

Is Meditation a Thing for Children?

Let the little children come to me... for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. In truth I tell you, anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

(Mark 10:14-15)

Introduction

Is meditation a thing for children? Can they meditate? Should they meditate? In this talk I intend to address these questions, first appealing to the Christian tradition, then considering what writers such as Sofia Cavalletti, Madeleine Simon and Laurence Freeman have to say about children's spirituality, and finally drawing from the experience of schools and children today. In a second talk I'll address some of the practical considerations involved in taking up the teaching of meditation to children.

The practice of meditation can take many forms, but for the sake of clarity, let me state up front that what we are considering here is a mantra-based way of silent prayer, following the teaching of John Main (1926-1982).

Meditation and the Christian Tradition

Some answer the questions above with a resounding 'No!' in the belief that teaching children such a practice is leading them down a New Age path to the occult and its associated dangers or to forms of Eastern religion. Such a response is largely a matter of ignorance, I think, arising from a lack of a sense of church history. This particular way of prayer, as you know, has been part of the Christian tradition since the early centuries of the Desert Fathers and Mothers and has its roots in the gospel teaching of Jesus on prayer. It is clearly central to contemporary church teaching too. What the Catechism of the Catholic Church describes (2668) is precisely this way of prayer:

The invocation of the holy name of Jesus is the simplest way of praying always. When the holy name is repeated often by a humbly attentive heart, the prayer is not lost by heaping up empty phrases, but holds fast to the word and "brings forth fruit with patience." This prayer is possible "at all times" because it is not one occupation among others but the only occupation: that of loving God, which animates and transfigures every action in Christ Jesus.

At the same time, practices dubbed 'New Age' are popular among many young people today. Why is this so? The Pontifical Councils for Culture and Interreligious Dialogue in their reflection, *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life* (2003:7), propose a self-critical answer.

It should be recognized that the attraction that New Age religiosity has for some Christians may be due in part to the lack of serious attention in their own communities for themes which are actually part of the Catholic synthesis such as the importance of man's spiritual dimension and its integration with the whole of life, the search for life's meaning, the link between human beings and the rest of creation, the desire for personal and social transformation, and the rejection of a rationalistic and materialistic view of humanity.

The document (: 13-14) explains further.

The appeal of New Age religiosity cannot be underestimated. When the understanding of the content of Christian faith is weak, some mistakenly hold that the Christian religion does not inspire a profound spirituality and so they seek elsewhere. The success of New Age offers the Church a challenge. People feel the Christian religion no longer offers them – or perhaps never gave them – something they really need. The search which often leads people to the New Age is a genuine yearning: for a deeper spirituality, for something which will touch their hearts, and for a way of making sense of a confusing and often alienating world.

By not teaching our children and young people to meditate are we denying them their inheritance? Are we shutting up the kingdom of heaven in their faces, neither going in ourselves, nor allowing them to enter? (See Matthew 23:13.)

Roy Lowe (2009:23) in a book dedicated to early childhood studies presents the theory of the American scholar Lloyd De Mause who argued in the 1970s that “the habits and practices which were imposed on children throughout history offered the only meaningful explanation of how they subsequently performed as adults” and that it is therefore “not possible to understand human history without first understanding how the main protagonists had been reared: the kind of childhood they had experienced.” If we follow this line of thinking we may well ask what sort of world will emerge if we teach all our children to meditate?

Capacity for Contemplation

Should children meditate? Can they meditate? The fact of the matter, according to a number of writers and attested to by the personal experience of many educators, is that children have an innate capacity for meditation: they are born contemplative. Penny Sturrock, the editor of Madeleine Simon’s book *Born Contemplative: Introducing Children to Meditation* (p. xvi), states the following:

Children are born contemplative... ‘Young children have a great openness to the presence of God in their lives and a real readiness for prayer’. We, parents, grandparents, teachers, and other significant adults in their lives have a responsibility to lead them ‘to a real and profound interior silence which is the first requisite of listening’ to ‘God [speaking] to their hearts[where] they can discover the love of God for each of them personally’.

Sofia Cavalletti, the originator of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, agrees with this assessment in a number of statements such as “transcendent reality seems to be so apparent to the child” (1992:47), and “early childhood is primarily the time of the serene enjoyment of God” (:74-75).

A third voice, that of Laurence Freeman (2008), currently leader of the World Community for Christian Meditation, attests to this capacity of the child from personal experience.

Children are natural contemplatives in some ways, not fully conscious, but because of their relative lack of self-consciousness, they are able to enter fully into what we call the contemplative dimension. The less self-conscious we are, the more contemplative we are, and the more ordinary and open we are as well. It’s a very wonderful thing to pray with children. We have many small groups of children, meditation groups, usually started by parents who have been meditating for some time, and who feels a natural sense of wanting to introduce their children as early as possible to this dimension of prayer. It’s a wonderful thing to see that and to see how naturally, how ordinarily a child can sit in stillness and in silence and do this inner work that Cassian describes, the work of saying the mantra. The child doesn’t necessarily find it easy, but they find it natural.

Given that this is so, and reflecting again on the thoughts of DeMause with regard to childhood experience and its long-term effect, it is sad to note that this capacity has not been acknowledged and therefore, to a large extent, been allowed to atrophy. William Wordsworth, in his *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, expresses this regret.

*There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day.
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.*

*The Rainbow comes and goes,
And lovely is the Rose,
The Moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare,
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair;
The sunshine is a glorious birth;
But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.*

St John of the Cross describes the soul as “an unopened parcel and only God knows what He has put in it.” Wordsworth, in this poem, is experiencing the unopened parcel which is now covered over with many layers of wrapping and string tied with hard knots. But in childhood the parcel is almost transparent. Consequently, says Laurence Freeman (Simon 2010: xiii), “if we can help children to see this in themselves at the beginning of their life’s journey we will have gone a long way to fulfilling our responsibility to them and also to remembering that we too were ‘born contemplative’.

The many layers of wrapping in the adult soul, I suggest, are there for security, a need arising from fear of the inner desert that everyone seeking God must travel through. But the transparency that children experience allows them to agree with the Little Prince who says, “What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well...” Is this perhaps why Jesus says, “In truth I tell you, anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it”(Mark 10:15).

Readiness for Meditation

Given this inborn capacity, it follows that children have a readiness for meditation. Unlike adults who, having reached the stage of logical thought, “tend to have questions and queries when coming to this form of prayer for the first time,” children “take to it like ducks to water” (Simon 2010:2). John Main, whose work was the inspiration for the founding of the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), shares his experience of this ease with which they come to meditation:

The children who come to our monastery to meditate are a marvellous witness of the naturalness of this way of meditation. They are a real example for the adults who come. They show the essential childlike quality that we need to tread the way (:7).

Another writer, Theresa O’Callaghan Scheihing (Simon 2010:16), stresses a similar sentiment:

Once invited into the silence and privacy of their own inner core, they [the children] simply come aglow. Theirs is a knowledge of contemplation that comes from within, a knowing that was present long before I ever met them. I cannot stress this enough. It does not take any technical knowledge to engage in contemplation. There are no course requirements, no necessary books to read. Everyone, especially every child, has an innate aptitude for contemplation.

Not only are children ready for it, but “they have the right,” says Laurence Freeman, “to be introduced to a way of being in which they experience no threat, no competition, no exploitation, no distraction... If we underestimate their capacity for contemplation, we fail them” (Simon 2010:xiii). Those who are working in school systems around the world find not only that children are ready for it but that they like to meditate, ask for it when the teacher may have forgotten it, and even “choose to meditate in their own time after they have got used to practising it in their school environment” (Laurence Freeman in Battagin 2012:xiii)

Educating Children

The importance of spiritual development in education is not only recognised within religious circles. The 1996 report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, *Learning: The Treasure Within (Highlights, p. 37)*, notes that “formal education systems tend to emphasize the acquisition of knowledge to the detriment of other types of learning; but it is vital now to conceive education in a more encompassing fashion.” It therefore strongly recommends that education throughout life is based on four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be: learning to be

so as better to develop one’s personality and be able to act with ever greater autonomy, judgement and personal responsibility. In that connection, education must not disregard any aspect of a person’s potential.

Earlier in the report (p. 16), attention is drawn to “the tension between the spiritual and the material.”

Often without realizing it, the world has a longing, often unexpressed, for an ideal and for values that we shall term ‘moral’. It is thus education’s noble task to encourage each and every one, acting in accordance with their traditions and convictions and paying full respect to pluralism, to lift their minds and spirits to the plane of the universal and, in some measure, to transcend themselves. It is no exaggeration on the Commission’s part to say that the survival of humanity depends thereon.

Our urgent task as educators of children is then to foster in them the development not only of mind but of heart as well (Green 2011:26) so that they become aware of another way of relating to themselves – beyond competitiveness and consumerism (Freeman 2013:30, Green 2011: 18), and so come to an experience of union with God (Freeman 2013:33). We need, as Pope John Paul II (1984) said, “to help them not to suffocate but rather to nourish their innate amazement in the face of creation and to reflect on it in order to grasp its perfection. To educate to this attitude,” he adds, “it is indispensable that the child be led to a real and profound interior silence which is the first requisite for listening.”

In a document nearly twenty years later, *Spiritus et Sponsa* (2003: 13), John Paul II emphasizes again the need for an education in silence.

One aspect that we must foster in our communities with greater commitment is the experience of silence. We need silence “if we are to accept in our hearts the full resonance of the voice of the Holy Spirit and to unite our personal prayer more closely to the Word of God and the public voice of the Church”. In a society that lives at an increasingly frenetic pace, often deafened by noise and confused by the ephemeral, it is vital to rediscover the value of silence. The spread, also outside Christian worship, of practices of meditation that give priority to recollection is not accidental. Why not start with pedagogical daring a specific education in silence within the coordinates of personal Christian experience?

In the context of Religious Education, the balance of mind and heart in faith education of children will be achieved by introducing them to tradition, Church, community, scripture and worship on the one hand – kataphatic knowledge (education of the mind), as well as to personal spiritual experience – apophatic knowledge (education of the heart) (See Christie 2008:10).

The Townsville Experience

In 2006, the Catholic Education Office in Townsville, Queensland, Australia took this call to heart and initiated a project, under the leadership of the Executive Director, Cathy Day and Director of Learning, Teaching and Catholic Identity, Ernie Christie, to introduce Christian meditation to their 31 schools and some 12 000 students. They had the full backing of their bishop, Michael Putney and support from the World Community for Christian Meditation based in London.

The rationale for the project is stated in a Position Statement thus:

The world teaches children and young people a set of values – but are these values conducive to the making of a better world? Are these values transformative? Western culture invites excitement, not silence; activity, not stillness. Students are therefore often over-stimulated and restless. It is vital that education responds to such social challenges by presenting and teaching an alternative way of being.

Appendix I of *Coming Home: A Guide to Teaching Christian Meditation to Children* (Christie 2008:108-111) gives an overview of the stages of the project which began by offering an extensive training programme to specially selected teachers from 12 schools who then introduced meditation to their classes over a trial period of 12-18 months. After the trial phase, the project was expanded to all 1500 teachers in Townsville Catholic schools. The work is ongoing with continuing support for the teachers, which includes two intensive formation retreats for teachers every year. Testimonies from teachers at various levels can be found on the Coming Home website (www.cominghome.org.au).

[DVD Coming Home extract (7:24)]

The effects of the project are seen beyond the classroom. “Many schools,” according to Day and Christie (2008), “have adopted Christian Meditation as their staff prayer and at least once a week interested staff meet for meditation before school. The diocese of Townsville,” they report, “is actively fostering Christian Meditation as a particular experiential prayer experience and in turn there has been a renewal of interest in other forms of contemplative prayer

The Townsville initiative has sparked interest around the world and there are similar projects in various stages of development in 25 countries including Canada, Mexico, USA, Fiji, England, Ireland and since 2012 in South Africa.

The South African Experience

The Townsville project came to our attention through a presentation given at a Religious Education Seminar hosted by the Australian Catholic University in Sydney in July 2011. Such was the impact of this presentation that we immediately decided to bring the message to Catholic schools throughout South Africa. We were generously assisted with resources by Catholic Education, Townsville and over the next few years presented a total of 26 introductory workshops in 19 centres.

Schools that expressed definite interest in implementing the practice were supported with resources and workshops for the whole staff so that there would be a wider understanding of what was being introduced. To date, relatively few schools have taken this step, but if the experience of teachers in Fiji is typical, the seed is slow to germinate. Denise McMahon (2015), WCCM National Coordinator in that country writes: “Although successive generations of children living near the Prayer Centre have

learned how to meditate and we have noticed the visible positive effects which it has had on them, Christian Meditation in the schools in Fiji has taken quite a number of years to be accepted and appreciated.”

To help the seed to germinate, we have employed two main strategies – a round of nine seminars in five cities presented in September 2015 by Ernie Christie and Cathy Day, and monthly communication of materials for personal reflection and classroom teaching with some 250 interested teachers and catechists.

What Children Say

To give you some idea of the impact that meditation is having on children and young people in our schools, I offer a selection of verbatim answers from a class of Grade 8 students to three questions posed:

- Describe in detail your experience of our meditation time in class
 - At first I found it very difficult because whenever I tried to clear my mind I would just get all these thoughts about things that upset me and I never spoke about before. (Ayanda)
 - It is really relaxing and it takes my mind off all things happening around and what is troubling me. I tend to feel much safer when we are meditating. (Lerato M)
 - The first thing I thought is that it is very difficult and a waste of time. The second session I felt more relieved and free and I fell deep into it. (Kamogelo)
- Do you enjoy meditating? Motivate your answer.
 - I feel it makes me a better person. I become more calm and considerate towards others. ((Zamokuhle)
 - It releases tension. When I feel depressed meditation calms me down and helps me get out of my depression. (Kiara)
 - Meditation makes me happy and I feel more energised deep down in my soul. (Lerato N)
- What challenges do you face when meditating?
 - Falling asleep or not focusing (Ayanda)
 - I get easily distracted sometimes and my mind goes other places (Bokang)
 - When I say a prayer word and it slips out of my mind, I start thinking about other things. (Hloniphile)

While there is general positivity expressed in these responses, students clearly do not find the practice easy. What we stress is that we should not try to assess our meditation. It is not about success but about fidelity. What we experience in meditation is not the point, but rather how gradually the practice begins to effect positive changes in our lives.

Benefits for Children

We introduce meditation to Catholic schools in the first place not as a technique for mental or physical wellbeing but as a spiritual discipline. Nevertheless, besides the spiritual fruits of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22), meditation has many other benefits, all confirmed by scientific research. Initial research into the Townsville project by Jonathan Champion of St George’s University, London, and Sharn Rocco of James Cook University, Townsville showed – among others – the following results:

- Meditation has the potential for improved ability to manage stress and calm self, improved attention/concentration, reduced anger impulsivity, and improved interaction/empathy
- Meditation has the potential to improve academic outcomes and prevent stress, mental illness as well as risk taking behaviour

- Many participants also reported that the experience of meditation at school had prompted them to meditate outside school, particularly at times of stress.
- A whole-school approach appeared to facilitate more regular practice.

In an article covering a range of areas which relate to education and meditation, the same Jonathan Campion (Green 2011: 29) makes the link between meditation and mental health. He notes that the majority of mental illness begins before childhood, with half of life-time mental illness arising by the age of 14 (:30). He argues therefore that the early years are a particularly important time for the promotion of mental health and resilience (:31), and he advocates school-based meditation (:36) as having the potential to result in many of the characteristics that mark a state of mental health which, he says:

is more than just the absence of mental illness. It results in a broad range of benefits including improved educational outcomes, healthier lifestyles and reduced health-risk behaviour, reduced mental illness, reduced anti-social behaviour, reduced crime and violence, stronger social relationships, increased productivity at work, more flexible thinking, improved physical health and reduced physical illness and rates of mortality.

To sum up the fruits of meditation for children and young people, Ernie Christie (2008:33-36) describes four basic changes that can be expected from meditation:

- Personal well-being and harmony
- Self-knowledge and acceptance
- Personal relationship with God
- The experience of community

A comment on the last of these from Laurence Freeman (Green 2011:19) is apposite, especially in view of the grave difficulty the world is experience today of recognising the one human family. He writes:

School is one of the first strong experiences that children have of a social environment outside of their own family. If they can learn to meditate with their class, they are also learning at a deep level that they are social beings. Meditation in a school setting can be adapted to a single faith, in a secular way, or in a class of mixed faith. Meditation highlights the distinction between faith and belief. (Faith is our capacity for relationship, forgiveness and transcendence). And so it is possible to build communities of faith with people of different beliefs. This is our future – and so the teaching of meditation is prophetic.

Conclusion

Perhaps enough has been said to put the case for teaching meditation to children. But there is a spin-off for the teacher too. “Teaching meditation in the classroom and at home,” says Laurence Freeman (Simon 2010: xiii), “helps us both to care for the child and to learn to reactivate our own spiritual lives,” for we shall then be walking a way of wisdom (Christie 2008:9).

“We will learn so much,” says Madeleine Simon, “if we discipline ourselves really to listen to children as Jesus surely did. We will then understand something of the awe which led him to exclaim in gratitude to the Father and thank him for showing to little children things which are hidden from the wise and learned” (2010: 57)

References

- Battagin, Jeannie. 2012. *A Child's Way: How to Teach and Practice Christian Meditation with Children*. Singapore: Medio Media
- Campion, Jonathan, and Rocco, Sharn (2009) Minding the mind: the potential and effects of a school-based meditation programme for mental health promotion. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, 2 (1). pp. 47-55.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church. 1993. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM <20 April 2016>
- Cavalletti, Sofia. 1992. *The Religious Potential of the Child*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications
- Christie, Ernie. 2008. *Coming Home: A Guide to Teaching Christian Meditation to Children*. Singapore: Medio Media
- Christie, Ernie & Day, Cathy. 2008. Teaching Christian Meditation to Children in *Echoing the Word*, Vol 7 No 4
- Delors, Jacques & others. 1996. *Learning: The Treasure Within (Highlights)*. New York & Geneva: UNESCO
- Freeman, Laurence. 2008. *The Ego on our Spiritual Journey I* Meditatio Talks Series 2008A (Jan-March).
- Freeman, Laurence (ed.). 2013. *Meditation with Children*. Miami: Convivium Press
- Green, Jim (ed). 2011. *The Meditation Journal: Education*. London: Meditatio
- John Paul II. 6 December 1984. Discourse to participants of the National Congress of the Italian Association of Catholic Teachers
- John Paul II. 4 December 2003. *Spiritus et Sponsa*: Apostolic Letter on the 40th Anniversary of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*
- Lowe, Roy. 2009. 'Childhood through the Ages' in Maynard, Trisha & Thomas, Nigel (eds) *An Introduction to Early Childhood Studies* (Second Edition). London: SAGE Publications, pp. 21-32
- McMahon, Denise. 2015. 'Christina Meditation in Fiji Schools' in *Meditatio Newsletter*, Vol 39 No 1, p. 10
- Pontifical Council for Culture & Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. 2003. *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life. "New Age": A Christian Reflection*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa
- Simon, Madeleine. 2010. *Born Contemplative: Introducing Children to Christian Meditation*. Singapore: Medio Media
- Townsville Catholic Education Office. *Position Statement: Teaching Christian Meditation to Children and Young People*.