Meditation and Interreligious Dialogue:
Similarities Between Christian and Buddhist Meditative Practices (2016)

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This paper is a comparative exercise, one which is designed to highlight some similarities between Christian and Buddhist meditative practices, offering an overview of some of the literature on the subject. In particular, I will look at the Christian use of the mantra, its development in recent years, and how some other types of Buddhist meditative practice are able to enrich its use as a contemplative tool. Olson (2000, p.19) talks about comparative philosophy being a 'promiscuous activity' because the participants in any such dialogue 'experience the broadening of cultural horizons,' and hopefully in the process make 'new connections.' Therefore, as a hermeneutical dialogue, I plan to remain open to ways in which Buddhist meditative practices may inform my own Christian tradition, although undoubtedly my conclusions will remain incomplete. Nonetheless, as an initial exercise, hopefully it may lead the reader to further enquiry and comparison.

In the Christian tradition, the beginnings of a recognisable form of meditation can be found in the contemplative practices from the 4th century when the Desert Fathers and Mothers were active in Egypt, Palestine and Syria. One person in particular stands out as an important figure for this brief study, namely John Cassian (360-435), the author of 'The Conferences,' a seminal work drawing on the existing Desert traditions on the conduct and practices of early Christian monastics. In Conference IX and X on Prayer, we find instructions on meditation which became influential in the second half of the 20th century with a group of Christian monastic scholars who were instrumental in reviving this ancient and largely forgotten practice. This also coincided with the Second Vatican Council's call for respectful dialogue with other religious traditions. Some began to see similarities between Roman Catholicism and Buddhism, not only in the area of ethics and monastic institutions, but also in meditation practices.

A Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968), who resided at Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky, was one of the most prolific and well-known Roman Catholic authors of the 20th century. Merton was one of the first to connect his own monastic experience to a recovery of earlier monastic traditions, particularly in the work of Cassian. His study of the writings of medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (c.1260 - c.1328) became fruitful for his dialogue with Zen Buddhist D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966).

Of interest to us is Merton's conversations with Suzuki (considered controversial by some), which made him a pioneer in inter-religious dialogue. Turning to the East, he discovered a rich tradition which continued to fascinate and influence him until his death. Merton was a complex character, who in later life, developed what can only be described as an 'affair with Buddhism,' kindled when he came into contact with Suzuki, an instrumental figure in introducing Zen Buddhism to the West. Through his friendship with Suzuki, Merton compiled a collection of essays called 'Zen and the birds of appetite' (1968). In it he discusses the similarities and differences between Roman Catholicism and Zen Buddhism.

Merton was to focus his attention on the human condition as expressed in both Christianity and Zen Buddhism. As Apel notes (2006, p.92): 'For Merton, the Christian gospel and Zen desired to know and to experience things as they truly are, to overcome all illusion - not to see a different world, but to see the world differently. For Merton, the gospel and Zen had this common effect upon people. Both jolted them out of their routine way of viewing life and challenged conventional wisdom… Self-deception and false constructs of reality are rejected.'

Meditation in both traditions, therefore, has a similar goal, and Merton made a connection between the kenotic (emptying) experience of the Christian mystical tradition (as related to the self-emptying of God in the person of Jesus Christ), and the experience of *sunyata* (emptiness) so important in Buddhist philosophical thought and meditation practice. Merton was learning from Suzuki that both the Christian gospel and Zen Buddhism called people away from their false selves. As Apel (2006, p.92) put it, 'self

deception and false constructs of reality are rejected' in both religious traditions. While differences between Christianity and Buddhism were acknowledged by both men, nonetheless, there was a meeting of minds between Merton and Suzuki which has influenced Buddhist-Christian inter-religious dialogue ever since. Nonetheless, conservative Catholic Christians view much of Merton's later writings as too syncretistic. However, in my view this is an unfair assessment; in his last journal, known as 'The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton (1968), he clearly states that any dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism should not become some facile syncretism and ought to involve a healthy respect for obvious and important differences.

Benedictine monk, John Main (1926-1982), has also played a major role in the contemporary renewal of Christian meditation. At Ealing Abbey, London, in 1975, Main began teaching Christian meditation to lay Christians, later moving to Montreal, Canada. This was the origin of the worldwide ecumenical Christian meditation groups known as the World Community for Christian Meditation.

Before he become a Benedictine monk, Main was a member of the British Colonial Service, and while on assignment in Malaya he was exposed to Asian culture, meeting Swami Satyananda, not a Buddhist, but a Hindu. This encounter was to become, as Freeman (Main & Freeman, 2002, p.18) describes, 'one of the great stories, almost the central myth, of his spiritual journey.' Swami Satyananda meditated twice a day and when Main asked if he, as a Christian ought to meditate as well, he was told (p.18) 'of course, it would only make him a better Christian.' They met regularly and Main learnt a simple formula which is said (p.18) 'never lost its wisdom and force for him.' He was told to (p.18) 'say your mantra,' and as Freeman explains (p.18), 'the heroic simplicity of this practice attracted Main immensely and become one of the most important aspects of meditation he was to emphasize in his own later teaching.'

In his several writings, as taught by Stayananda, Main (Main & Freeman, 2002, p.98) encourages his followers to use the mantra: 'To meditate you need to take a word, and the word I suggest to you is *Maranatha*. Simply, gently repeat that word in silence in your heart, in the depths of your being, and continue repeating it. Listen to it as a sound. Say it; articulate it in silence, clearly, but listen to it as a sound.'

Like Merton, as a Benedictine monk he too studied the works of Cassian, and it was in Conference X that he discovered the use of the mantra he had already been using for some time. This was to become the foundation of his life work and teachings.

Larkin (2007, p.78) has commented on Main's discovery in the works of Cassian, thus highlighting Main's contribution to contemporary Christian meditation practice: 'John Cassian has preserved the traditions of these early Christian attempts at monastic living, and Christian Meditation is part of this patrimony… The mantra is found as the repetition of a particular phrase from Scripture and is presented as a legitimate and effective way of praying for Christians… Cassian validated the use of the mantra in John Main's prayer. The classic name for the repetition of one word of phrase prayer is "monologistic prayer," or "one-word prayer." John Main constructed his own version of monologistic prayer and put the method back in practice for thousands of meditators.'

Main taught that the mantra was to be articulated clearly in the silence of the mind, and to concentrate on it to the exclusion of all other thoughts. Main (Main & Freeman, 2002, p.101) says: 'The purpose of repeating the word is to gently lead you away from your own thoughts, your own ideas, your own desire, your own sin, and to lead you into the presence of God, by turning you around, by turning you away from yourself toward God.'

Another Benedictine monk, Christopher Jamison, writing several years later was to equate the practice of the mantra with the use of the breath. Jamison (2006, p.57) writes: 'In solitude [the mantra] can be spoken in time with the breathing, rhythmically… The rhythm of this helps to lift you out of yourself and away from the noises of your head. If those distractions become insistent, one way to handle them is to pause from the phrase, consider the distraction… and then consciously say to yourself you are putting it aside.'

Interestingly, Jamison says (p.58) that 'the use of the breathing described above is not from Benedict, but is a technique drawn from elsewhere,' leaving the reader wondering just where that might be, perhaps falling short of admitting it comes from Buddhist meditative practices.

The parallels that can made between Main's use of the mantra in Christian meditation, and techniques to calm the mind developed in Buddhist *samatha* meditation, are striking. Moreover, I believe that it is not accidental that Jamison has further developed Main's teachings with the use of the breath. In *samatha* meditation practices, the technique most often taught (particularly in modern Buddhist practices) to calm the mind is *anapanasati* (the mindfulness of breathing). This is where one feels and concentrates on the sensations caused by the breath. The principal source for Buddhist teaching on the mindfulness breathing is found in the *Anapanasati Sutta* (MN 118). When practiced and well developed *anapanasati* is said to be beneficial in calming and training the mind to focus more easily on mental processes; if used in Christian meditation this would be a way of focusing the mind on the mantra.

As one develops *samatha* meditation, Buddhist traditions hold that the *panca nivaranani* (The Five Hindrances) which impede meditation can be suppressed and even overcome. In the Pali Canon, one finds several discourses which make reference to the *panca nivaranani* (e.g. SN 46:37). These refer to mental states such as *kamacchanda* (sensual desire), *vyapada* (anger or ill will), *thina middha* (lethargy or drowsiness), *uddhacca kukkucca* (restlessness or worry), and *vicikiccha* (doubt). Clearly one can see the benefits of *samatha* meditation, therefore, not only for Buddhists but for Christians. Gethin (1998, pp, 175.176) uses an ancient simile to illustrate how the mind is continually distracted, by falling prey to the five hindrances: 'to a bowl of water disturbed or contaminated in five ways: mixed with dye, steaming hot, full of moss and leaves, ruffled by the wind, muddled and in a dark place. If someone should look down into a bowl of water contaminated in any one of these five ways, then he would not be able to see a clear and true reflection of himself. On the other hand, if one were to look down into a bowl of water that is free of such contaminations, one would see a clear and true reflection.' Buddhist's believe, therefore, that the practice of *samatha* meditation, weakens those things which hinder the mind from concentration; a useful tool not only for Buddhists but for Christians too.

These hindrances are alluded to by Main (Main & Freeman, p.102) when he writes about the use of the mantra: 'Meditation is the way par excellence to handle distractions because the purpose of the one word, the mantra, is simply to bring your mind to peace, silence, and concentration. Not to bring it to rest with holy thought alone but to transcend what we know as thought altogether. And the mantra serving this end is like a plough that goes through your mind using everything else aside - "making the rough places plain."'

Main (Main & Freeman, p.102) also makes reference to Cassian, saying he spoke of the mantra's use as: '"casting off and rejecting the rich and ample matter of the manner of thoughts." It is because the mind is "light and wandering," as susceptible to thoughts and images as a feather to the slightest breeze, that Cassian enjoins the mantra as the way to transcend distraction and attain stability.'

The need for concentration in Christian meditation practices is also referred to in Buddhist traditions as *samadhi* (one-pointed concentration), forming one of the three divisions of the *ariyo atthangiko maggo* (the Noble Eightfold Path). As the last division, *samadhi* refers to right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Clearly, the modern Christian practice of combining the use of a mantra with the rhythm of the breath, integrating the benefits of two religious traditions, helps the meditator ignore distractions, leave the self behind and become fully available to the presence of God within. Main (Main & Freeman, 2002, p.100) refers to this sense of God's presence as learning 'to be awake, to be alert.' This sense of wakefulness has immediate parallels with 'right mindfulness' mentioned above and with another meditation practice of Buddhism, namely *vipassana* (insight) meditation.

The training of *sati* (translated most often as 'mindfulness' but also 'wakefulness' or 'alertness') is considered in Buddhist circles as the most important part of *vipassana* meditation. The *Satipatthana Sutta*

or 'The Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness' (MN 10), along with the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* or 'The Great Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness' (DN 22), are the two most widely studied discourses on mindfulness meditation and their practice. One way to describe *vipassana* meditation is the practice of being totally aware of, present to, and in tune with whatever it is you are looking at. As Knitter (2009, p.145 of 240) describes so well: 'The intent is to allow whatever it is you are regarding to reveal itself to you before you can impose on it your preconceived or socially determined ideas or preferences. To enable this to happen, the meditator is called upon totally and almost ruthlessly to do nothing else but observe… Whenever other thoughts start buzzing around, swish them away as gently as you would a fly, and return to looking.'

This form of meditation is not unknown in Christian circles, finding a new place among devotional practices. For example, Stead (2016) has recently published an excellent book entitled 'Mindfulness and Christian spirituality' and believes mindfulness can nourish and renew one's Christian faith. Dominican friar Meister Eckhart (mentioned earlier), whose writings have recently gained a renewed interest, taught Christian 'mindfulness' practice, pointing out that even our ideas about God can lead us away from God, so we must walk lightly among them and remain 'aware' of them too. Eckhart (Eckhart & Blakney (tr.), 1941, p.9) writes: 'We ought not to have or let ourselves be satisfied with the God we have thought of, for when the thought slips the mind, that god slips with it. [This discipline] requires effort and love, a careful cultivation of the spiritual life, and a watchful, honest, active oversight of all one's mental attitudes toward things and people. It is not to be learned by world-flight, running away from things, turning solitary and going apart from the world. Rather, one must learn an inner solitude, wherever or with whomsoever he may be.' Although *sati* is present in the Christian tradition, undoubtedly it has taken the West's fascination in the modern mindfulness movement to reawaken that interest, both within its own traditions and Buddhist traditions.

As a hermeneutical exercise, this presentation has only skimmed the surface. Monastics like Merton, Main and Jamison, through their various writings, have once again brought ancient meditation techniques to the fore, encouraging their use in Christian circles. Merton's 'affair' with Buddhism highlighted the common need in both religious traditions to see things 'as they truly are' and for a reaction of 'self-deception and false constructs,' insights so important in meditation. After studying the writings of Cassian, Main felt legitimised in the use of the mantra, seen as the way 'par excellence' to handle distractions and bring the mind to full concentration. Jamison in recent times has suggested it be combined rhythmically with the use of the breath; parallels could then be drawn between its use and the Buddhist practice of *samatha* meditation and the *anapanasati* (mindfulness of breathing). Developed *samatha* meditation overcomes the *panca nivaranani* (The Five Hindrances), and is clearly a useful tool in both meditative traditions, developing *samadhi* (one-pointed concentration). Finally, *vipassana* meditation and the training of *sati* (mindfulness) was offered as a useful tool for Christian meditators, granting insight into our true nature, and in the teachings of Meister Eckhart, to stay mindful even of our ideas about God which may lead us not to God, but in fact away from God. Meditation remains an important practice for some members of both religious traditions, and there is much we can learn from the literature offered here. Basically, it is the ability to take attention off oneself and to put it forward: for the Christian this is 'to put it forward on God;' for the Buddhist, this is the attaining of 'enlightenment.'

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