

Meditation in Christianity

by Alan F. Zundel

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Is meditation a Christian practice? As there are perhaps millions of Christians in the world who meditate, in a purely descriptive sense the answer must be yes.

But there are other Christians who are suspicious of meditation and regard it as an illegitimate import from Eastern non-Christian religions. They claim that meditation is not a Christian practice, in the sense of being compatible with true Christian principles. I will argue here against that claim, that on the contrary meditation is deeply rooted in and compatible with Christianity.

1. What is meditation?

Meditation is one of those ambiguous words which can mean different things in different contexts. It comes from the Latin language and its basic meaning is to focus one's mind on something, particularly in the sense of reflecting on important truths. (It is related to the word *medication*, both words having to do with healing: medication with healing the body and meditation with healing the mind or soul.)¹

Western Christianity has used the word for nearly two thousand years to refer to pondering the words of the sacred scriptures. With this meaning, no one would dispute that meditation is a Christian practice. There are different ways to mediate on the Bible, but these are less controversial among Christians than are other forms of meditation.

When Westerners in modern times started to become aware of practices

¹ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1995), 722.

for focusing the mind from Eastern religions (particularly Hindu and Buddhist practices), they used this same word to refer to these practices. This gave us the image that is now commonly associated with the word meditation: someone sitting in the cross-legged lotus posture, their attention turned inward. As the mind is not focused on the meaning of Biblical texts, this is not the traditional practice of Christian meditation as described above.

What I will argue, however, is that many of these practices do have parallels in Christian tradition. Because there are a variety of Eastern forms of meditation being used today, is it impossible to make a blanket claim about all of them. For this essay I will focus on a few of the most common types in use today: meditating on a word or phrase (mantra meditation), attending to the contents of the mind (insight meditation), and focusing the mind in a general state of calmness and quiet (tranquility meditation).

2. Meditation in the Christian monastic tradition

All three of the forms of meditation just mentioned have parallels in Christian tradition.

Mantra meditation is most familiar to people from Hindu meditation practices, in which a word or phrase is repeated continually, either vocally or purely in the mind, in order to focus the attention and counter mental distractions. This form of meditation was popularized in the West when the Beatles were trained in Transcendental Meditation during the 1960s, but is now promoted by a number of other organizations and meditation teachers.

Christians have used similar practices since very early times, best known today in the form of “the Jesus prayer.” The Jesus prayer uses the repetition of a phrase, such as “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me,” or even just the word “Jesus,” to focus the mind and direct it toward God. The practice of the Jesus prayer can be traced back as far as the fifth century, being passed down in Christian monasteries until it became popular among Christian laypeople and in

modern times spread to the West. Before the Jesus prayer short phrases from the Biblical psalms were used in the same manner, such as “Come to my help, Oh God; Lord, hurry to my rescue.” The repetition of such a prayer, at first vocally but then later internally, is meant to create a habitual state of mind in which the practitioner can “pray unceasingly,” as recommended by the Apostle Paul (1 Thessalonians 5:17).²

Insight meditation is a Buddhist practice in which the meditator pays attention to each of the various thoughts, feelings and sensations that pass through one’s consciousness, in order to become more aware of and less controlled by them. Forms of insight meditation were brought to the U.S. from Southeast Asia in the 1970s, and taken together are now one of the fastest growing Buddhist movements in the West. Many mental health professionals have been trained in these techniques and have recommended them for use by their patients.³

Insight meditation has a Christian parallel in the practice of “watching (or weighing) the thoughts,” in which one looks within and attends to thoughts, feelings and imaginings in order to discern their origins and thus become better able to resist sinful tendencies. This practice also goes back to the early Christian monastics, with literary references as early as the fourth century.⁴

Tranquility meditation is a form of Buddhist meditation in which the aim is to calm the thoughts, memories and emotions so as to bring out the “Buddha mind” within. In Zen Buddhism, this is represented by the practice of shikan-taza, or “just sitting,” without using a special mediation technique such as counting the breaths or focusing on a koan (a paradoxical phrase). Shikan-taza is regarded as an advanced meditation practice for those who are already proficient with beginning methods and who aspire to become fully enlightened. “Just

² Lawrence S. Cunningham and Keith J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 154-155; William Harmless, S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 62, 392-396.

³ Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 56-57, 59, 320-321, 346.

sitting” is most closely associated with the Soto school of Zen, and was taught by two of the most influential Zen teachers in the U.S., Shunryu Suzuki and Hakuun Yasutani.⁵

Similarly, in the Christian tradition there is the practice variously known as pure prayer, the prayer of quiet or contemplative prayer. This form of prayer uses neither words nor thoughts, but allows the mind to rest in a state of *hesychia* (stillness) so that the innermost self can commune with God. As with Zen shikan-taza, this is an advanced practice which has been prepared for by the use of other methods, such as vocal prayer, meditation on the scriptures, repetition of a phrase or word, and the watching of the thoughts. In the Christian tradition, this practice is regarded as moving beyond method or technique, because when one has become sufficiently single-minded and “pure of heart” the stillness one experiences in this prayer is the result of an increasing surrender of the self to God’s grace active in the soul.⁶

There are, then, very close parallels in the Christian tradition to some of the most common forms of meditation now associated with Eastern religions. Each of these Christian practices can be traced back at least to the fourth century, when people familiar with the desert monastics discussed them in writings which we still have today. Although the origins of these practices are obscure, we can assume that they had been around for some time before the fourth century, as they were regarded by the writers as traditional monastic practices and not innovations.

3. Roots in New Testament Christianity

But this still leaves a gap in our historical knowledge of a couple of hundred years from the time of Jesus, and so it is possible to question whether

⁴ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 62, 229, 389-391.

⁵ Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 59, 329, 331-332; Philip Kapleau, ed., *The Three Pillars of Zen*, revised ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1980), 56-57, 131, 133.

⁶ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 229, 320, 351-354.

these practices were rooted in the teachings and practices of Jesus and the apostles, or whether they veered away in incompatible directions.⁷ That is, are these forms of meditation in harmony with Christianity as represented by the New Testament? My considered answer to this question is yes.

Although it is impossible to prove that Jesus and the apostles engaged in meditation practices like those described above, in my opinion it is very likely. First of all, we must remember that the New Testament was written in Greek, and so the Latin word “meditation” would not be found in it. But writings about the early Christian monastics were also written in Greek, and the words they used for the above practices were the words for “prayer” and “exercises,” concepts that *are* found in the New Testament.

Jesus in the gospels is presented as a person of prayer, who often went into isolated places for periods devoted to prayer, much as the early monastics were later to do (Matthew 14:23, 26:36; Mark 1:35, 6:46, 14:32; Luke 6:12, 9:28, 11:1, 22:39-42).⁸ The only specific form of prayer Jesus is depicted as teaching his disciples is the (often misunderstood)⁹ prayer we call “the Lord’s Prayer” or the “Our Father” (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4), and in several gospel passages he is shown praying by speaking vocally to God. But for longer periods of prayer, it is possible that he also engaged in other practices such as reciting verses of

⁷ The hypothesis of Hindu or Buddhist influence on early Christian monasticism is intriguing, but the preponderance of evidence weighs against this: Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 435-439.

⁸ There are other passages in which Jesus is said to withdraw into isolated places, without specifically saying that he went to pray, although that is probably implied (Matthew 4:1, 14:13, 17:1; Mark 1:12-13, 3:7, 9:2; Luke 4:1-2, 4:42; John 6:3, 6:15, 8:1, 10:40, 11:54). This theme is particularly interesting in light of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan’s claim that the Hebrew term for isolating oneself, *hitbodedut*, has long been used to refer to a meditation technique of isolating the inner self from the distracting thoughts and images of the mind: Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1988), 1-15. In addition, an early term applied to the desert monastics, “anchorite,” means “one who withdraws”: Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 64. The possibility that words and phrases that seem to refer to physical isolation might also allude to meditation practices may be worth further research.

⁹ Gary Wills has done a particularly good job of interpreting the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer in his book *Why I Am a Catholic* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), Ch. 27.

scripture, reflecting on his thoughts and feelings, or resting in an inner stillness.¹⁰ In my experience, people who prayer for long periods usually move between forms of prayer like these quite easily, without thinking much about it. It would not be a large step from doing this to recognizing each way of praying as something distinct and developing its possibilities further. Thus I regard it as probable that the meditation techniques of the early monastics were linear developments from prayer practices that were common among early Christians (and Jews).

Christians have sometimes objected to mantra-type prayers based on the gospel passage where Jesus cautions his disciples not to “heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do” (Matthew 6:7). However, he goes on to say that the Gentiles “think they will be heard for their many words,” which is not the point of the mantra-type prayer, but rather seems to refer to pagans petitioning their gods for favors by reciting multiple titles of honor to them. “Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:7-8).

The Greek word *askesis*, from which we get the word ascetism, was originally a sports term for a regimen of exercises. The desert monastics used it to refer to exercises for the spiritual life, not only meditation but such practices as fasting, staying up late praying, renouncing wealth, and refraining from sex.¹¹ As the latter practices were clearly modeled on the example of Jesus, it is likely that the former was as well. The analogy of athletic training and spiritual discipline is found as early as Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (9:25-27), and the first letter to Timothy counsels him to “Train yourself in godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:7-8).¹² What kinds of

¹⁰ Jesus’ command to “go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Matthew 6:6) has long been associated with the prayer of inner quiet. (Translations of New Testament passages are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973)).

¹¹ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 61.

¹² The word translated as “training” in this passage is not *askesis*, but another sports term from which we get the word gymnasium.

practices constitute this training are not specified, but the use of the sports analogy is a point of commonality with the desert monastics which could indicate that meditation was one of these exercises.

The aim of such exercises for the desert monastics was the inner renewal of the mind that is frequently mentioned in the New Testament (Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 3:14-19, 4:22-23; Colossians 3:9-10).¹³ Christians are expected to undertake spiritual exercises to fully develop the inner transformation that begins with the turn toward faith, to train the body and mind as a preparation for more advanced stages of the spiritual life. This understanding of the spiritual life as moving toward a state of greater spiritual maturity is also in conformity with Christian tradition as presented in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 2:6, 3:1-3; Philippians 3:15; Colossians 1:28; Hebrews 5:12-14; 1 Peter 2:2; 2 Peter 1:5-8).

To sum up, monastic meditation practices have several features in common with New Testament Christianity: the emphases on prayer and spiritual exercises, inner renewal of the mind, and movement toward greater spiritual maturity. These points in common do not prove that meditation was practiced in New Testament times, but I think they give us sufficient reason to think that monastic meditation was at least a direct line of development from early Christian practices and in harmony with Christian principles.

The argument of this section is speculative, but seems stronger to me than any case that could be made for the opposite position: that monastic meditation veered away from the spirit of New Testament Christianity. If that were the case, we could expect some evidence of controversy in early Christianity over the adoption of such practices, with Christian leaders condemning them as in violation of apostolic tradition. I am not an expert in the literature of this time period, but I have read fairly extensively on it and am not aware of any such

¹³ The theme of the preaching of Jesus and John the Baptist before him, usually translated as a call to “repent,” is presented in variations of the Greek word *metanoia* (Matthew 3:2, 4:17; Mark 1:4, 1:15; Luke 3:3, 3:8), which literally means “to alter the mind.” In my view, the English word “repent” does not capture the full sense of this inner transformation that is being called for.

controversies. It seems that Christian condemnations of meditation are a modern development, probably because meditation has come to be so closely associated with other religions.

The reasons why many modern Christians are unaware of the role of meditation in their own tradition are worthy of further discussion, but too complex to go into here.

4. Conclusion

I have argued in this essay that some common meditation practices associated with Eastern non-Christian religions have Christian parallels that are deeply rooted in Christian tradition. These meditation practices are thus not only compatible with Christianity, but can help Christians retrieve a vital but neglected component of their own tradition.