

Lecture: Christian Meditation

Bangkok, Samphanthawong Church, 26.2.2017

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1. Christian Meditation – my spiritual journey

I was born in 1957, I attended Sunday school, confirmation classes and church youth groups.

I started to look for the real experience of being close to God.

But my prayers in the style of evangelical Christians didn't help to gain this experience.

At the same time, in the 1970's in Germany a number of cults and guru groups showed up, promising the experience of spiritual knowledge and doubtlessness: Unification Church (Sun Myung Moon), Scientology, Transcendental Meditation (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi), Hare Krishna, Bhagwan Rajneesh / Osho and others.

One of the Protestant youth pastors in Essen (the city I grew up) realized that condemning all those cults and groups might be not sufficient, and so he tried to re-discover Christian spiritual practices. This was quite difficult at that time, because for Protestants spiritual practices had been forgotten or were blamed as a kind of "opium" or demonic influence.

So the first steps to re-discover Christian spiritual practices started by using the techniques of autogenic training (a technique for relaxation), Hatha yoga and Zen meditation. This was the time when I started to attend the first meditation classes led by this Protestant youth pastor.

For me personally these forms of meditation opened a gate to discover my own form of praying and spirituality. And also understand better the shortcomings of those new cults and Guru groups. And later to deepen my theological understanding in my pastoral education.

At the same time those "first generation" of Protestants practicing meditation re-discovered the Christian roots of meditation: the medieval mystics in Europe (Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, "The Cloud of Unknowing", Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Gerhard Tersteegen), the Orthodox Prayer of the Heart (Greece, Russia), the monastic tradition of liturgical meditation, and last but not least the influence of this mystic tradition on the Reformation of Martin Luther.

Meanwhile in my Protestant church in Germany "Meditation" has become "normal" – a growing number of pastors and lay people practicing and teaching it, and a number of retreat centers offer meditation classes, times of fasting and other meditative practices.



2. Christian Meditation – biblical and spiritual background

Latin language: medi-tari

being guided to the center
(inbetween active and passive)

Similar latin word: medeor
to heal, to cure

Natural Experience of Meditation

Everybody has yet experience of Meditation
Children are getting fascinated spontaneously
Also adults can get focused spontaneously
by a shining candle, by watching waves moving
This experience includes all parts of mind, spirit and body



Practice of Meditation



There are three types of Meditation practices,
three “gates” to meditative experiences

*Robert E. Ornstein, Claudio Naranjo,
On the Psychology of Meditation, 1972*

1. Focussing on
objects, symbols, words, holy scriptures –
chew it, but don` t analyse it, let it speak to you
2. Focussing on
pure awareness –
watch breath, heartbeat, feelings, thoughts,
but don` t hang on it
3. Focussing on
ritual activities –
repetetiv chanting, dances,
let go, loose control

Common to all Meditation practices:
repetetiv “activity”
body control / awareness
change of mind status (awake ...)
experience of loosing control, of being gifted
(you are always a beginner ...)
probably experience of unusual abilities
(which mostly is interpreted as temptation!)

Often you will find combinations of the three types of Meditation exercises!

Meditation and Religion

Meditation practice always happens in a frame of religion or philosophy of life. There is no “independent” or “neutral” form of meditation practice.

Harvey G. Cox, *Turning East: Why Americans Look to the Orient for Spirituality-And What That Search Can Mean to the West* (1978), Simon & Schuster, [ISBN 0-671-24405-1](#)

Meditation in Buddhism

The purpose of meditation in Buddhism is

to reach nirvana / to realize Buddha Nature:

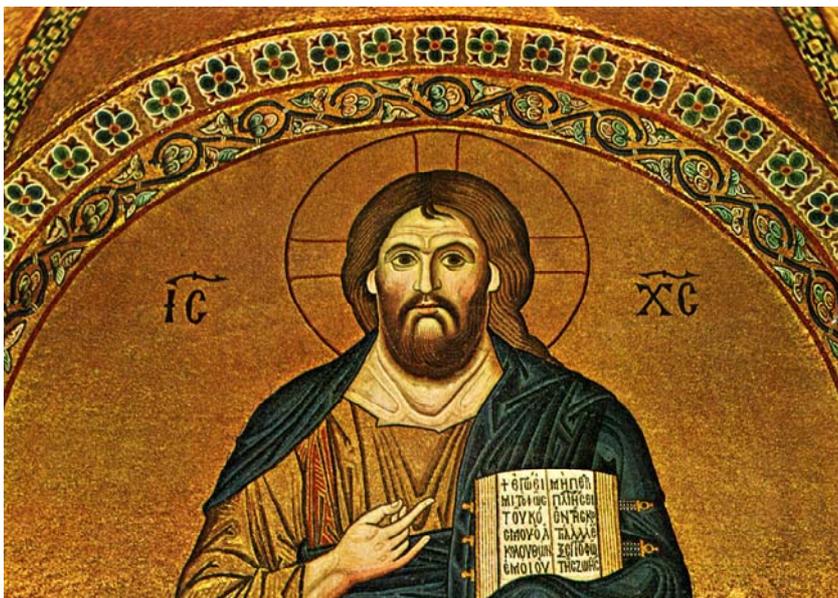
release from suffering and the circle of re-incarnations

by overcoming greed, hatred and illusion.

The three types of Meditation practices can be found in Buddhism as



1. Studying and reciting the Holy Scriptures, Praying Holy Names (Amida Buddhism)
2. Pure Awareness (Vipassana Meditation, Zen Meditation)
3. Ritual Activities (Tantric and Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism)



Meditation in Christianity

The purpose of meditation in Christianity is

to realize the Kingdom of God / Schalom:

release from suffering and injustice

by overcoming sin (the breakage of relations to myself, to other beings, to God).

The three types of Meditation practices can be found in Christianity as

1. Studying and reciting the Holy Bible, Praying the Name of Jesus (Prayer of the Heart)
2. Pure Awareness (John Tauler, “The Cloud of Unknowing”, Theresa of Avila)
3. Ritual Activities (Pentecostal worshipping, healing and deliverance services)

Biblical roots

Psalm 1, 1a.2

Blessed is the one, who does not walk in step with the wicked ...

but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.

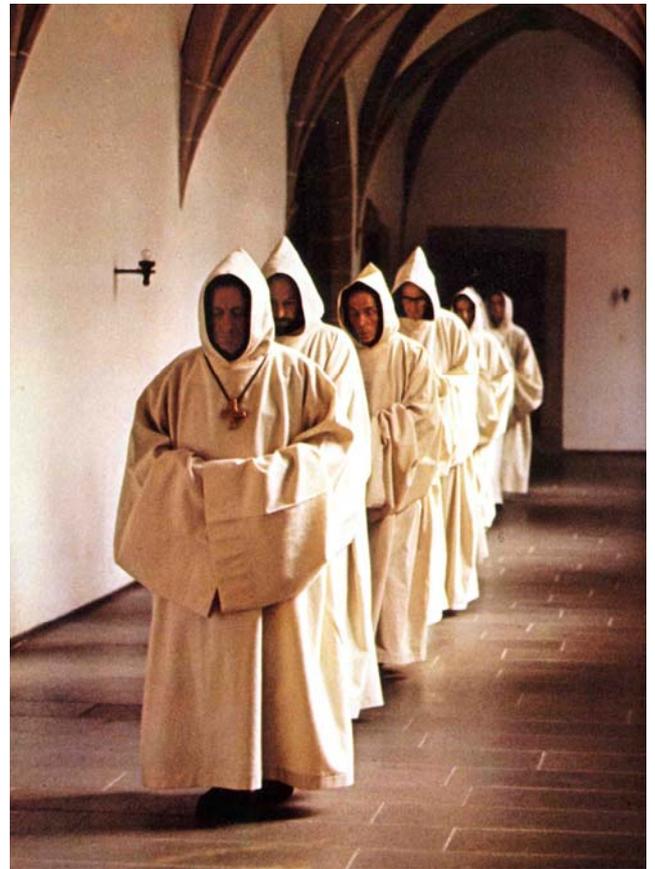
*(original in hebrew language:
who is murmuring the torah day and night)*

St. Paul, First Letter to the Thessalonians, 5,16-18

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

St. Paul to the Galatians, 2,20b

I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.



Christian Tradition

Lectio Divina (monastic tradition)



lectio (reading)

*read slowly
and several times
a passage from the bible*

meditatio (meditation)

*choose one verse
of the reading
ponder on it, (chew it)
but don't analyse*

oratio (prayer)

*engage in dialogue with God
on what you were inspired*

contemplatio (contemplation)

*dwell in the presence of God
without words or imaginations*

Christian Mystics

John Tauler (1300-1361)

*Let totally go all images of objects, and clean up your temple.
If the temple would be emptied,
and all fanciful imaginations
besieging the temple would be driven out,
so you could be ready to become a house of God.
And so you could have peace in your heart, and joy, and nothing
could trouble you anymore
what now is troubling you all the time, depressing you and
making you suffer.*



The Cloud of Unknowing (14. Century)

When I say darkness, I mean a lacking of knowing ... and for this reason it is not called a cloud in the air, but a cloud of unknowing that is betwixt thee and thy God. It is a dark mist which seemeth to be between thee and the light thou aspirest to ... the mysterious radiance of the divine dark, the inaccessible light wherein the Lord is said to dwell, and to which thought with all its struggles cannot attain ...

Of God Himself can no man think. And therefore I would leave all that thing I can think, and choose to my love that thing that I cannot think. ...

For silence is not God, nor speaking is not God; fasting is not God, nor eating is not God ... He is hid between them, and may not be found by any work of thy soul, but all only by love of thine heart.



Martin Luther (1483-1545)

Faith is a reliable knowledge or darkness which is not able to see anything.

However – in this darkness Christ is present, who can be grasped by faith – like GOD sitting on Mount Sinai or in the Temple in the midst of darkness.

Faith in Christ is being raptured (raptus), and transferred (translatio)

away from everything which can be touched inside or outside bound to GOD the invisible and incomprehensible who cannot be touched inside or outside.

Faith his knowledge by experience, expressed by the (biblical) words: Adam perceived his wife (Eva), which means by experience (sensu), not by fiction or by rational reflection.

The truth is: we are beggars.



The everlasting Prayer of the Heart (orthodox tradition)

The Name of Jesus can only take possession of a heart when it is filled by the cleaning breath and the flame of the Holy Spirit. ...

Start to vocalize the name of Jesus reverential and loving. Hold on. Repeat it. Don't reflect on what you are doing, only focus on Jesus. Vocalize his name slowly, soft and calmly. ...

Beginners often make the mistake to connect the invocation of the Holy Name with inner effort and emotion. But the name Jesus shall not be cried out or vocalized with impetuosity. ...

The repetition of the name is like a bird's wing beat which elevates it to the sky. Never should this happen labored, forced, hasty or noisy

Resistance and Acquiescence (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906-1945)

*When you totally renounce
to create somebody out of yourself –
a saint, or a converted sinner or a man of the church
(a so called priestly appearance!),
a just person or an unjust one,
a sick person or a healthy one –
then you throw yourself in God's arms,
then you don't focus anymore on your own suffering,
but on God's suffering in this world,
and then you keep watch
beside Christ in Gethsemane,
and this is faith, this is "metanoia",
and so you will become a true human being, a Christian.*

*How should we become boisterous because of our successes or desperate
because of our failures when we suffer with God in this secular life?*

*I believe
that in any distress GOD will grant us as much resisting power as we need.
But HE doesn't grant it in advance
so that we don't rely on ourselves but only on HIM.
Dwelling in this faith
We will be able to overcome all fear of the future.*



3. Christian Meditation – invitation to practice



Meditation

starts with only few basics, which can be practiced easily:

sitting upright, without any effort, and without any body movement

*(which means well balanced in your bones and muscles
sitting on a chair, on a little bench, sitting with crossed-legs in lotus position, standing)*

keeping the eyes half closed

(focused on one point in front of you)

watching the own breath

*(from the tip of the nose through the throat to the belly,
maybe counting the breath moving in and out)*

watching and let go the own thoughts and feelings

(without analyzing or judging them)

Later the meditation

can be combined with a word / sound, which is repeated again and again

*(only soft and in low voice or calmly, in the rhythm of
breath)*

and can be combined with slow walking

(easiest way in straight direction)

Ulrich Holste-Helmer
German Protestant Church in Thailand

