

Eastern Meditation Techniques and Christian Spirituality: The Example of Vipassana

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Abstract

This article is a theological reflection on Vipassana meditation. Starting with the practical experience of an introduction to this technique, it asks: what is the place of such a discipline, originating as it does in Buddhism, in the life of western Christians? It finds the practice a promising tool in our efforts to make up what Ronald Rolheiser calls our 'contemplative deficit'. Comparisons are made with various elements in Christian spirituality such as ascetical practices like fasting and prayer-forms like the use of a mantra or prayer-word. It concludes that the primary use of the technique is as a therapeutic ascetical practice. In a general sense, it may also be termed a contemplative practice. Whether it is helpful to use the word 'prayer' to refer to it turns out to be a more difficult question.

Introduction

Vipassana meditation is one of the many techniques of Asian origin that are attracting an increasing number of practitioners throughout the world. Among these practitioners there are of course many Christians. This article presents a theological reflection on the experience of an introduction to Vipassana, a technique that had its origin in Buddhism. How does it fit into a Christian way of life? In India courses are run specifically for seminarians and priests and members of religious orders. This study focuses on its use by western Christians. By focusing on Vipassana I hope to raise questions that have a broader reference to the use of eastern practices. Two extreme initial positions are, I think, to be excluded.

The first is that using eastern techniques is to be ruled out *a priori*. In our western culture we are suffering from what Ronald Rolheiser termed a contemplative deficit, an atrophied or muddled self awareness.¹ We should be on the lookout for the best possible means to tackle this, including exploiting the rich practical wisdom of the

east. We should do this in the spirit of the desert fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries in Egypt who went on uncharted spiritual journeys. Simon Tugwell puts it in terms of their saying to themselves things like: ‘Let’s fast for a week and see what happens’.² In a different era John of the Cross in the 16th century saw his spiritual journey in terms borrowed from the adventures of geographical exploration of the New World that were re-shaping the world he lived in. In our era of unprecedented globalisation and religious pluralism, the powerful psychosomatic techniques of the east cannot be responsibly excluded *en bloc*. It is hard to imagine the desert fathers not pressing them into experimental service in their striving to achieve *apatheia*, to pray always and with total concentration.

The second position to be excluded is that any and every eastern technique can be practised without asking theological questions. A work such as *The Unexpected Way* by Paul Williams must give pause for thought.³ He emphasises the profound theological differences between Christianity and Buddhism, and in particular the different aims that are envisaged in the use of techniques to modify awareness or consciousness. The Christian practitioner must ask theological questions about his or her practice. Identifying such questions and trying to address them are tasks for practical theology.

What is Vipassana Meditation?



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The word Vipassana means insight or seeing things as they really are and the term is applied to various Indian meditation techniques. The particular technique we are looking at is Vipassana as taught by S.N. Goenka.⁴ An Indian businessman raised in Myanmar, Goenka learned the technique from Sayagyi U Ba Khin, a layman. Until relatively recently it had been the exclusive preserve of Buddhist monks.⁵ It is claimed that it represents a pure technique that goes

back two thousand five hundred years to the historical Buddha who himself rediscovered a technique that was even in his day already ancient. Lost or corrupted

in India itself, Vipassana is said to have been preserved in its purity in the monastic milieu of Theravada Buddhism.

The technique consists essentially in the calm and detached observation of bodily sensations. Practitioners survey the surface of the body in a systematic and disciplined way. They notice the impermanent and fleeting character of these sensations, evoked in the often repeated Pali term *Anicca*. As they survey their bodily sensations in this way they cultivate a disposition of non-reaction. Some sensations are pleasant and enjoyable, others disagreeable or even painful, but the meditator tries to avoid reacting either positively or negatively.

The technique is taught in ten-day residential courses with a very strict code of behaviour: total silence; no sexual activity and segregation of the sexes; no killing of sentient beings; no intoxicants, i.e. drugs, alcohol, tobacco. With nine hours a day of silent meditation according to detailed instructions, the experience of the course is an intense and demanding one. Ten days are considered the minimum time necessary to inculcate a solid grasp of the technique. In less frenetic and time-poor eras such introductory experiences lasted several weeks. The hope is that the participants will persevere after the course and make Vipassana meditation a permanent feature of their life. If they do it is maintained that they will gradually experience the fruits: peacefulness, improved concentration and clarity of mind, greater benevolence and love of others, and so on. These fruits are associated with a growing freedom from craving and aversion that is said to promise deliverance from human misery. Such deliverance is presented as a sort of psychic healing. As well as the systematic observation of bodily sensations in meditation, a whole ethical dimension of kindness and altruism is equally important. There are no charges for Vipassana courses, meditation teachers work without payment, and the meditation centres run on voluntary donations from grateful participants in earlier courses.

Two Strands in Vipassana

In the teaching given during the courses and in the literature produced by the Vipassana movement and most particularly by the Vipassana Research Institute in Igatpuri in India, ⁶ two distinct strands are readily discernible. The first strand

presents Vipassana as a powerful therapeutic technique which can be used by people of any religion and no religion. It is described as being based simply on nature or reality. This religion-neutral strand is not, however, value-neutral as the technique involves attitudinal change and moral conversion. Testimonies are reproduced from secular minded practitioners, Jews, Christians, Hindus and Moslems.⁷

A second strand is more specifically Buddhist. The impermanence of bodily sensations observed during meditation is seen as revealing the radically passing and insubstantial character of everything, including the ego that is observing the sensations. Everything is fundamentally constant flux. Human pain and pleasure, suffering and happiness, are all equally ephemeral. To come to this realisation is to see things as they really are, and such a realisation helps to break down the habit of reacting, either positively or negatively, to the passing ephemera. This is the path away from misery and to happiness, and ultimately to liberation or *Nibbana*. The sensations observed in meditation are traces of past reactions, whether of craving or aversion, either in one's present existence or, in terms of reincarnation, in many previous existences.

This second strand expresses one particular religious view of reality. All other religions or philosophies are interpreted in terms of an inclusive Buddhism. Essentially what the Vipassana technique effects is seen as the core of all true religion. Other religions are seen as defective in that they rely on a faith that is described as blind, and on rituals and rites that imply a decadent or even magical approach to their religious efficacy. It must be said though that the attitude to other religions is generally positive – they contain elements of *Dhamma*, that is to say nature or reality, which is fully and properly understood in Vipassana. Although there is a certain slippage between the two strands in the teaching discourses during the course⁸ and in the Vipassana literature, they can nevertheless be distinguished.

For our purposes, with our particular interest in the use of the technique by western Christians, the account of a western practitioner, Paul R. Fleischman, is of particular interest.⁹ His cultural roots are in the Judaeo-Christian tradition of the west. The two strands we have just been considering are evident in his work. The therapeutic strand is clear to see: 'I sit to find mental freedom' ; 'I sit to anchor my life in certain

moods.’¹⁰ He gives extensive treatments of the psychological and emotional benefits of Vipassana. The religious strand is also evident: Vipassana ‘is not exactly religion, but is not *not* a religion either’.¹¹ It is an ethical or religious psychology rather than a religion.¹² The ‘religious’ strand is fundamentally Buddhist. The self is an impersonal stream of transitory events. ‘We exist in the whole, like flecks of spray thrown up momentarily by the ocean.’¹³ For Fleischman, the overall context for a particular human life is reincarnation: ‘There are many lives I have to live’.¹⁴ The Buddhist vision is expressed partially in terms borrowed from the Judeo-Christian tradition such as a sacred partnership of between reason and faith.¹⁵ Particularly striking are evocations of the three theological virtues: basic trust, adult faith and love.¹⁶ Fleischman is not presenting a theistic view of reality but he can say such things as ‘Inside us and around us is the maker for whom we care’.¹⁷ He talks of the mysterious ocean of the universe.¹⁸ ‘Even the stars are born and die, but beyond the transiency of the world there is an eternal that each of us can travel towards.’¹⁹ This is an expression of an atheist mysticism, but at the same time it is a sensibility that opens out towards the numinous or the absolute. Within what Fleischman calls the religious or ethical psychology of Vipassana there is, then, a contemplative dimension.

The Therapeutic Aspect of Vipassana

Most people turn to Vipassana with a therapeutic interest, and the therapeutic strand in Vipassana literature is clear to see. Moreover, a large proportion of practitioners in the US are active in the caring professions.²⁰ So people turn to Vipassana for healing and a good number of them have the healing of others as their chosen profession. The evidence for the real psychological benefits is clear. The way that meditation centres run on the voluntary donations of former participants speaks for itself. When subjected to professional statistical analysis, the data indicate positive results for psychological integration, freedom from anxiety or depression, consumption of drugs and alcohol.²¹ S.N. Goenka himself turned to the technique when he had exhausted every other means of addressing chronic and debilitating migraine. But he now repeats the initial response of his teacher that that was not a sufficient motivation to embark on the path of Vipassana. That is to say, the technique is seen as much more than a psychological therapy.

When we return to our focus on the role of Vipassana in the life of a western Christian, this therapeutic aspect is relevant in two respects. First, simply as a human being he or she can benefit from the recognized therapeutic effects, in a straightforward way, and indeed should do so with gratitude. To the extent that it works as a therapy, it has the same place in our conceptual geography as psychological therapies. Secondly, the psychological and ethical changes that the practice of the technique promotes can serve the ongoing process of *metanoia*, for example if a Christian practitioner finds that the technique helps them grow in patience. This connects with the claim made in the Vipassana literature that the non-denominational technique of Vipassana can help you be a better Hindu or Christian, without any question of converting to Buddhism

The Contemplative Aspect of Vipassana

Vipassana is an exercise in self-awareness and can be called in a general sense contemplative or apophatic. Attention is focused on bodily sensations and is supra-conceptual. It may well be that it is precisely the sort of antidote we need to tackle our restless over-stimulation and to address what Rohlheiser described as our contemplative deficit. In a moment we will turn to de Mello's argument that Vipassana-type meditation can be called prayer. But before we do so, it is important to underline that Vipassana could well help prayer, even if for a particular individual it cannot be termed prayer as such. It is analogous in this respect to activities which promote a contemplative lifestyle but which are certainly not always prayer, for example, looking at beautiful scenery, or sustaining the awareness of a Yoga posture. I would think that the primary and most unproblematic location of Vipassana, and the one with the widest application, is, as we have seen, as an ascetical practice that is primarily therapeutic. As regards prayer, it is typically ancillary or preparatory.

As to whether Vipassana-type meditation can be more than a help or a preparation for prayer, that is whether it can be prayer itself, de Mello is unequivocal:

‘When I practice the exercise of being aware of my bodily sensations or of my breathing, can I said to be communicating with God? The answer is yes.’²²

He argues that observing bodily sensations is essentially the same as praying with a mantra in that both reduce drastically the activity of the discursive mind by blocking

out thinking and concepts. Mantra prayer has an assured place in Christian tradition. Therefore Vipassana can also have its place. It is true that what can be called mantra prayer does have an assured place in the tradition (we can cite the Russian *Jesus Prayer*, Chapter X of Cassian's *Conferences* or passages in the 14th century *Cloud of Unknowing*). But is reducing the activity of the discursive mind, as such, prayer (he notes that this can occur when a mantra has no religious content: 'one, two, three, four' for example)? De Mello finds the answer to this question in the self-reporting of Christians who have practised these techniques.²³ When a group of Jesuit retreatants practised awareness exercises along with traditional exercises using the discursive mind, they reported that their experience while doing the awareness exercises was a diffuse sense of God's presence similar to what is described in spiritual theology as the prayer of quiet, and their experience of discursive prayer during the retreat was itself deeper and sharper. That is, self-awareness exercises helped their explicitly Christian prayer, and the self-awareness exercises themselves were experienced as a form of prayer. Josef Sudbrack says something similar about another eastern meditation technique, Zen:

If, however, a person is steeped in a religious tradition, then this kind of meditation method deepens their awareness of God and their attentiveness. If these exercises are undertaken in a Christian context and out of Christian conviction, they can strengthen that conviction and become a truly apophatic, mystical experience of God. They touch on a level of consciousness that breaks through our everyday constrictions, and help us approach the sphere where we are truly ourselves. Christian mysticism thus sees the way of self-awareness as a royal road to God.²⁴

So awareness exercises such as Zen or Vipassana can be prayer for some people. However, the Christians in question are 'steeped in a religious tradition', that is Christian tradition, and the exercises are undertaken in a Christian context and out of Christian conviction. The experience of a Cistercian monk or a Jesuit retreatant is significantly different from that of most Christians who turn to eastern practices in search of healing and also perhaps, in some general sense, of spirituality. Zen or Vipassana may become a Christian contemplative exercise if they are integrated into a well developed Christian lifestyle with Christian practices firmly in place. For many contemporary Christians, however, their grasp of their Christian faith can be weak, and their sacramental and devotional life equally weak or virtually non-existent. For such practitioners, Vipassana can indeed be a contemplative exercise, that is supra-

conceptual and apophatic, but not every contemplative exercise is prayer.²⁵ Contemplative or apophatic experience figures far more widely in ordinary secular experience than we might notice: a solitary fly fisherman gazes out at the water; a long distance lorry driver prefers to drive with the radio switched off; a well-known British businessman describes his principal recreation as gazing into space. These examples are what we might call natural contemplation, and to the extent that some sort of calming or centring occurs, perhaps acquired contemplation.²⁶ This is good and perhaps culturally we need more of it than we have, but we should be slow to liken such contemplative experiences, whether induced by meditation methods or not, to experiences described in traditional Christian spiritual theology.²⁷

The most assured place for Vipassana in Christian experience is, as we have seen, as a therapeutic ascetical practice (in this there is some analogy with fasting). I think within the context of a Christian lifestyle it can also be called, for some people, a Christian contemplative exercise or even prayer. Gazing out at a quiet sea may be a parallel here. This can be a contemplative activity in varying degrees from person to person. And it can be a prayerful activity in varying degrees too. For some people it is almost automatically a prayerful activity, for others less so, and for others it can be called contemplation but not prayer.

Theological Reflections on the Religious Aspect of Vipassana



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The Christian must distinguish clearly between the two strands, the therapeutic and non-denominational strand on the one hand and the inclusively Buddhist one on the other. Comparing and contrasting the Buddhist teaching and Christian teaching is illuminating.

First, and most importantly, God exists. A Carthusian speaks eloquently of the ‘seductions of the Far East’:

There is a particular form of solitude closed in on itself which today attracts those in pursuit of contemplation. The age-old techniques of the Far East, hidden for centuries, are now enjoying considerable publicity, with their promise of recollection, self-discovery and the incomparable joys of the deepest interior silence. There is no doubt that these techniques, in their most authentic and conscious manifestations, allow those who apply themselves wholeheartedly to reach an inner balance and peace that exert an undeniable appeal. The illumination afforded is genuinely contemplative....

Nevertheless, a discordant note is struck in this optimistic view by the tragedy of Job. He also had found his balance and his happiness in sincerely accomplishing all that was required of him to free himself from evil; but, without realizing it, he had reduced God to his own dimensions...

And when the Lord appears, he goes on, the mountains melt. ²⁸

Secondly, there is a different sense of the self. The implications drawn from the perceived impermanence of observed phenomena – *Anicca* - are quite different. Martin Laird describes a sense of impermanence very like the *Anicca* of Vipassana and very unlike it. ²⁹ He registers in the Christian contemplative a growing sense of distance from what he describes as the video playing in one's head. Our thoughts and feelings come and go, but we are not our thoughts and feelings. This is very reminiscent of the detached and equanimous mind of Vipassana registering the coming and going of ephemeral sensations. Even apart from the fact that Vipassana has a characteristic focus on bodily sensations, Laird's take on what is common is quite different. The fleeting sensations and thoughts are like the changing weather on Mount Sinai, but the self is like the mountain itself. This is a diametrically opposed conclusion to that of Vipassana according to which personal identity is ephemeral and transient. According to the Christian view of things, dialogue with a living and personal God increases rather than decreases the sense of personal identity. Henri de Lubac in a work on Buddhism quotes St Augustine's version of a biblical text at this point in which he uses the Latin verb *solidabor*, I will be made solid. ³⁰ Nothing could be further from Fleischman's comparison of the foam thrown up momentarily by the ocean.

Thirdly, the ultimate destiny of the self is quite different in Christianity and the religious strand of Vipassana. We look forward to a future that transforms the present, and nothing that is valuable to God will be allowed to pass away.³¹

In Vipassana personal identity is transient; in Christianity our ultimate destiny is, we hope, the resurrection of the dead. With that conviction firmly in possession, Vipassana can, paradoxically, give us a more vivid sense of our bodily/spiritual reality than a lot of very abstract Christian theological discourse about the body.

A fourth point concerns grace. Vipassana meditation can be seen as what Janet Ruffing refers to as ‘a human technology of the self’.³² Theravada Buddhism, the religious matrix of Vipassana, is sometimes described as a ‘Pelagian’ religion, and it is true that Goenka’s discourses put a great deal of emphasis on the necessity of effort – only you can save yourself. Let’s say a Christian practitioner of Vipassana experiences new patience in trying circumstances. Is this grace or is this Vipassana? This is a false dilemma, of course. In his psychoanalytical biography of St Ignatius Loyola, W.W. Meisner, detects unconscious dynamics at work in all the stages of the saint’s dramatic religious conversion.³³ For Meisner even the famous consolation without cause, Ignatius’ term for what is known more commonly in Catholic spiritual theology as infused contemplation, is to be interpreted both in terms of unconscious psychodynamic processes and in terms of God’s saving activity. On this view of causality, moods of encouragement or consolation or a growth in virtue can be due both to secondary causes of a psychological or even biological nature (such as changes in the serotonin level or in the production of endorphins) and to divine causality. It is wholly wrong to see divine causality and secondary causality as alternatives. Our Christian Vipassana meditator who finds himself or herself more patient can attribute this change to God’s loving activity and to the therapeutic effects of an ancient meditation technique. Divine causality and secondary causality are not competing for the same logical space.

Vipassana and Conversion

As regards the possibility of personal change, Vipassana is decidedly optimistic. We can change a lot. In this it dovetails with some currents in contemporary empirical psychology and in brain science. We can change much more than an older psychology suggested and some recent interpretations of genetic research have

suggested. Just as early Christians would insist that our destiny is not written in advance in the stars, so today we can assert that it is not written in our genetic code either. This newer optimism is epitomised in the idiom of *The Mind Gym*: we can change our default settings.³⁴ This is important for contemporary spirituality. And it is also part of the background to locating the role that Vipassana meditation can indeed play in our Christian lives. The key question is an empirical one: does it work? We find ourselves at this point back with the early desert fathers casting around for the best methods to live an authentic Christian life.

Conclusions

Half a century ago Henri de Lubac saw that the secularising forces at work in the culture were not just an external threat in the public spaces but were invading the personal experience of Christians.³⁵ His intuition has certainly been confirmed by subsequent developments and is complemented by the insight of one of his contemporaries, Simone Weil: 'It seems that Europe requires genuine contacts with the East in order to remain spiritually alive'.³⁶ Vipassana, along with other techniques of eastern origin, may well be understood in these terms. We need instruments and techniques to address our restlessness and lack of focus, which is exacerbated by the way we live so often with our technology. Most of our instruments will of course be from the Christian tradition itself but some will come from elsewhere.

There is every indication that Vipassana represents a powerful therapeutic instrument which can be integrated into Christian spirituality. It can be used with gratitude by the Christian as a means of healing, just as we employ medical or psychotherapeutic modalities. That is to say, it can be employed as something that is seen to work, independently of religious or philosophical convictions. In this respect it is analogous to some forms of psychotherapy.

The technique may help us westerners deal with our contemplative deficit as a preparatory or ancillary practice at the service of Christian contemplation. In this respect it is analogous to ascetical practices such as fasting. It is certainly not automatically Christian prayer simply because it is practised by a Christian. I would suspect that for most people it can perhaps be described as a contemplative exercise

but not as prayer. For some it can be prayer. For Christians who have a well-developed life of Christian prayer, such as the Jesuit retreatants cited by de Mello, awareness exercises such as those of Vipassana may take on a more specifically prayerful character. In this respect it is analogous to the use of mantras, and to other awareness exercises from Yoga and Zen.

It would be naïve, though, to draw the conclusion that Vipassana could constitute the entirety of your spiritual practice as a Christian. An essentially apophatic exercise intertwined with a distinguishable Buddhist strand, it must be accompanied with specifically Christian cataphatic practices of a biblical, ecclesial and sacramental character. If that is not the case, there is every likelihood that it will wash out our Christianity altogether. We hold our treasure in earthenware vessels.

Christians should not be urged to avoid such techniques. Vipassana is open to participation by members of other religious traditions and indeed encourages it. But Christians must maintain a firm grasp on core faith convictions: the existence of God, the centrality of Christ, the reality and dignity of the self created in the image of God, the resurrection of the dead, the necessity of divine grace for salvation. The best way of doing that is regular Eucharistic worship and personal prayer.

Buddhism is not the same as Christianity, and it is on this notion of otherness that I would like to conclude. If a Christian dips a toe into this tradition by doing one of the ten day courses I have described, by that very fact they benefit from the generosity of benefactors and the teams of helpers who run the centres, prepare the food, and create an environment where the goodness is palpable. You sense that you are in contact with something great, which demands respect, and that you are sharing a journey with people following an ancient and noble tradition. There is every reason to believe that it can be a journey of conversion, where one's Christian faith is neither abandoned nor diluted, but rather deepened and purified by this very contact with the other.

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³ Paul Williams, *The Unexpected Way: On Converting from Buddhism to Catholicism*, Edinburgh and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2002, especially pp. 65f. See also *ibid.*, *Buddhism From a Catholic Perspective*, London: Catholic Truth Society, 2006.

⁴ Ample information is available on the Vipassana website: www.dhamma.org

⁵ William Hart, *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S.N. Goenka*, Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute, 1991, p. 8.

⁶ See, for example S.N. Goenka, *For the Benefit of Many: Talks and Answers to Questions from Vipassana Students 1983-2000*, Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute, 2005.

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⁹ Paul R. Fleischman, *Karma and Chaos: New and Collected Essays on Vipassana Meditation*, Onalaska, WA: Vipassana Research Publications, 1999.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 23-24.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 13.

¹² Ibid. pp. 59-61.

¹³ Ibid. p. 34.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 95.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 1.

¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 26-27, 59.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 40.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 54.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 56.

²⁰ Ibid. p. viii.

²¹ *Realising Change* (2005) pp. 157-8.

²² Anthony de Mello, *Sadhana: A Way to God*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1985, p. 25.

²³ Ibid. p. 30.

²⁴ J.Sudbrack, 'Finding God in All Things' in *The Way Supplement* 2002 / 103, pp. 87-99, at p.93.

²⁵ As I am using the terms here, not all contemplation is prayer. Often the term 'contemplation' is used not for contemplative practices but for God's unmerited gift. See, for example: Mary Jo Meadow(ed), *Christian Insight Meditation: Following in the Footsteps of John of the Cross*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2007, p. xviii.

²⁶ 'Vipassana is the best process of acquired contemplation. We can come to the highest state of receptivity to receive the gift of God's grace' Desmond D'Souza C.S.S.R., in *Realising Change* (2005) p. 212.

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