

Mind-emptying techniques are not Christian prayer, but rather practices of Hindus, Zen Buddhists and New Agers.

A closer look at centering prayer

By Anne Feaster

■ The Centering Prayer Movement has become very popular in Catholic circles today. People sign up for it in retreat centers, in workshops, and sometimes in their own parish. These people believe it to be authentic Christian contemplative prayer practiced by the saints. Is it really Christian contemplation?

In my research on the New Age which I did for the past ten years, I found that it is not Christian contemplation and that this type of prayer is not recommended by Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Ratzinger, The Catechism of the Catholic Church, or St. Teresa of Avila. There have also been warnings from Johnette Benkovic on EWTN (Mother Angelica's Network). Johnette has a program called "Living His Life Abundantly", and has had a series on the New Age. She has also written a book called, *The New Age Counterfeit*, and devotes one chapter to the problems of Centering Prayer (CP). She identifies it as being the same as Transcendental Meditation (TM) which is tied to Hinduism.

What is centering prayer?

Centering prayer, as taught by Fr. Basil Pennington and Fr. Thomas Keating, is a method of prayer that is supposed to lead a person into contemplation. It is supposed to be done for twenty minutes in the morning and twenty minutes in the evening. The person chooses a sacred word. He tries to ignore all thoughts and feelings, letting them go by as boats going down a stream. When the thoughts keep coming back, the person returns to the sacred word. The goal is to keep practicing until ALL THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS DISAPPEAR. Fr. Keating says in *Open Mind, Open Heart*, "All thoughts pass if you wait long enough."¹ A person then reaches a state of pure consciousness or a mental void. The thinking process is suspended. This technique is supposed to put them into direct contact with God. The idea is to go to the center of your being to find the True Self. This pro-

cess is supposed to dismantle the False Self, which is supposedly the result of the emotional baggage we carry.

Fr. Thomas Keating is a monk, priest, and abbot of St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Col. and is the founder of the Centering Prayer movement. He has written four books. Fr. Basil Pennington is a Trappist monk at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Mass. He has written over thirty books, some of which are on Centering Prayer. Some of the concepts in their books are similar to New Age beliefs and practices.

What are New Age beliefs?

New Agers borrow many of their beliefs from Hinduism. They believe that we are all connected to an impersonal energy force, which is god, and we are part of this god. This god-energy flows into each one of us; so we too are god. (This is the heresy of pantheism, condemned by the Church at the First Vatican Council). They think because we are god, we can create our own reality, experience our own god-power. This awareness of our god-selves is called god-consciousness, super-consciousness, Christ-consciousness, *pure-consciousness*, unity consciousness, or self-realization. To reach this awareness, New Agers use mantras or yoga to go into altered levels of consciousness to discover their own divinity. They look inside to find their True Self or Higher Self—to find wisdom and knowledge since the True Self or Higher Self is god.

They address god as the Source, the Divine Energy, the Divine Love Energy, or the Great Universal Intelligence. The goal of New Agers is to usher in a new age of peace, harmony and unity. They hope that all mankind will come to “god consciousness,” which is the awareness that they are god. The complete definition on the New Age by Fr. Mitch Pacwa is as follows: “The New Age Movement is highly eclectic, borrowing ideas and practices

from many sources. Meditation techniques from Hinduism, Zen, Sufism, and Native American religions are mixed with humanistic psychology, occultism, and modern physics.”² There is a scripture in Col. 2:4-8, that warns us against this pitfall. It states, “I tell you this so that no one may delude you with specious arguments. . . . See to it that no one deceives you through any empty philosophy that follows mere human traditions, a philosophy based on cosmic powers rather than on Christ.”

How do New Age beliefs compare to centering prayer?

In CP, people are taught to use a prayer word or sacred word to empty the mind. (Fr. Keating says it is not a mantra; but if it is used to rid the mind of all thoughts and feelings, then it does the same thing as a mantra). The goal is to reach a mental void or pure consciousness in order to find God at the center. Pure consciousness is an altered level of consciousness. This is exactly what the Hindus and Buddhists do to reach god-consciousness or pure consciousness. This is also similar to what actress Shirley MacLaine does to go into an altered level of consciousness and discover her Divine Center or Higher Self, which is her divinity.

What are the similarities between CP and TM?

Johnette Benkovic has interviewed people on her show and in her book who have done both CP and TM. They claim it is basically the same. The only difference would be that in TM the mantras are names of Hindu gods, and in CP the sacred word is usually Jesus, God, peace, or love. Fr. Finbarr Flanagan, who was involved in both CP and TM says CP is TM in a Christian dress. He says Fr. Pennington has endorsed TM “. . . without hesitation.”³ Let's look at the similarities:



- 1) Both CP and TM use a 20-minute meditation.
- 2) Both CP and TM use a mantra to erase all thoughts and feelings.
- 3) Both CP and TM teach that in this meditation you pick up vibrations.
- 4) Both CP and TM claim that this meditation will give you more peace and less tension.
- 5) Both CP and TM teach you how to reach a mental void or altered level of consciousness.
- 6) Both CP and TM have the common goal of finding your god-center.

In regard to vibrations, Fr. Keating says, "As you go to a deeper level of reality, you begin to pick up vibrations that were there all the time but not perceived."⁴ Fr. Pennington also speaks of "... physical vibrations that are helpful."⁵ (Vibrations are common TM, New Age language.) Using mantras and reaching a mental void are also New Age, not Catholic. In fact, reaching a mental void is described in the Catechism as an erroneous notion of prayer (#2726).

When does the one who prays cross the line into Hindu/Buddhist/New Age prayer?

In the beginning stages of CP, the one who prays is still ignoring thoughts as they float by. If they are still thinking of Jesus or heavenly things, they are still in Christian prayer. They cross the line when they get to the point where they bypass all thoughts and feelings. In other

words, there are no thoughts at all. Fr. Thomas Keating says in his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, "As you go down deeper, you may reach a place where the sacred word disappears altogether and there are no thoughts. This is often experienced as a suspension of consciousness, a space."⁶ When a person is able to do this, they have crossed the line into Hindu/Buddhist/New Age prayer. HE IS NO LONGER PRACTICING CHRISTIAN PRAYER. Fr. Keating wants his followers to let go of even devout thoughts. He says, "The method consists of letting go of every thought during the time of prayer, even the most devout thoughts."⁷ (In Christian prayer, devout thoughts are important and desirable.) He also tells his followers to let all feelings go. To do this, one would have to let go of any sentiments of love toward Jesus, the Heavenly Father, or the Holy Spirit.

What does Pope John Paul II say about this type of prayer?

In Cardinal Ratzinger's booklet, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, he quotes the Pope. On p. 34, footnote 12, he writes "Pope John Paul II has pointed out to the whole Church the example and doctrine of St. Teresa of Avila who in her life had to reject the temptation of certain methods which proposed a leaving aside of the humanity of Christ in favor of a vague self-immersion in the abyss of divinity. In a homily given on November 1, 1982, he said that the call of St. Teresa of Jesus advocating a prayer completely centered on Christ "is valid even in our day, against some methods of prayer which are not inspired by the gospel and which in practice tend to set Christ aside in preference for a mental void which makes no sense in Christianity. Any method of prayer is valid insofar as it is inspired by Christ and leads to Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life" [(cf. John 14:6). See *Homilia Abulae habita in*

honorem Sanctae Teresiae: AAS 75 (1983) 256-257].

What does St. Teresa of Avila say about contemplation?

Throughout their books, Fr. Keating and Fr. Pennington mention St. Teresa of Avila, implying that she is an advocate of their prayer techniques. However, after reading her books, I have found that her teachings on prayer are the opposite of what Keating and Pennington are teaching. First of all, she says that contemplation is a gift from God, and no technique can make it happen. She says it is usually given to people who have a deep prayer life and are practicing many virtues, although God can give it to anyone he chooses. She repeatedly insists that contemplation is divinely produced. She said that entering into the prayer of quiet or that of union whenever she wanted it “was out of the question.”⁸ She also said in her book, *Interior Mansion*, “For it to be prayer at all, the mind must take a part in it.”⁹ Cardinal Ratzinger, in his booklet, also quotes St. Teresa as saying “the very care not to think about anything will arouse the mind to think a great deal”, and that the separation of the mystery of Christ from Christian meditation is always a form of “betrayal.”¹⁰ St. Teresa advised her nuns to meditate or think about the Passion of Christ as a preparation for contemplation. The Catechism describes contemplation as “a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus” (#2715). The focus is Jesus and the heart is involved.

What are the warnings on mind-emptying prayer from Cardinal Ratzinger?

Christians dabbling in Eastern religions in the 70s and 80s had become such a problem that the Vatican had to respond. In 1989, Cardinal Ratzinger of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, put out a document called “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic

Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation.” The document states, “With the present diffusion of Eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world and in ecclesial communities, we find ourselves faced with a pointed renewal of attempt, which is not free from dangers and errors, *to fuse Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian.*” He goes on to say, “Still others do not hesitate to place that absolute without image or concepts, which is proper to Buddhist theory on the same level as the majesty of God revealed in Christ.”¹¹ He says they abandon the Triune God, “in favor of an immersion in the indeterminate abyss of the divinity.” Then he says mixing Christian meditation with Eastern techniques can lead to syncretism (the mixing of religions).

Is the Vatican II statement regarding non-Christian religions misunderstood?

Yes. The documents of Vatican II state “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in non-Christian religions.”¹² The Council Fathers however, were not recommending the practice of eastern prayer techniques. The Hindu view of God is contrary to Christian belief. They do not worship a God who is superior to them. They believe that they become god, like a raindrop into an ocean.

What does Fr. Keating teach about reaching “pure consciousness”?

In his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, Fr. Keating says, “As the Spirit gradually takes more and more charge of your prayer, you may move into pure consciousness, which is an intuition into your True Self.”¹³ Then, again, speaking of pure consciousness, he says “In that state, there is no consciousness of self. When your ordinary faculties come back again, there may be a sense of peaceful delight.”¹⁴

What are altered levels of consciousness and what are the dangers?

Let us ask Maharishi Yogi, the guru who introduced TM to America. Fr. Finbarr Flanagan writes in his article “TM’s founder, the Maharishi Yogi, claims that the regular practice of TM leads beyond the ordinary experience of waking, sleeping, and dreaming to a fourth state of consciousness called “simple awareness.” Constant practice leads to cosmic consciousness, then god-consciousness, and finally “unity consciousness.”¹⁵ The fourth state in other books is also referred to as pure-consciousness. People who have reached these altered levels of consciousness (ALC’s) describe them as a pleasant trance-like state. Cardinal Ratzinger says, in regard to ALC’s, that these can be pleasant experiences only. He states, “Some physical exercises automatically produce a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and warmth, which resemble spiritual well-being. To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life. Giving them a symbolic significance typical of the mystical experience, when the moral condition of the person does not correspond to such experience, would represent a kind of mental schizophrenia which could also lead to psychic disturbance and, at times, to moral deviations.”¹⁶

Clare Merkle, a former New Age healer and yoga practitioner, has been appearing on EWTN network (Mother Angelica’s network) on the program, “Living His Life Abundantly.” Now converted, it took her five years to be freed from the effects on her involvement in New Age. She gives this warning: “When we open ourselves up to foreign religious practices that have ties to the occult, we open ourselves up to the demonic.” (Hinduism and Buddhism have ties to the occult because they tap into spiritual power that is not from the Holy Spirit.) On her website, The Cross and

the Veil, she exposes CP as New Age. (See crossveil.org.) She said that going into ALC’s can be dangerous because they can lead to out-of-the-body experiences or hallucinations. She said some people cannot come out of them. In Fr. Keating’s book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 120, one of his followers commented that he had a hard time coming out of an ALC during Mass and could not concentrate. Fr. Keating told him, “That is a nice problem to have.” Fr. Amorth, who is the Vatican exorcist, says “Yoga, Zen, and TM are unacceptable to Christians. Often these apparently innocent practices can bring about hallucinations and schizophrenic conditions.”¹⁷

Can centering prayer lead to a Hindu view of God?

Yes, it can. For example, Fr. Keating studied the eastern religions, and wanted to “devise an approach to Christian spirituality that would be comparable to the methods of the East.”¹⁸ However, somewhere in his studies, he appears to have succumbed to the Hindu view of God. Throughout his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, he refers to God as the Ultimate Mystery, the Ultimate Presence, and the Source. (This is the way God is addressed by New Agers) Shirley MacLaine calls God the Source and the Divine Energy in her book, *Going Within*. In Keating’s new book, *Invitation to Love*, he says “the divine energy in itself is infinite potentiality and actuality.”¹⁹ Fr. Pennington makes similar statements in his book, *True Self, False Self*, speaking of God as the Divine Love Energy in many places. As Catholics, we believe in a personal God whom we call our Heavenly Father. Keating also says, “When you sit down for prayer, your whole psyche gathers itself and melts into God.”²⁰ (Melting into god is Hindu /Buddhist/New Age belief.) Catholic dogma refutes this pantheistic concept. “In the Mass, it is said that we are partakers of His divinity. Yet this must not be conceived in the panthe-

istic sense of the transition of the soul into the Divinity. The infinite distance between Creator and the created remains.” (Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma, Ludwig Ott, p. 256)

What other statements do Keating and Pennington make that reflect New Age beliefs?

In his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 37, Fr. Keating recommends yoga and jogging for relaxation. The truth is that yoga (the type that includes meditations) is a form of Hinduism, and is the most common way that New Agers enter into ALC’s. In fact, Webster’s Dictionary Library gives this definition: “Yoga is a system of Hindu philosophy, strict spiritual discipline, practiced to gain control over the forces of one’s own being to gain OCCULT POWERS, but chiefly to attain union with the Deity or the Universal Spirit.”

In Keating’s book, *Invitation to Love*, p.125 he speaks of “Energy Centers,” common New Age language. New Agers believe that the body has seven energy centers called Chakras. Fr. Pennington refers to energies flowing up and down the spinal system in his book, *Awake in the Spirit*, p.97. Actress Shirley MacLaine makes a similar statement in her book, *Going Within*, p.64. She also describes the energy in the spinal column when she sits with her back straight. Benkovic says, “Hinduism teaches at the base of the spine is a triangle which lies in the “Kundalini Shakti” (Serpent Power). It is usually dormant, but when it is awakened, it travels up the spine to the top of the head, passing through six psychic centers called “charkas.” As it passes through a chakra, one receives psychic experiences and powers. When it reaches the top chakra, supposedly, the power to perform miracles and liberation is realized.”²¹

Ralph Rath says in his book, *Mantras*, “In a forward to the book, *Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality* by Philip St. Romain, Keating calls kundalini “an enormous energy

for good” and does not point out that uncontrolled kundalini can kill or drive a person mad or that some cults use kundalini in an extremely debased way.”²² He does not show discernment here, since all spiritual power comes from the Holy Spirit or the Evil One.

Keating and Pennington have also enthusiastically endorsed the book, *Meditations on the Tarot, a Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, on the jacket cover. (The tarot is a form of divination, which is forbidden in Deut. 18.) According to Fr. Finbarr Flanagan, “Meditations on the Tarot is a mix of occult, theosophical, alchemical, esoteric, astrological and reincarnational ideas stirred together with Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Sufism in a manner reminiscent of the works of C.G. Jung.”²³

Is the goal of CP to find the True Self?

Yes. All through their books, Keating and Pennington talk about finding the True Self, finding out who we really are. What exactly is the True Self? Fr. Keating states, “God and our true Self are not separate. Though we are not God, God and our true Self are the same thing.”²⁴ Since the True Self is described by them as the human soul, how can it be the same as God Almighty? The soul is created by God. Fr. Pennington presents the same idea in his book, *Awake in the Spirit*, where he speaks of our “process of deification” on p. 81. The concept of the True Self originates in Hinduism. According to Benkovic, the Hindus believe the following: “The self is none other than Braham or god . . . The true self is God. The “I” which I consider myself to be is in reality the not-self. This “not-self” is caught in a world of illusion, ignorance and bondage. You must lose your personal ego-consciousness into god. You must say I am Braham.”²⁵ MacLaine presents the same idea in her book *Going Within*, p.83, calling it the Higher Self. She also claims that the soul is God. Therefore, the Hindus, MacLaine and Keating all

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claim that the True Self (human soul) is god. As Catholics and Christians, we know that there is no truth in this statement. We know that the soul is created by God, is inferior to God and is tainted with sin. We know it will come before God on Judgment Day.

Did the Vatican release a document on the New Age?

Yes. The Vatican recently released the document called “*Jesus Christ, the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the New Age.*” It specifically identifies the following as New Age: Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, Yoga, Enneagram, Wicca, the Higher Self, the True Self, ALC’s, the “god within,” and TM (Transcendental Meditation). Many of these beliefs or practices have made their way into retreat centers, workshops, or parish programs. Good Catholics attend these events trusting them to be good Catholic programs. However, the Vatican document states that these new age beliefs and practices cannot be accepted by those who are faithful to Christ and his Church. The document also named some of the writers who had the most influence on New Agers. They were Carl Jung, Teilhard de Chardin, and Thomas Merton.

Does Fr. Keating misquote some important scriptures?

Yes. Keating quotes Jesus as saying in Mark 8:34, “Unless you deny your inmost self and take up the cross, you cannot be my disciple.” He adds a word (inmost) that is not there. Then he says, on p. 15 of *Open Mind, Open Heart*, “Denial of our inmost self includes detachment from the habitual functioning of our intellect and will, which are our inmost faculties.” The meaning of this scripture is to carry our crosses and deny ourselves. It has

nothing to do with mind-emptying.

Keating also adds two new sentences to Luke 10:20 in *Invitation to Love*, p. 129. He quotes Jesus as saying, “Do not get excited about that kind of success. Anybody can work miracles with a little psychic energy and the divine assistance. What you should rejoice over is that your names are written in heaven.” These first two sentences do not exist; and Jesus would never suggest the use of psychic energy.

Does Fr. Keating give a strange definition of the Eucharist?

Yes. In *Open Mind, Open Heart*, he says, on p. 128, “The Eucharist is the celebration of life: the coming together of all the material elements of the cosmos, their emergence to consciousness in human persons and the transformation of human consciousness into Divine consciousness. It is the manifestation of the Divine in and through the Christian community. We receive the Eucharist in order to become the Eucharist.” As we know, the Eucharist is not composed of all of the elements of the universe. The New Agers believe that all is one and all is god. In our Catholic faith, the Eucharist is the body, blood, soul and divinity of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the greatest of the sacraments. We need to reflect on Hebrews 13:9, “Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teaching.”

Summary

1) Christian prayer always involves the mind and the heart. Even in preparation for contemplation, St. Teresa of Avila advises people to meditate or “think about” the sorrowful mysteries.

2) Mind-emptying techniques are not Christian prayer, but rather practices of Hindus, Zen Buddhists, and New Agers. The Pope says this type of prayer “makes no sense in Christianity.”

3) There are dangers involved in going into altered levels of consciousness.

4) The True Self is not God. The human

soul is inferior to God. It is separate from God because it is stained with sin, and it is created by God himself.

5) Involvement in the occult practices listed in Deuteronomy 18 is grave sin.

6) Hinduism, Zen Buddhism and New Age do not mix with Catholicism. These ancient religions contain grave error, and their beliefs are contrary to the Catholic faith.

In closing, I would like to say that I would not recommend books written by Fr. Thomas Keating or Fr. Basil Pennington. They have demonstrated a lack of discernment, and therefore are not reliable sources of information for spiritual growth. Also, some readers are unaware that they are being exposed to Hinduism through these books. I agree with the Pope when he said this type of prayer “makes no sense in Christianity.” As Christians, we are not to practice non-Christian religions or mix them in with ours (syncretism). When we practice

syncretism, the line between truth and error becomes blurred. The pleasant experiences that result from these techniques can gradually start to replace the sacraments, and a person can lose sight of God as Creator and Savior.

The Lord loves the Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, and all people. However, he wants us, as Christians, to look for opportunities to bring them to the True Faith. If we want to “center,” we can center our lives on Jesus Christ. If we want to pray, we can think about him during our prayer time. We can meditate on the Passion, practice virtues, and ask him to take us up into authentic contemplation one day if he so desires. We can remind others that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. ■

End Notes

¹ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, (Amity, N.Y.: Amity House, 1986), p.97.

² Mitch Pacwa, *Catholics and the New Age*,

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(Ann Arbor, MI: Servants Publication, 1992) p. 14.

³ Finbarr Flanagan, "Centering Prayer: Transcendental Meditation for the Christian Market: (Faith and Renewal, May/June, 1991) p.2., quoting from Basil Pennington, *Daily We Touch Him*, (Garden City, N.Y. : Doubleday, 1977, p.68.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2, quoting from Thomas Keating, *Finding Grace at the Center*, (Mass: St. Bede's Publications, 1978, p.20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2 quoting from Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, (Garden City, N.Y.:Doubleday Image Books) p.234.

⁶ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p.114.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸ Johnette Benkovic, *The New Age Counterfeit*, p. 23-24, quoting from *The Life from the Collected Works of St. Teresa*, Vol. I, Washington Province of Discalced Carmelites, p. 1976.

⁹ Peter Thomas Rohrbach, *Conversation with Christ*, by St. Teresa of Avila (Rockford, IL: Tan Publishing Co.)p.78, quoting St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Mansion, P. I. i*.

¹⁰ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation*, Oct. 15, 1989 (Text from English version published by St. Paul Books and Media, 50 St. Paul's Ave., Boston, MA 02130) p.34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹² Austin P. Flannery, Editor, *Documents of Vatican II*, "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (Grand Rapids, Michigan:

William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980) p.737.

¹³ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73-74.

¹⁵ Finbarr Flanagan, "Centering Prayer: Transcendental Meditation for the Christian Market", p. 2.

¹⁶ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Meditation*, p. 28-29.

¹⁷ Gabriele Amorth, *An Exorcist Tells His Story*, (San Francisco, CA.: Ignatius Press), 1999.

¹⁸ Chris Noble, "Christian Contemplation and Centering Prayer", *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, March 1994, p. 25, quoting, "Contemplative Prayer", *U. S. Catholic*, March, 1989, p. 10.

¹⁹ Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love*, (New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Co., 2002) p. 102.

²⁰ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p.49.

²¹ Johnette Benkovic, *The New Age Counterfeit*, p. 11.

²² Ralph Rath, *Mantras*, (South Bend, IN: Peter Publications, 1993) p. 25.

²³ Finbarr Flanagan, "Centering Prayer: Transcendental Meditation for the Christian Market", p. 5.

²⁴ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, p. 127.

²⁵ Johnette Benkovic, *The New Age Counterfeit*, p. 10-11.



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