

Three lies and a half-truth

When it comes to understanding meditation,
Christianity and neuroscience are closer
than you might imagine

BY THERESE DESCAMP

When I teach about cognition and prayer, I often start with an exercise designed for failure. I ask the class to cross their legs and arms, slump in their chairs and think of nothing for two minutes. During this period, I remind them regularly and harshly how much time is left and that their minds should be empty.

Afterward, participants invariably speak about their frustration and discomfort. For me, it's the longest two minutes of the course. But I love this exercise. It illustrates the three biggest lies and one half-truth about meditation: that meditation means getting our minds totally quiet; that if we get distracted we're doing it wrong; that there's only one correct, Christian way to meditate; and finally, the half-truth at the root of much suffering, that our goal is inner peace.

Neurobiology presents a problem for the first assumption, that our minds should be totally quiet in meditation. The human brain is made to be anxious; it's designed to scan for incoming danger. Three seconds is the longest we usually concentrate on any single thing unless we exert serious effort.

The stilling of the mind that happens in deep meditation is not a normal state of being, and even seasoned meditators can't sustain it continuously. There is a good reason why Buddhists call meditation "the noble failure" and Christians speak of contempla-

tion as a gift rather than an achievement. There is no way to force one's self into silence and stillness. Force actually makes repose more difficult to find.

Rather, the work of meditation is to find a balance between effort and release. We use willpower to maintain our practice and simultaneously let go of straining. Like all balancing acts, it takes time and repetition. Some days I'm good at it, some days I'm not.

A neuroscientist looking at my brain while I'm attempting to concentrate might say I am activating the parts that govern attention. Doing this repeatedly will strengthen my capacity to attend to myself and others. A religious person watching my practice would tell me that I am engaged in an act of co-creation with the Divine, letting God be in charge. Both of these ways of describing meditation are true.

The second big lie is if I can't concentrate, I'm failing. However, both brain scientists and contemplatives will agree that all my distractions are actually running continuously. The mind is never empty. It's simply more or less engaged with its own busyness. We don't notice all the chatter until we get quiet.

In the past, I've thought that the incessant noise meant I was a rotten meditator. I've beaten myself up for being distracted and at times even ditched the practice altogether. But these days, I'm convinced that living through the mess between my ears — looking at it with the compassion of Christ, gently setting it aside, returning to my practice — is what actually transforms me.

This is the work: with great self-forgiveness, we point ourselves back to centre. The experience of anxiety and discomfort is so common in meditation, there's even a phrase for it: taking out the trash. But distractions come and go. Losing the way and coming back are just part of the process.

If I want to know whether or not I'm making progress, I don't look at what happens when I meditate. I look at my daily life. Am I better able to imagine the feelings of someone I don't like? Do I lose my temper less frequently, conduct myself more generously in intimate relationships? If so, meditation is working.

A neuroscientist might say that when I bring myself back from distraction to a meditative state, I am increasing my neural integration; that is, I am growing new neuronal pathways from the prefrontal cortex down to the limbic system and the brain stem. This brings my normally automatic reactions more closely under conscious control. A Christian might call these changes in behaviour "fruits of the Spirit" — slow-growing, humble results revealed in daily living — and note that accepting God's love and forgiveness for myself enables me to love and forgive others. Both of these ways of describing meditation are true.

Now the third lie, that there's a single correct form of Christian meditation. I'd argue that our early Christian forebears would heartily disagree — as would hundreds of thousands of Christians around the world.

If we believe that God made each of us in our lovely and surprising diversity, then that diversity must also include the ways in which we approach the Divine. Walking a labyrinth,

prayerful journaling, reciting a mantra, practising loving kindness, contemplative Scripture reading, developing breath awareness, becoming attuned to the presence of God: each of these is a valid way to meditate.

What makes Christian meditation Christian is not the particular method we use, but the focus and centre we bring to it: Jesus Christ.

Whether you chant, concentrate on your breath or sing, "Oh thank you, God," to the tune of *O Tannenbaum*, if it's Christ to whom you dedicate your practice, you are engaged in Christian meditation.

A neuroscientist might point out similar brain activations associated with different forms of meditation when we label them Christian. A person of faith might say that each practice allows God into another corner of his or her life. Both of these ways of describing Christian meditation are true.

And now the half-truth: the purpose of meditation is inner peace. Unfortunately, I'm not in charge of what bubbles up in my mind during meditation. Trying to think comfortable thoughts only makes those thoughts more elusive. But if I'm willing to receive whatever comes, I get what's given: some things hard, some joyful. Unpleasant insights into my own character or a call to a difficult situation come accompanied by an invitation to deeper peace.

I'm convinced that living through the mess between my ears is what actually transforms me.

Here's an example. After experimenting with several different practices, I joined a group from the World Community for Christian Meditation. There was one leader who recited a little prayer that ended "so let your God love you."

This phrase stunned me. I had several mental frames for meditation — trying to love God, trying to contact the Divine, trying to please the Holy — but never before had I thought of meditation as a chance to let God love me. I was too busy beating up on myself every time I fell asleep or found myself worrying. I'd judge each thought, judge each session and then judge myself for judging. It wasn't fun.

I had kept at meditation for years because I am stubborn. But if you had asked, I'd have rated my experience as generally lousy.

When I heard "so let your God love you," I realized that I could relax. This wasn't about showing God anything or trying to make contact; it was simply soaking in the love that was always present. The purpose of my practice could be resting in the love of God and letting it fill me up.

Over time, I found the place inside where I felt that love. I even began to be able to feel it when I wasn't meditating, and began to bring that love to my work and relationships.

A cognitive linguist might say that I built a substantial neural net that was available for activation in many situations. A religious person might say that I learned to trust. What I say is that I learned to let my God love me.

All of these ways of describing my meditation are true.

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