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Contemplative investigation into Christ consciousness with Heart Prayer and HeartMath practices

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An exploratory pilot study with a small homogenous sample of Christian English speaking participants (four men and four women, with mean age of 48 and age range from 27 to 70 years) provided support for an alternative research hypothesis that a Christ consciousness contemplation with Heart Prayer of HeartMath techniques was significantly associated with increasing psychophysiological coherence, sense of coherence, spirituality and health perceptions. Participants described feelings of a peaceful place in oneness and connection with Christ. Integrative findings point towards Christ consciousness as an ultimately non-dual process of sensing vibrational resonance radiating from the human heart. Implications for further research are discussed.

Introduction

The English Biblical term 'Christ' derives from the Greek, 'Khritos', the anointed one, or 'Messiah' in Hebrew. When 'Christ' is coupled with 'consciousness', perspectives extend with infinite variety, height and depth. These range from orthodox Christianity to integral Christianity and are inclusive of various other interfaith spiritual and religious movements. All recognise Jesus Christs' presence, as well as gospel teaching, healing and revelations of the kingdom of heaven as a state and stage of consciousness, which is always already present, in the flowing and eternal moment (Smith 2011; Wilber 2007; Yogananda 1979). Some postulate a spiritual, teleological, omega point of creative evolution towards which the loving consciousness of the cosmic Christ continually draws all (de Chardin 1959). From this spiritual perspective, the value of contemplation and action on Christ consciousness seems as relevant today as ever.

In addition to the abovementioned links with other spiritual and religious movements, Christianity itself has developed into the largest organised religion on planet earth today with more believers than any other religion (McLoughlin 2007). Mark's Gospel (12:28–31) is particularly action orientated with regards to the explicit communication to: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' and to: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. These commandments provide perennial, practical theological and pastoral psychological guidelines for contemplation and action (McGinn 2006). The focus of the present study is on Heart Prayer or prayer of the heart, which refers to a particular form of heart based contemplative prayer, originally advocated in Christian Heychastic traditions, where the essential contemplative technique involves heart focussed, continuous repetition of Jesus Christ's name or related phrase (Consiglio 2010; Louchakova 2007a). Studies have reported considerable health, resilience and spiritual benefits of this practice (Edwards 2014; Louchakova 2007a; 2007b).

Spiritual and religious traditions typically converge on the heart as focal point of loving spiritual consciousness. In Hindu, Yogic traditions the heart chakra (*anahata*) expresses unconditional love for spirit, consciousness and all creation (Judith 2004). Taoist chi-gung emphasises subtle consciousness, breath and energy exercises in relation to the central (heart) *tan tien.* The Buddhist heart sutra regards ultimate enlightenment as the union of emptiness and form, realised through loving kindness meditation and action (Reid 1998). Judaic and Kabbalah energy spheres (*sefirot*) pivot on heart *(tiffer et*) beauty, balance and harmony (Childre & Martin 2000). The Prayer of the Heart, which is also found in Islamic Sufi traditions, (Louchakova 2007a; 2007b; Louchakova-Schwartz 2013), forms the essential foundation for centring prayer, which has been popularised by Keating (1997) and Bourgeault (2016), facilitating devotees gestures of surrender to release love through the reciprocal Godly gift of grace.

The HeartMath system refers to a system of scientific, evidence based, heart focussed, health promoting, self-regulation, tools and techniques, developed by the Institute of HeartMath. Founded in California in 1991 and now being global in application, the institute has

pioneered integral, heart focussed research in neuroscience, cardiology, physiology, biochemistry, bioelectricity, physics and psychology. Scientific research is typically integrative, dynamic and systemic in approach. A central vision and mission is to facilitate personal, social and global coherence (Childre, Martin, Rozman & McCraty 2016). Major findings relate to heart communication of electromagnetic, neurochemical, biophysical and hormonal information (McCraty, Atkinson, Tomasino & Bradley 2009). In addition to biofeedback technology to facilitate heartrate variability (HRV) coherence feedback training, this study will use the psychophysiological coherence promoting technique of Heart focussed breathing. Rigorous evidence-based research has indicated that HeartMath practice is associated with significant improvements in sense of coherence (SOC), health, spirituality and various other life spheres.

Within the context of the present study, following Delaney (2005), spirituality was initially conceptualised as:

> a multidimensional, universally experienced phenomenon, encompassing a personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal context consisting of four interrelated domains: (a) higher power or universal intelligence – a belief in a higher power or universal intelligence that may or may not include formal religious practices; (b) self-discovery–the spiritual journey begins with inner reflection and a search for meaning and purpose; … (c) relationships–an integral connection to others based on a deep respect and reverence for life and is known and experienced within relationships …; and (d) eco-awareness – an integral connection to nature based on a deep respect and reverence for the environment and a belief that the earth is sacred. (p. 152)

Both Heart Prayer and HeartMath may be viewed as meditation and contemplation practice. Contemplation may be viewed as inclusive of meditation and prayer in the Christian context. Although meditation is also used in Christian contexts, contemplation has time honoured historical roots derived from the Latin word *contemplatio*, a Catholic, particularly Eastern, Orthodox Church, translation of the Greek *theoria*, the gospel word for divine vision. Keating (1997:21) has noted the tendency to distinguish between 'discursive meditation if thoughts predominated; affective prayer if the emphasis was on acts of the will; and contemplation if graces infused by God were predominant'. It is viewed as a God-given gift, which may or may not be associated with various apprehensions, thoughts, feelings, insights and actions (McGinn 2006:519–520). Christian contemplation generally resembles other contemplative and meditative traditions in terms of altered states of consciousness and unfolding developmental stages of image, *metanoia* (conversion), *apatheia* (purification), illumination and *theosis,* or union with God (Wilber 2007:83). As distinct from such typical stage-like approaches, centring prayer practices objectless awareness (Bourgeault 2016).

In view of studies indicating distinct, individual and separate benefits of contemplation, Christ consciousness, Heart Prayer and HeartMath, the research question arose as to whether their integrative collective practice would be associated with any individual and collective, qualitative and quantitative benefits with special reference to coherence, health and spirituality experiences and perceptions. To the best knowledge of the researchers, this is the first study of its kind. The objective of the ensuing exploratory investigation was to assess and evaluate any qualitative and quantitative, individual and collective coherence, health and spirituality benefits in a pilot study with a small convenience sample of Christian participants. In view of small sample size, the null hypothesis of no significant change was set for any quantitative comparison.

Method

Design

An exploratory, mixed qualitative and quantitative, pre-test and post-test design was considered suitable for this pilot study type investigation. Although found in various religious contexts, the concepts of Christ consciousness and heart prayer practices are essentially Christ inspired and were originally practised by Christians. The study was limited to a small homogenous convenience sample of practising Christians, with some consciousness, understanding knowledge and experience of the phenomenon of Jesus Christ, as historical personage and de facto founder of the Christian religion. All had some knowledge of HeartMath techniques. Christ consciousness, Heart Prayer and HeartMath practice were viewed as independent variables. Psychophysiological coherence measures of low, medium and high coherence percentages, coherence levels, coherence score, achievement score and psychometric measures of SOC, spirituality and health perceptions were regarded as dependent variables. Of these measures, only the spirituality scale was previously standardised for South African participants. This is not necessarily a limitation in the context of the present small scale study with a within group, test re-test design.

Participants and context

Participants consisted of a convenience sample of eight persons, four women and four men, with a mean age of 48.3, standard deviation (SD) of 17.8 and age range from 27 to 70 years. All participants were of Protestant, Anglican Christian faith background, of the same English speaking community church, who attended services regularly, thus satisfying small homogenous sample requirements with regard to experience of the research phenomena (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter 2006).

Procedure and data generation

After appropriate establishment of rapport and discussion with regard to procedure, all contemplation sessions took place in a relaxed, comfortable and quiet setting. Pre-testing consisted of completion of psychometric measures and 5 min HeartMath recording in a rest condition. This was followed by instructions to:

> please contemplate Christ consciousness through prayer of the heart and repeating the name of Jesus Christ, for at least 15 minutes. Afterwards you will be asked to describe in writing your experience of Christ consciousness.

This was followed by post-testing on the psychometric measures and recording of participants' experiential descriptions. Research notes were kept throughout the process.

Instruments

Psychophysiological coherence variables were measured on HeartMath tools, Inner Balance and emWave2. When attached to a laptop computer, these give readings of heart rate variability, time elapsed, as well as low, medium and high levels of physiological coherence. Feedback consisted of red, blue and green coloured bars with percentage indications and accompanying tones for low, medium and high coherence levels respectively. Further feedback was provided by a cumulative coherence graph with a demarcated area for coherence indicating the zone of optimal autonomic nervous system functioning.

The adapted SOC measure consisted of a shortened nine-item version of Antonovsky's (1987) scale, with a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0.79. Antonovsky's (1987) original scale has three subscales, which measure the degree to which participants perceive their world as manageable, meaningful and predictable. The shortened version used in the present study has been shown to demonstrate high internal reliability and concurrent validity when assessed against Antonovsky's original 29 item measure (Klepp, Mastekaasa, Sorensen, Sandanger & Kleiner 2007). Participants reported their feelings in relation to items such as, 'Do you have the feeling that you don't really care about what goes on around you?' on nine, seven-point Likert-type scale items anchored by the descriptors, 'very often' to 'very seldom'.

The Spirituality Scale consisted of a 12-item adaptation of Delaney's (2005) Spirituality Scale. This was standardised with a South Africa sample of 302 participants and a short 12-item version (SS-12) of the scale was developed (Edwards 2012). Reliability analysis for the SS-12 as a whole indicated a very satisfactory total scale alpha coefficient of 0.82. Responses to items were scored on a one to four point Likert rating system graded from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The Health Scale consisted of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), which is intended to screen for general psychiatric morbidity. Although it has not yet been standardised in South Africa, it has been widely used internationally, and, as a result, translated into many languages and extensively validated in general and clinical populations worldwide (Hankins 2008). A recent study conducted in the United Kingdom indicated that reliability was over-estimated by the reported Cronbach alpha of 0.90 for the Likert scoring method and that a more realistic estimate of reliability was 0.73 (Hankins 2008). The adapted version used in the present study consisted of 12 items, 6 positively phrased and 6 negatively phrased with a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 4, requiring responses of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree, respectively.

Data analysis, synthesis and integration

Quantitative data were analysed using the computer based Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), with specific reference to comparisons of means and non-parametric Wilcoxon Z statistics. Qualitative information was thematically content analysed (Terre Blanche et al. 2006).

Results and discussion

Quantitative physiological coherence and psychological findings

Table 1 refers to pre-test and post-test means and SD for percentage measures of low (LO), medium (ME) and high (HI) psychophysiological coherence, coherence level score, achievement score, SOC (C), spirituality and health scores. Table 1 indicates that there were significant decreases in low physiological coherence: $Z = 2.52$, $p = 0.012$; significant increases in high physiological coherence: $Z = 2.52$, $p = 0.012$; significant increases in coherence level: $Z = 2.37$, $p = 0.018$; significant increases in achievement level: $Z = 2.37$, $p = 0.018$; significant increases in SOC perceptions: $Z = 2.11$, $p = 0.035$; significant increases in spirituality perceptions: $Z = 1.96$, $p = 0.050$ and significant increases in health perceptions: $Z = 2.37$, $p = 0.018$. Thus, findings from all measures all provided support for an alternative research hypothesis that the Christ consciousness contemplation with Heart Prayer of HeartMath techniques was associated with increasing psychophysiological coherence, SOC, spirituality and health as perceived by participants. Obviously, this is an extremely small sample and no great value can be attached to these findings, the fact that all participants individually increased in all dependent variables and increased significantly as group on all dependent variables, except for

TABLE 1: Pre-test and post-test means and standard deviations for measures of low, medium and high psychophysiological coherence levels, coherence score, achievement score and perceptions of sense of coherence, spirituality and health.

Measure	Pre-test	SD	Post-test	SD	Wilcoxon *Z*	Probability
LO	51.4	35.7	19.9	29.8	2.52	0.012
ME	17.5	15.6	17.8	14.4	0.21	0.833
HI	29.9	32.8	62.4	32.9	2.52	0.012
Cohere	1.4	0.61	3.7	1.8	2.37	0.018
Achievement	78.6	32.7	783.1	424.7	2.37	0.018
Sense of C	46.9	5.2	54.1	7.1	2.11	0.035
Spirituality	40.3	5.2	44.6	2.7	1.96	0.050
Health	32.9	4.9	39.3	6.6	2.37	0.018

SD, standard deviations; LO, low, ME, medium, HI, high.

medium coherence level, which in itself is simply a ratio between low and high coherence and as such has no real value, provides consistent evidence in support of this alternative hypothesis. This research hypothesis received unqualified support in all eight participants' descriptions of their experiences as indicated below.

Qualitative findings

Experiential descriptions and group summary of the eight participants follow, coded A to H, respectively.

> 'I shifted my consciousness into my heart area, breathed in and out to the count of five and then began to recite 'Jesus Christ'. My reciting alternated between 'Jesus Christ', 'Christ' and 'Jesus'. I felt a deep sense of relaxation and peace. I experienced people, places and events that make me happy including my family and Africa. Even though I had been relaxing beforehand, this was another level of enjoyment. I felt a glow afterwards. It helped me to connect with Christ. As a technique it could be used in any context, setting or situation to connect with God, increase coherence, reduce cortisol, and enhance DHEA and in essence happiness.' (Participant A)

> 'Focussing on Christ consciousness for the 15 min instilled a sense of gratitude and peace over me. I felt my sense of self fall deeper within myself. Saying the name *Jesus Christ* over and over, gave me an overwhelming feeling of calm, and I could feel my breathing slow down and become more in sync with every beat of my heart. I could feel my breathing through my heart. After the 15 min, I have a greater sense of peacefulness and clarity. I would use this technique of Christ consciousness when it comes to my studies as it would help me focus and bring me into the moment, especially by calming ones nerves and anxiety before an exam.' (Participant B)

> 'During this session, I prayed and focused my mind on meditating and praying. My breath was controlled by the pattern of the words in a prayer. I was able to reach and maintain a state of high coherence in a short period of time. I again felt a state of oneness, fullness and contentment. I sensed a link between being able to focus breathing according to a pattern and the ability to clear the mind of all thoughts other than those related to the words in the prayer. The body feels at ease and in a state of relaxation and a general sense of well-being is perceived. This is a valuable tool for regulating emotions and promoting calming of the mind.' (Participant C)

> 'Experiencing Christ consciousness is being and feeling one with all created and uncreated reality and things of the world. It is seeing the world through the clear eyes of the pure child. The world of people, nature, plants and animals are sacred and divine. When and where there is suffering, this means healing all that is suffering. Christ consciousness is Christ's and Christianity's gift to the troubled world. It implies the meeting and working together of all religious and spiritual caring organisations. It is a continual call to create and make the world a better place, to improve consciousness, reality, human relationships and things of the world. The implications are infinite, eternal and relentless.' (Participant D)

> 'As I consciously slowed my breathing, it became more rhythmical and I turned my focus to the beating of my heart. I visualised the waves rolling onto the shore in synchronisation to my breathing. I experienced a sense of calmness and a wonderful feeling of God's grace filled my being. I was able to let go of my worldly thoughts and draw close to Christ. I lost all sense of time and space as I entered a place of deep meditation. I felt a connectedness and oneness with Christ through His spirit. After the session, I felt very peaceful, contented and experienced a sense of joy and gratitude.' (Participant E)

> 'I felt very peaceful and relaxed. I almost felt like I was completely at peace and could hear and feel God. I wish I did this more often. It also gave me time for reflection and to think how blessed and satisfied I am with life.' (Participant F)

> 'After my prayer experience, I felt more in touch with myself, and with the power of Jesus in my life. It was also a peaceful place after the very busy morning activities. It was excellent to concentrate on breathing too.' (Participant G)

> 'The experience was calming and restful. It was difficult to broaden my thoughts at first, to move away from immediate surrounds but the sound of birds helped to move my thoughts to a peaceful calm place where I could feel close to creation and abundance. The presence of Jesus was more a sense of a powerful and peaceful presence.' (Participant H)

Group summary

The collective experience (A,D,E,G,H) essentially involved feelings (B,C,D,E,F,H) of a peaceful (A,B,E,F,G,H), place (A,D,E,G,H), of oneness (B,C,D,E) and connection (AE), with Christ (A,B,D,E), God (A,E,F), spirit (D,E), grace (E) and presence (H). Feelings included calmness (B,C,E,H), content (C,E), joy (A,E), happiness (A), blessedness (F), satisfaction in oneself (B,F,G), the natural and human world (G), body, mind (C), breath (A,B,C,E,G) and heart (A,B,E), coherence (AC) and prayer (CG).

Integrative findings

Qualitative experiential descriptions of participants' contemplation experiences meaningfully endorsed the quantitative psychophysiological and psychometric test findings with regard to the perceived value and effectiveness of Christ consciousness, Heart Prayer and HeartMath practices. The null hypothesis of no change in dependent variables was rejected in favour of the alternative research hypotheses. Qualitative findings endorsed qualitative findings. Participants described feelings of a peaceful place in oneness and connection with Christ and related healing implications. Since this was a very small-scale study, findings should obviously be treated with caution. Further research is needed to generalise and transfer findings in different contexts with other participant samples. From a quantitative perspective, randomised controlled studies are recommended to control for experimenter effect of enhanced expectancies of informed participants and for causal inferences to be postulated. From a qualitative perspective, further in-depth, individual and group investigations are needed to explicate subtle and causal, individual and collective, features of the independent variables. For example, Smith's (2011) integral Christian perspective includes three forms of God as: (1) infinity as revealed in the rhythms of the universe that links with human hearts and mind or brains in objective form of reality as consciousness, (2) intimacy and Grace unfolding in human intersubjective consciousness and (3) in our inner

being unfolding as spark of embodied awareness and subjective, heart felt consciousness. Finally, although further research is clearly needed, qualitative, quantitative and integrative findings provide general indicators towards some degree of reliability, validity, dependability and transferability of the integral, holistic embodied form of Christ consciousness, Heart Prayer and HeartMath practice used in this study.

Conclusion

As noted above, various religious traditions have long recognised the heart as focal centre of physical, psychic spiritual life, as traditionally exemplified in an array of practices ranging from San dances, Nguni *umbilini* and Hindu kundalini to Christian and Sufi prayer of the heart (Edwards 2013; Louchakova 2007a; 2007b). Contemporary integral, holistic intuitions readily will extrapolate this dynamic, energetic activity to various realms of personal ancestral, transpersonal and non-dual consciousness including the collective and personal unconscious (Assagioli 2007; Sardello 2007; Wilber 2000; 2007). HeartMath research provides a robust, scientific foundation to the intuitive, intellectual role of aligned, coherent, heart brain transmission and reception of patterns of electromagnetic, neurochemical, biophysical and hormonal information (Childre et al. 2016). For Bourgeault (2016:5), the tripartite physical, emotional and spiritual organ of the human heart ultimately functions as 'homing magnetic center' for a vital neurological shift in the mechanics of perception from the ordinary binary modes of dualistic consciousness to that nondual, holographic resonant heart capacity whereby one senses a single unified field, and is enabled to 'see from wholeness'. Thus, as implicit or intimated in participants' experiential descriptions, Christ consciousness ultimately implies a non-dual, kenotic, awareness and indwelling process whereby vibrational resonance is embodied, sensed and felt as pure peace and love radiating from the human heart. As exemplified in and through Jesus Christ, contemplation and all ensuing, related actions arising from such consciousness, point to unitive healing implications of infinite and eternal value.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

S.D.E. conceived, researched and wrote this article. D.J.E. collected the data, edited and processed the article.

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