

**WISDOM CENTRE**  
FOR THE PRACTICING CONGREGATION



**St. Michael's Spiritual Centre**

and

**Fire and Grace Contemplative Group**

Hillhurst and Wild Rose United Churches

**Silence and Awareness Meditation Retreat  
Following in the Footsteps of  
St. John of the Cross**

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**Frequently Asked Questions**

**The Importance of Silence**

Silence is an integral part of this retreat, which is based on “emptying out”. Eye contact, reading, and writing, as well as speech, dissipate meditative energy. In order to get your best results, please observe the rule of silence very strictly. Silence helps us “Be still and know that I am God”.

**What is retreat life like?**

Retreats follow a typical daily schedule that starts at 6:30 am and ends at 9:30pm. The day is spent in silent practice comprising alternate periods of sitting and walking meditation. Three meals are served – breakfast, lunch and a light dinner.

Each day offers:

- Two Meditation Instruction sessions
- Eucharist
- Group Sitting Meditation
- Walking Practice
- An integrative conference
- Communal Reconciliation
- Question and answer sessions

Comprehensive meditation instruction and talks about the teachings are offered daily. In addition, individual or group interviews with the teachers take place at regular intervals.

A simple, daily Eucharist is also offered on most retreats.

## **What to Bring**

There are two mottos for clothing during your retreat: "Be Prepared" and "Be Comfortable". Weather in Calgary is seasonal and extremely variable, so we recommend that you come well prepared, with clothing selected for comfort rather than style.

Winters are cold, with frequent snow or ice. For walking outside, we suggest you bring a pair of boots or hiking shoes. As your meditation practice deepens, cool weather may affect you more than usual. Even for indoor wear, you may appreciate long underwear, light gloves, a cap or scarf, warm sweaters or a shawl, and heavy socks. Please do not bring clothing in noise-making, rustling fabrics such as nylon.

For your comfort in the dormitory accommodations, be sure to bring loose sweat suits, or other kinds of clothing that allow you to go to sit with ease. Also be sure to bring at least one pair of slippers or indoor-only shoes - this helps contribute to the silence and overall cleanliness of our retreat environment.

At the Retreat Center, please bring a sufficient supply of clothing to last the duration of your course.

Medicines, vitamins, supplements, etc. We ask that you anticipate your needs and bring unscented soap, body lotion and other hygiene products with you.

Please bring your own meditation cushion or bench. Chairs are available for those who cannot sit on a cushion. Please bring any extra meditation props you may need, such as additional cushions, a meditation stool, a shawl or throw rug.

You may want to bring so cash for donations. Books and other items are for sale at the end of your retreat. We do not cash personal checks or have the ability to accept credit cards.

## **What not to bring**

Please do not use scented hygiene products, cell phones, beeper watches, candles, incense or 'noisy', rustling clothing. This retreat will be held in verbal and mental silence so you will not require reading or writing materials.

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### A Reflection on Vipassana by Father Peter Loudes<sup>1</sup>

*People who know I am a priest sometimes wonder what a Catholic priest is doing in a Buddhist centre.... Thomas Merton remarked he felt more in tune with D.T. Suzuki (a Zen Buddhist) than with the average Catholic mass-goer. I am no Merton, but ...I often feel so in my ministry. Spirituality is a lifelong quest for me. I have dared to search for it in waters outside of the Bark of Peter.*

*How does that square with my Catholic affiliations? I think Vipassana is one way of reaching the goals of the mystical spirituality of my Catholic tradition.*

*The theory (or theology if you will) of the Vipassana technique does not generally fit with my Catholic theological world view. But I do not think that is important.*

*The reason why I do not think it is important is this: I consider my Christian theology just one way of interpreting and talking about transcendent experience. I think the experience is more important than talking about it. In the experience, I feel closer to the mystics of Christian tradition and to those of our Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist traditions, that to our theologians and mass-goers.*

*In my Christian tradition, I think, "theological spirituality" is more dominant than the mystical one. I seem to find that in (Vipassana) the mystical is all. It reaches out so heart-warmingly to the really Real and will not settle for anything less.*

*Does not the Christian tradition have the same thrust? I believe it does, but it does not seem to have a simple and clear-cut method like Vipassana. Whatever methods it had may have died with the monasteries.*

*Where I am at present in my spiritual journey, I feel hungry for the ineffable God of our humanity rather than the talked-about God of our theology and Sunday school.*

*Although I do not wish to be messianic, I often feel sad that I cannot interest all my fellow Christian in the mystical dimension of our common human thirst for the Beyond.*

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<sup>1</sup> Father Loudes is a priest with a degree in psychology from Rome and a PHD from Loyola University of Chicago. [A Catholic Priest on Vipassana, Sayagyi U Ba Khin Journal, 1991](#)

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## A Students Experience Practicing Christian Insight Meditation

My question came at the end of a weekend retreat with Father Thomas Keating at the FCJ Centre in Calgary: Does Buddhist Vipassana or insight meditation open you to the Holy Spirit? Father Thomas' answer came quickly but also with an accompanying question, "Yes, but have you tried Christian Insight meditation with Dr. Mary Jo Meadow?" Thus began my search to acquire Mary Jo's books and attend one of her nine day Silence and Awareness retreats.

In June 2006 I traveled to the Franciscan Mt. Alvernia Retreat Centre in upstate New York to finally take part in one of the silent retreats taught by Mary Jo Meadow. The retreat centre was beautifully located in the hills of the Hudson Valley and most of the retreatants had sat the course before. Many were in religious life, nuns and priests of the Discalced Carmelite order but there were a handful of lay people, as well as an Anglican priest from Grimsby, Ontario.

In the retreat Mary Jo teaches the Buddhist practice of Vipassana, or insight meditation within the framework of Christian contemplative prayer found in Carmelite spirituality, especially in the life and writings of John of the Cross and the illuminating writings of Teresa of Avila. A secular Carmelite herself, a Sister for Christian Community, a clinical psychologist, and a retired professor emeritus of religious studies, Mary Jo was an inspiring speaker and teacher as she led us through the days of silence with sitting and walking meditation times, daily Eucharist, and illustrative discourses.

The retreat began with a day of loving kindness practice, a practice which over time helps you develop a loving heart toward all beings and to yourself. Then the real work began as we learned and practiced the method of insight meditation. Mary Jo gave daily talks about the writings of John of the Cross which helped to connect mind with spirit and practice.

The writings of John of the Cross are based on his personal experiences and serve as guidelines into this apophatic type of prayer. John of the Cross taught that we need very deep self-knowledge to lead a moral life and to know God. Insight or mindfulness practice helps us to see patterns in our lives – ways that we set ourselves up for repeated unhelpful behaviours, patterns of emotions and ways of living. John said we have to see our clinging all the way to the very depths of our beings which, as the meditative work progresses, we see that our problem is not only habits and actions of behavior but also clinging to unhelpful opinions, memories and emotional reactions. This self knowledge is necessary to know God; we go to knowledge of God through knowledge of self.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Jo Meadow. Mindfulness Practice and Christian Living. Talk given to US Army Chaplains in Washington DC

John of the Cross further said that the less we cling, the emptier we are and the more room there is for God. Doing the practice we just make ourselves present to be worked on by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. <sup>3</sup>

Meditation teaches us how to become very still and to listen. It guides us in letting go of the noisy busyness of our mind-chatter, of craving particular experiences in prayer, of wanting to be in charge of our conversation with God. It teaches how to simply be there listening. Thus, meditation is very intimate prayer, the most deep and humble way we can choose to relate to God.<sup>4</sup>

I have to admit there were many times when the noisy chatter of my mind was infinitely more interesting than the practice. Silence does not mean being unaware of others at times, no matter how hard I tried! There was the “tick” scare – don’t walk in long grass as the ticks carry Lyme disease. Of course I had and I was sure there was an army of ticks hidden in the folds of my skirt! On the last day, talking resumes and talk we did. Although everyone’s experience is their own, there are always the “did you notice” comments that have you laughing and realizing that we all are one on the journey.

Insight meditation has become central to my prayer life and I see it as a method to respond to the two great commandments left to us by Jesus: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ (Mk 12: 30-31). Devoting nine days to silence and practice is a gift to oneself that you cannot appreciate until you step out in faith and undertake the challenge – one that I continue to do annually.

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<sup>3</sup> IBID.

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## **Mindfulness Practice and Christian Living**

Mary Jo Meadow

Resources for Ecumenical Spirituality

Good morning. I am here to tell you how mindfulness practice also well supports Christian living. I will speak of some effects of this practice in Christian terminology. I have not worked with military personnel, but I have brought the practice to prisons--so I have taught in a combat zone.

I teach mindfulness primarily as a spiritual practice. Since 1989, I have been leading a ten-day mindfulness retreat as a way to implement the teachings of Christian saint and mystic John of the Cross. We teach across the USA, and in Canada, Europe, and Australia. Although one of our leaders is a Catholic priest, clergy in many denominations and a full spectrum of lay people attend the retreat. A brief explanation of it is on page three of the buff-colored RES flyers you have been offered. In case there are Jewish religious leaders here, I want to mention that a teacher in California offers the practice in a Jewish setting.

**Misconceptions** I want first to dispel a few misconceptions that some Christians have about meditation. It is not dangerous. Probably you would not be here if you believed that it opens your mind to the devil or can let in all sorts of evil forces. However, some Christians do. The truth is that meditation strengthens your mind greatly. It makes it increasingly impervious to any alien content--both that which comes from outside us as well as that which our minds harbor within themselves. Meditation is not mind control; it helps keep you from being controlled by the disturbing thoughts and emotions of the mind. The practice is also not self-hypnosis. Rather than imposing certain beliefs on our minds, as hypnosis does, the practice opens our minds to clearly see the truth of our own beings and lives as they are.

Some people accept traditional Christian forms of meditation, but are doubtful about methods derived from Eastern traditions. Many men and women in contemplative religious orders meditate using Eastern methods or methods based on Eastern forms. Many attend our retreats. For Catholics, the documents of Vatican II urged Christians not only to respect the ancient traditions that predated Christianity, but also to use from them whatever helps develop Christian spiritual life. Mindfulness practice has proved itself to do that.

**Self-knowledge** We start with morality and self-knowledge. Mindfulness practice almost forces greater care with our conduct. The practice draws up into conscious awareness whatever is out of harmony in our lives, bringing an inescapable self-knowledge. People often feel very intense remorse on recalling past bad behavior; this

brings a resolve to abandon whatever action triggered the remorse. People find themselves wanting to apologize to others whom they have hurt.

The practice can dredge up long forgotten things that are buried deep in memory. Because of the way it brings such self-awareness, some others and I also offer it as an eleventh step method for people working twelve step programs. One 12-stepper told me that it brought up everything he drank to get away from. Seeing such buried emotions and motives makes proper self-management much easier.

John of the Cross assumed that meditators want to live a moral life. He taught that we need very deep self-knowledge to do this completely. He knew that meditating would bring us beyond just simple awareness of our outward conduct to a much more penetrating knowledge of self. As our meditation practice deepens, we start seeing patterns in our lives--ways that we set ourselves up for certain outcomes, ways that our upbringing and previous choices have bent us in the direction we are going. It reveals patterns of emotions and thought that keep us locked into unhelpful ways of living. One of my students said that it gives us an owner's manual for understanding our functioning.

John said that such self-knowledge is also necessary to know God. He didn't say that it is one way to know God; he said we go to knowledge of God through knowledge of self. Our minds are clinging to these remnants of our earlier lives--and this, John taught, is a barrier to knowing God. Anything to which the mind clings other than God is a worship that keeps us from God; it is a form of idolatry. So John said we have to see our clinging all the way to the very depths of our beings. As meditative work progresses, we see that our problem is not only habits and actions of behavior. We also cling to unhelpful opinions, memories, and emotional reactions.

Long ago St. Augustine said that our hearts are made for God and will be restless until they rest in God. When we experience the emptiness, hunger, yearning that only God can satisfy, we often grasp at what can never satisfy us. We then find that this "solution" only causes more trouble and suffering. John said we inflict much suffering on ourselves when we desire anything more than God.

**Relinquishing** John of the Cross said that we have to be very empty of all these things to know God. The emptier we are, the more room there is for God. So we have to let go of all objects of clinging. We cannot force this by will power. Anyone who has tried to abandon a bad habit knows this. Doing the practice leads us to seeing in a way that helps our minds relinquish these objects of clinging. We just make ourselves present to be worked on, and it is done in us. We surrender ourselves to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. This helps us to come to the place where we live now, not ourselves, but Christ lives in us. Our part is to remain present to the purification being wrought in us--and the practice is a method for staying present.

We also come to see ourselves differently. As we more deeply know ourselves, we increasingly realize that we are not separate from everything else. I have often told people that the words "the mystical body of the Christ" were just a beautiful notion until I actually experienced it in mindfulness practice. Increasingly, we see not only the connections within ourselves, but also our relatedness and oneness with everything that ordinary vision sees as outside of ourselves. We experience being the body of the Christ.

Such realization helps us let go of emotional bad health--deep-seated grudges and resentments, self-pity, discontent, and the like. It opens us to realize that--just as the unhealed places within us are behind our own problematic thought and behavior--the same is true of other people. We come to have compassion for both others and ourselves because we see the suffering that each of us harbors within.

John also said that we have to let go of ideas about how God is because these are just thoughts in our minds. John called them "the back of God" and said we are not to be content with that, but must long to see God's face. His bottom line is that any thought or image or idea about God that you have is *not* God. If you hold onto it, it will stand in the way of really getting to God as God is. If we truly want to know God, we must let go of everything that we *think*

we know. Jesus once chided the Pharisees for holding that they knew. So, John taught that we must empty out all our notions about God to be able to see behind them.

**Loving attention** John of the Cross taught that two things are necessary to know God: loving attention to God and self-denial. We have talked some about self-denial--about giving up harmful behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. But what did John mean by loving attention to God? Because he held that thinking a lot about God is not the way to know God, we know he didn't mean thinking. He even said that thinking is a barrier. He advised us to "just learn to abide...with a loving, alert attentiveness to God and pay no heed to the imagination." That is, don't go off into paying attention to the creations of your own mind.

In mindfulness practice, we maintain our attention on what we can have of God in any given minute--which is only the experience that God sends us to live in that minute. So we observe our experiences of mind and body without making anything of them, without adding anything to them, or embellishing them in any way in our minds. When we do this, John said, "God will feed you with heavenly refreshment since you do not apply your faculties...but detach them from everything in the simple loving attentiveness."

Mindfulness meditation is a powerful way to practice this attentiveness to God that John prescribed. When we rest content with mindfully watching our experiences of body and mind, we are paying loving attentiveness to the healing work of the Holy Spirit in our beings. We are also practicing self-denial, letting go of thinking and trying to control our experience, participating in the "emptying out" of the Christ, being willing to be the seed that falls into the ground and dies to bear greater fruit. We are living the Paschal mystery of willingly dying so we can rise to new life. We are waiting for the bridegroom with our lamps lit and full of oil. We will not be sleeping when the time of our visitation comes if we remain in mindful awareness.

**Prayer** A word about prayer. We often hog the floor when we have a conversation with God. The prayer of some Christians boils down to reciting formally worded prayers. For those with a more developed sense of intimacy in prayer, prayer may be telling God the news, thanking or praising God, or asking God for some kind of assistance. Both groups often see prayer and meditation as two different activities.

Not seeing meditation as prayer creates unnecessary conflict. Some people have told me that they would love to meditate, but they do not have enough time to do both it and prayer. Realizing that meditation *is* prayer would help them. Meditation is prayer in two major ways: as a conversation with God and as an act of surrendering oneself to God. In John's language, meditation is the practice of loving attention to God and self-denial.

For conversation, you must listen as well as speak. When faced with one who knows more than you do and has more to offer than you have, you profit most by choosing the silence of listening instead of getting in your own words. How much more true this is of prayer! Contemplatives have long said that a much higher kind of prayer is listening. How much better off we are, they say, when we become still to know God.

Meditation teaches us how to become very still and to listen. It guides us in letting go of the noisy busyness of our mind-chatter, of craving particular experiences in prayer, of wanting to be in charge of our conversation with God. It teaches how to simply be there, listening. Thus, meditation is very intimate prayer, the most deep and humble way we can choose to relate to God.

In this listening prayer, we keep our minds attentive to what we are given, and we learn from it. We learn about ourselves, we learn about our lives and relationships, and we learn about God. We cannot do this if we are talking all the time. Meditation gives God the floor and is thus the deepest form of prayer that we can practice.

**In summary** In summary:

1. Mindfulness meditation is deep prayer.
2. It fosters morality, care about proper conduct.
3. It brings the deep self-knowledge we need to know God.

4. It develops non-judgmental compassion for others and ourselves.
5. It heals our brokenness and flaws.
6. It empties us of clinging to make room for God.

In these ways, mindfulness meditation fosters Christian living.

In closing, I want to say a few words about our Silence and Awareness retreat. It is traditional mindfulness practice across the day, taught with reference to Christian understandings. I give full meditation instructions, so the retreat works well for beginners as well as advanced practitioners. The evening talks integrate the teachings of John of the Cross with the meditation practice. Our priest leader offers Eucharist daily as an option for those who want it, and all are welcome to attend. Many do, but some choose to meditate during Eucharist time. We offer a question and answer session to answer theoretical questions. Deep silence is observed during the retreat; retreatants do not interact with each other. There is a time for talking and sharing before departure.