the rush? What personal methods of contemplative meditation, if any, do you use in your own life?

Answer:

This season of the year in our country is certainly a busy, and often hectic, time. And we need all the help we can find to slow down and remember what is really important in our lives. It is for that reason that I practice meditation and centering prayer throughout the year.

I have found real inspiration for this season in the writing of the Rev. Forrest Church, former minister of All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in New York City. He died last year from esophageal cancer, and in his last year he wrote a book titled, "Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow." In that book he reminds us, "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die."

Further, he suggests that there are three ways we can live our lives with spiritual integrity. They are simply to, "want what you have, be who you are," and "do what you can." It sounds so easy, but I believe that following those three directives is probably the most difficult thing we are called to do, this season or any other.

By wanting what we have, Church is not referring to physical things. Instead, he suggests that we need to discover what is truly meaningful in our lives, things such as our religious faith, our families and friends, and the many intangible blessings that are ours.

Being who we are, how could we do anything else? And yet, we are often drawn to do and say things that are not what we truly believe to please others or to follow the messages that are communicated by our media. Church encourages us to delve more deeply into our own sense of values and convictions and to live from that place.

And doing what we can is sometimes the most difficult of all. There are so many important things to do that we can feel overwhelmed. Instead of becoming scattered, we can follow the advice of Unitarian clergyman Edward Everett Hale, who wrote, "I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do."

May we all find peace and blessing in this season.

The Rev. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills,
La Crescenta

Beneath the hectic cycle of activities at this time of year is that increasing pace of modern times. Everything we do appears to demand more of us. Too easily we become trapped in a way of thinking that, if generally accepted, leads to more of the same.

We do not need to accept this. Lobsang Tenzin Negi's compassion meditation is a lovely example of going beyond what is often mere motion.

There may be many instances when we need to make speedy efforts, but that does not mean we need to dwell in an endless cycle of impatient hurry. Even Christ Jesus found moments in his busy schedule to align his priorities, such as when "he went into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God." On board a ship, he "rebuked the wind and the raging of the water: and they ceased" (see Luke Chapters 6 and 8.) He did not accept the necessity of impatient turmoil.

In her book "No and Yes," Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, writes about how, when we "are liable to be borne on by the current of feeling, [we] should then turn temporarily from the tumult, for the silent cultivation of the true idea and the quiet practice of its virtues." That "true idea" can be thought of as the undoubting awareness of God's constant, guiding peace, which cannot be absent or negated.

Regardless of the pressures of the day, we can fulfill our duties with increased grace and a lessening of haste when we take moments to realize that the spiritual calm of our creator is present and active. It's our privilege to do this, to be aware continually of the divine presence that impels a progression of balance and poise in all that we do.

Graham Bothwell

Regional Assistant Committee on Publication

First Church of Christ, Scientist,

La Cañada Flintridge

The act of meditation — "*hisbonenut*," in Hebrew — plays a central role in the mystical teachings of Judaism. Ancient Kabbalistic texts call for daily meditation to facilitate proper focus on the important elements of life. We are instructed to recognize every morning that God has given us life in order to enhance life — ours and that of others.

The pilgrims who initiated this season of Thanksgiving gave humble gratitude to the almighty for all he had given them, and recommitted themselves to the selflessness and altruism that sustained them as a community. Without sounding too harsh, it seems that we Americans have recently transformed these days into frenzied food-fests and shopping sprees that have strayed far from their original intent.

My point is not to dampen the fun of the season — heck, I'm having a grand old time as well. What I would like to stress is that while we're enjoying ourselves by sharing great food and presents with family and friends, we also need to take a moment to remind ourselves that there are many people out there who are, sadly, not as fortunate as we are.

I sincerely hope that during this busy season, each one of us will pause for a moment to stop the merriment — if even for a very short time — and meditate on our responsibility to each another. Take the time to visit a sick child in the hospital and bring him or her a toy and some holiday cheer. Spend a few hours at an orphanage or

stop by a home for the aged and offer some warmth and comfort to those unfortunate souls who don't have family to look out for them.

By doing so, you will really enhance the lives of these people — and equally important, you'll make own your life more meaningful by achieving the great spiritual objective of bringing happiness those who otherwise would not experience it.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center,

Glendale

It is really difficult, first of all, not to get caught up in the commercial Christmas rush. I'd love to say that I meditate a lot, but I can't, because I'm too busy. Seriously, what I try to do, as often as I think of it, is to say a little "thank you" to God for all of my blessings. Such a prayer might not last as long as 10 seconds, but at least it is an acknowledgment of what the season is about: gratitude to God for the "wonders of his love," as the Christmas carol "Joy to the World" says.

Something else that comes to mind is "a still, small voice" (1 Kings 19:12, King James Version). We all need to get in touch with that "still, small voice" in our own way. Elsewhere in the Bible is the command, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

So what I try to do is grab some time to be by myself and ponder again the meaning of the season. It isn't always easy to find that time, but we need to be intentional about finding the time. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the idea of tithing, or giving a 10th of one's income to God, isn't the *last* 10th; it's the *first* 10th, the "first fruits," if you will.

The same could be said for finding time to contemplate or meditate. Make time for that first, and then all the rest should fall into place. Said Jesus, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, ... and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

The Rev. Clifford L. "Skip" Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church,

La Cañada Flintridge

This week's topic couldn't have been better timed. All humanity would be more tranquil and generally better off if no one participated, ever, in any event with a name like "Black Friday." Plus we would be spared the depressing waste of time that is the media coverage before and after.

Even in our up-scale suburbs, garage, yard and tag sales are ubiquitous.

Call them what you will, they (along with self-storage units) are a symptom of a civilization already drowning in stuff, yet so addicted that we invent special days to go out and get more. We will never nourish an inner life as long as managing our crap approaches a full-time job.

But once you do clear a big enough space on your floor, I heartily recommend yoga, which I have practiced since 1970. Its physical discipline and deep breathing helps quiet a racing mind, not to mention easing tight muscles and promoting balance. Classes vary widely. Keep trying until you find a blissful one for you.

Yoga certainly seems compatible with religious beliefs. It may have Hindu origins, as the "Take Back Yoga" movement claims, or be millennia older, as others think (New York Times, Page 1, Nov. 26, 2010).

And while in this general vicinity, any discussion of spirituality, and certainly of meditation, would seem to be far from complete without voices representing Hinduism or Buddhism or any number of other religious traditions of Asian origin. Can we have some here, please?

I also find that lap swimming simultaneously turns me into a mindless blob and helps me think clearer. Go figure. Ditto weeding, jigsaw puzzles and even reading for long stretches.

My achieving both retirement and an empty nest makes quietness easier to schedule. But look around. Maybe shutting off your TV, commuting more slowly by using public transit while reading, or just skipping a shopping trip entirely can make room for more contemplative moments for you.

Roberta Medford

Atheist,

Montrose

Christian meditation requires no particular posture or altered mental state, but simply a commitment to always reflect on the words of God and their application.

While this can be done every waking moment, we must also periodically stop for quiet time to specifically focus on communication with God, undistracted. We call this prayer. Business interferes, but we must strive for it. Our religion is relational, and it's difficult to have a relationship with God without relating. In either situation, God's will informs our behavior, and if we truly grasp the depth of his grace toward us, it should translate into humane compassion.

I realize that some define compassion as just accepting everything anyone does without objection or critical examination, but that's not Christianity. We filter our perspective through the lens of inspired scripture, and ruminate on divine opinion. If the Bible means anything to us, our view of fellow man will be that he is loved by God, yet needful of the Christmas savior. "I was lost but now I'm found," the song goes, and that is true of every true Christian.

So we embrace Christmas with renewed zeal, sharing God's love during this window moment when our culture surrounds itself with the trappings of our holy day. The decorations reflect the savior's lasting influence. The carols lyrically extol the Bethlehem king. And the movies reflect the savior's transforming power, as in the end Scrooge loves everyone and the Grinch's shrunken heart grows by triple.

Currently I'm preaching through the alphabet as an Advent series, helping point every aspect of Christmas to its reason for being. It is *Christ*-mas after all, and if we can imagine all the things beginning with each letter from A to Z having to do with the season, we can surely find the manger babe who is himself the alpha and omega. The alphabet provides just enough letters to make for daily spiritual meditation up until Christmas Eve, and that should keep our holiday frenzy in proper perspective. Or so I hope.

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church,

Montrose

Unity uses a five-step prayer process referred to as "Centering Prayer":

First step: Relaxation. Quieting the body by closing the eyes, deep breathing, sitting upright so the energy can flow up and down the spinal column, sending thoughts of relaxation and peace to the body, releasing anxious thoughts and opening the mind to an awareness of God.

Second step: Focus (Concentration). Think about God, your higher power, focus your mind on a single thought or scripture that resonates with you. Repeat this idea over and over (either silently or out loud) until it becomes your only thought, for example, "I am one with God."

Third step: Meditation. Allow this focused state of mind to move you into a deeper awareness of God. "Be still ... and know that I am God." Be still as you connect with the divine presence within you.

Fourth step: The Silence (Realization). This is entering "The secret place of the most high," the closet of prayer, within. In the Silence, you commune with your inner power and listen to what God (your higher power) has to say to you. Resting in the Silence is the purpose of meditation.

Fifth step: Giving Thanks. Let gratitude be your heart's joyous response to the experience of communion with God and infinite goodness. Give thanks for what you have received and for all the blessings yet to appear. "Thank you, God."

Open your eyes and slowly become aware of your surroundings. You will feel refreshed, encouraged and ready to go about your day.

The Rev. Jeri Linn

Unity Church of the Valley,

La Crescenta

I've been through a personal odyssey, over the years, from fighting against the holiday stress and trying to insist on Advent stillness to embracing the madness and seeing it as an incarnational joy.

My spell-checker just now wanted me to correct that to "Inca national," (what?) but I really do mean "incarnational" — having to do with the incarnation of God in Christ, which is what we celebrate at Christmas, at least in theory.

Christians believe that when God became incarnate in Christ, when God entered human history and the world in a physical way, all of earthly life was hallowed. (Or maybe it already was, and Christ's humanity simply helped us see that.) Differently from some religions, we view material reality as good, as blessed, as holy, not as an illusion or distraction to be transcended. We believe that God is to be found within and through the material

world, as well as beyond it. The reason we believe that is because Christ, who for us is the ultimate revelation of God, was a flesh-and-blood person, who walked among us along the roads of the physical world.

God revealed in physicality. Christ's messy, suffering, struggling, compassionate human life as an icon through which we see and know the holiness of God is what we celebrate at Christmas.

So the journey I've taken is from trying to keep the God-parts of the season separate from the bustle, remembering that God is incarnate in human life and all its busyness and messiness and madness. The bustle is blessed, too.

I still light my Advent candles and steal what quiet moments of Christmas-tree gazing that I can, just to stay sane. But I no longer confine the holiness of the season to those moments. Christ, the incarnation of God's joy, is out there walking the malls and oohing and ahing at colored lights and dancing to carols blared over loudspeakers and laughing when my finger gets caught in the perfect ribbon I'm trying to tie.

It's all God — that's what Christmas is supposed to teach us.

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church,

La Cañada Flintridge

I begin most days by reading a few chapters from the Bible in a quiet setting, and spending some time in prayer. Reading scripture exposes us to good things to think about, eternal things that are true and uplifting and helpful. Scripture also puts the hype and distraction of the world in proper perspective.

Reading the Bible helps us follow the beneficial principle expressed in Philippians 4:8: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things."

Prayer is how we directly speak to God, and listen in silence for the leading of his spirit. Prayer is directly related to receiving peace from God during busy times. "Be anxious for nothing," says Philippians 4:6-7, "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

These simple yet profound practices are important year-round, but are especially helpful when the extra pressures of the holidays come upon us. Of great help also is the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in us. God promises to give the eternal presence of his spirit to all who receive Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit in turn produces "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness [and] self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). Which of us couldn't use more of these?

This holiday season, take time for God every day. It'll save you from the time and effort that frustration, hurry and self-direction always cost us. And you'll be an example to others of what the holidays are really about — God making a difference in our lives through Jesus Christ, his son.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank