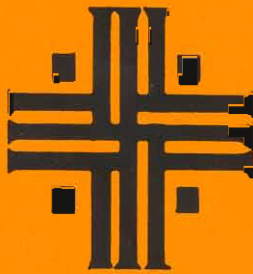


**Teach
Us
to
Pray**



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The Human Experience of Prayer: East and West

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INTRODUCTION

All peoples of the earth and all adherents to every form of religion engage in some activity we might name from our Western perspective, "prayer." Buddhist traditions, however, have no similar term. Although their practice of meditation comes closest to our understanding of prayer, they conceive of this activity quite differently. Moreover, the human experience of prayer is even more diverse. Any particular person's experience of prayer is unique and is profoundly informed by the culture and tradition in and through which this pray-er, this desiring, seeking, beseeching, surrendering, contemplating person becomes one with ultimate reality.

From the Western perspective, the activity designated either narrowly or broadly as prayer is characterized by amazing variety and diversity. It encompasses remarkably different activities, experiences, goals, and attitudes, many of which differ considerably across religious traditions and cultures. Yet, prayer is a universal human activity which expresses some form of relationship to God; to ultimate reality; to the Holy Ground of the world; to the Divine whose beloved we discover ourselves to be. The effects of this process in both the East and the West, however named or taught, *when most authentic*, result in nothing less than the transformation of the person who prays or meditates. The experiences of God or experiences of insight, mindfulness, or awakening in nontheistic traditions cumulatively yield experiences both of ultimate reality, however conceived or described, and of the human self in right relationship with itself and with all others, both human and non-human. In prayer, we discover both the Divine Mystery and the

mystery of our authentic selves. We are eventually stripped of falsehood, illusion, ignorance, and self centeredness. Prayer is the vehicle in and through which we foster and consent to this transformation which also results in healing, peace, justice, compassion, service, intercommunion, and love in our world. The way we pray ultimately expresses what we actually believe about God, ourselves, and others.

In our postmodern, economically and ecologically interdependent world, individuals within every culture are rapidly encountering personally felt connections with others, events, and influences in crosscultural and multicultural contexts. Cultures are changing as a result. This process is so bewildering and frightening to many that they resist encounter and project blame for the confusion, inconvenience, challenges, and threats of this situation onto the culturally or religiously different. They retreat into some enclave of safety with those "they know," those like them, while they reject the alien. Others are receptive to the diversity and attempt to welcome and appreciate the gifts offered by otherness. Even these may be reluctant to be changed by expanding their way of being human in subsequent stages of encounter and mutuality with otherness. The almost totally secularized contexts of politics, economics, and business tend to render invisible, or sadly to neglect, the deeply religious dimensions of nonWestern cultures.

The Second Vatican Council, in one of the most dramatic changes in Roman Catholic theology expressed in *Nostra Aetate*, exhorted believers, "prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, [to] acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men (and women) as well as the values in their society and culture."¹ In Karl Rahner's assessment, such statements signalled the profound theological shift from a European centered Church to a truly world Church. He equated the significance of this shift to that made in the first century from an exclusively Jewish sect to a Church which was both gentile and Jewish. The Council left the particulars of this dialogue and collaboration to the future, but set a dramatically different tone and theological agenda for the dialogue which continues to the present day.²

The interreligious conversations on prayer, meditation, and contemplation, conducted by members of the monastic traditions in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, have been among the most fruitful interreligious dialogues.³ Those pray-ers and meditators who practiced their disciplines together and conversed from the experience of that practice easily reached mutual understand-

ing and respect despite the differences in philosophical and cultural modes of thought and expression. As a result of this ongoing, interreligious, monastic dialogue and of the influx of every form of Eastern meditation practice into the United States in the last thirty years, when the babyboomers turned East looking for meditation teachers, most likely no one in this very Christian audience has been untouched by either meditation practices or language about meditation and prayer from nonChristian religions. Like the spiritual theologian, John Dunne, most of us have "passed over" to experience a meditation or prayer form from another tradition and have "returned" with greater "insight" to our own tradition of Christian, contemplative prayer.⁴ This appropriation of practices from Eastern forms of meditation has become so popular that the Vatican, fearful that Christians would abandon their own rich traditions of prayer, raised alarms about this rich dialogue in 1989.⁵

Although the remainder of this volume emphasizes various aspects of prayer as understood and practiced by Christians and shared with the other major theistic religions, I want to offer an overview of prayer. Then, I shall focus more specifically on the Christian tradition of contemplative prayer and bring that into dialogue with meditation as practiced in Buddhism in both *vipassana* and Zen forms.

PRAYER

Prayer includes all the ways we express and celebrate our relationship with God.⁶ Prayer comprises all the symbolic expressions of ourselves in words, silence, posture, movement, worship, song, thoughts, and unutterable longings toward the mysterious Source of all reality whom we address in these ways because our very personhood is constituted by relationship with this Holy Mystery. Prayer takes many forms and, existentially, may be addressed to different "gods" over the course of our lifetime. Subjectively, the object of our prayer, the image of God, bears a correlative relationship with our self image. As we mature, so, too, does our image of God shift and change to accommodate both this change in ourselves and the changing way we actually experience God to be in relationship with us. Catholic tradition insists upon the ultimate unknowability of God. Every image of God is susceptible to disintegration in the face of the ever increasing fullness of the Divinity's self disclosure to us. Hence, in the experience of prayer, our sense of who God is changes dramatically over time, even though we also experience a mysterious continuity of relationship. It is in our personal history of intimate intercourse with God that

God reveals God's self to us.⁷

We first learn the way to pray and the names of the One to whom we pray in the community of faith in which we are born or which we eventually choose. In this faith tradition, we receive a language of words, stories, concepts, symbols, and rituals which help us interpret the longings of our hearts in relation to the experience of others who have also encountered the living God stirring in them. In the process of prayer, we discover both the deepest mystery of ourselves and the way to live in the presence of the numinous Other.

TRADITIONS OF PERSONAL ADDRESS

Each of the great "religions of the book," Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, emerged out of the profound encounter of its founder with this Holy Mystery who was experienced as self-revealing, intimate, present, and relational by Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. Each of these great prophets and initiators of communities of faith spoke sacred names: I Am Who Will Be; Abba; and Allah. Moses discovered he was continually guided where he was to go, what he was to do, and how he was to relate to others who joined him in this covenantal relationship with *Adonai* or *El Shaddai*, the more familiar names for the God whose name they refrained from speaking. Jesus, whose own self-understanding was constituted by this same community of faith, experienced an intimacy with God that was so familial and intimate that he addressed God as his Abba. So regular and visible was Jesus' intimate converse with God, whose Beloved he discovered himself to be, that his disciples observed him withdraw in solitude for prayer and burst out in spontaneous prayers of praise and thanksgiving in the midst of their gatherings. His teachings were spoken with such authority that his *amen, yes, so be it* was his response to what he heard and received from God before he spoke. In its Hebrew context, this word belongs to a cluster of meanings which includes reliability, trust, and fidelity. Jesus speaks both a word and himself in response to his Abba's *Yes* to him and to us even now. Christians' experience of the Risen Christ led them to recognize the fullness of God in Jesus, giving a Triune character to God. Mohammed's Arabic name for God, *Allah*, was further elaborated in Koranic revelation in a chain of ninety-nine names or attributes: "God appears . . . as the only real Agent who creates and predestines human actions. He is the Absolute Personality — as the Sufis defined it: 'He alone has the right to say, "I."'"⁸ The corresponding human response is submission, total surrender to the holiness of *Allah*, who alone judges. Islam, in rejecting both the Christian

Trinity and the Incarnation, holds to a radical monotheism. Prayer in each of these faith communities is profoundly shaped by its founder's originating experience of God and the subsequent experience of the believing community.

Hinduism, which has often been wrongly described as polytheistic, expresses the greatest diversity in the names used to address God. Hinduism is an amalgamation of many ancient religious streams that coalesced in both devotional and meditative forms of prayer. Most Hindus believe in one supreme God whom they worship in many forms. They tend to choose a form with which they most readily identify: "This concept of *ishtadeva*, the deity of one's choice, means that even within the same family there may be considerable variation of both belief and practice."⁹

Shamanistic traditions also shape the experience of prayer and the cultures of the indigenous peoples in which they originate. In these traditions, the shaman, much like the prophet, is the one who, on behalf of the community, is called into a special relationship with the Divine through which the people receive healing, blessing, forgiveness, and connection. The shaman is recognized by his or her initiatory gifts of vision, trance, or ritual connection with Divinity and receives training from an experienced shaman. In these religions, the shaman serves as a spiritual guide and leader of the community as well as the community's primary link with the Divine through the ritual roles of divination and offering of sacrifices.

In all these traditions, Divinity is personally addressed by individuals and by the community as a whole in its collective ritual worship. All these traditions recognize the Divinity as creator or origin of all that is. All develop a similar repertoire of prayer activity. God, however understood, is praised, honored, adored, worshipped. Such dispositions in prayer recognize the Mystery of God, God's ultimate inscrutability and unknowability, and God as origin. Prayer characterized by these attitudes, however performed by individuals in various traditions, also profoundly expresses the dependence of human existence on Divinity.¹⁰

FORMS OF PRAYER

All these traditions also foster individual and corporate forms of prayer in which human sinfulness is acknowledged and through which forgiveness is sought. Humans experience their contingency, their insufficiency, and their dependence on a single originating Source. So, too, do they experience either their failure to act appropriately according to their personal relationship with this Holy One or their failure to treat others as brothers and sisters by

virtue of their common relationship to this same Holy One. Experiences of personal and collective sin result. This awareness leads people to express sorrow, to seek forgiveness, and to heal the damage done to the community.

Another universal practice of prayer in all these traditions is the prayer of petition and intercession. We pray or ask for what we need and want personally, whether it be for material or spiritual sufficiency. And, we pray for what we feel others need or want. These two forms of prayer can become problematic. The failure to receive that for which we pray often provokes crises of faith, leading some to question whether or not God does or can intervene in their daily lives. It can lead people to question the existence of God altogether. When we pray for deliverance, and the earthquake erupts just the same; when we seek healing for sick family members, and they linger in their suffering or die despite our intercession; when we suffer in some way, and no relief arrives — a lack of response to our voiced wishes confounds our expectations and invites us to discover more profoundly what our relationship with God is or might be and what our relationship with one another is.

All these traditions also practice some form of ritual prayer. This form of prayer ranges from corporate worship several times a day (the prayers Muslims recite five times a day together or alone), to the weekly rhythms of the Christian Eucharist or the Jewish Sabbath (celebrated both at home and in the synagogue), to seasonal rituals (Easter or Christmas for Christians; Rosh Hashanah and Passover for Jews; Pilgrimage to Mecca and the fast during the month of Ramadan for Muslims) as well as rituals which celebrate life events in the whole community or individuals in the shamanistic traditions, such as births, deaths, and harvest. In addition to these corporate practices, individuals within these traditions also practice devotional rituals which may include mantram type repetitive prayers, like the Rosary, the Jesus Prayer, Wazifas, or chants. Frequently, individuals recite prayers or make other offerings alone before household shrines or in visits to a sacred place.

BUDDHISM

Buddhism poses a special problem with regard to prayer as it is understood by all who use the term to mean addressing God personally, first, and then secondarily to mean addressing those who are understood to be with God, such as Christian or Islamic saints. Buddhism developed out of Hinduism through the experience and teaching of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, the Enlightened One. Buddhists do not address a personal God. The

Buddha overcame the problem of suffering through insight into the nature of reality arrived at in meditation. The result was an awareness of nonduality, nonseparation between the self and ultimate reality; hence, no "One" needs to be addressed in prayer. He taught the four noble truths: all life is suffering; desire is the cause of suffering; cessation of desire will stop suffering; the noble eightfold path is the way to stop desire. The noble eightfold path included: morality, wisdom, and meditation. If one followed this path, one could overcome ignorance of the nature of self and realize oneness with reality. Gautama, as a Hindu ascetic, had ardently pursued all the means to happiness Hinduism offered and found them wanting. He discovered that illusion and ignorance of reality were overcome, not by feats of asceticism, but only by meditation which allowed the self as usually experienced to dissolve. This dissolution of the sense of a separate "self" ushers the awakening one into *nirvana*, the release from suffering. After his enlightenment, the Buddha taught his disciples the way to experience this reality directly through meditation.

This process of meditation continues to be widely taught today in both the East and the West in either the concentration created through 1) *vipassana* practice, sometimes called mindfulness, in which the meditator meticulously observes each activity of consciousness as it arises, or 2) through Zen practice in which the meditator concentrates simply on the breath. In Zen, focus on the breath is often combined with intuitively solving the meaning of paradoxical statements called *koans*.¹¹ Both of these forms of practice result in experiential insight into reality which distinguishes the absolute from the relative. A teacher is almost always required to coach the meditator through this process. There is often a mind-to-mind transmission from an illumined teacher to the student. Intense training periods of meditation, which last for several days or months at a time, are normally required. Some practitioners participate in this training by joining a monastic community either temporarily or permanently. Many lay people participate in a series of retreats or meditation intensives without commitment to a monastic style of life.

The vast majority, however, of lay adherents to Buddhism follow the eightfold noble path without a full commitment to meditation. In Buddhism's more popular form, Buddhists participate in a cycle of ritual prayer and offerings much like those in other religious traditions. Offerings are made to Kuan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion, the Buddha, Amida Buddha, and the whole series of enlightened ones who show others the way to enlightenment. Lay Buddhists also support the monastic communities and

their local priests with offerings of food and alms. Buddhists also participate in various ceremonies which frequently include the recitation of mantras, verses from the Buddhist scriptures, the bodhisattva vows and the precepts. Buddhist priests recite prayers at the ceremonies which mark life occasions: births, marriages, deaths, et cetera. Group meditation practice is frequently conducted within a whole set of formal rituals which use incense, flowers, drums, clappers, gongs, statues of the Buddha or Kuan Yin, as well as patterns of movement.

Because the Buddhist conception of reality is one of the profound interdependence of all manifest beings, confession and repentance are acknowledged for negative actions committed in the state of ignorance. The four abodes (pure love, infinite loving-kindness, joy in the joy of others, and equanimity) describe qualities of the liberated mind which demonstrate a positive relationship with interdependent reality. These habitual attitudes are cultivated through *metta* practice in *Theravaden* traditions. *Metta* practice prays for compassion or loving-kindness for oneself, particular others, and all beings without exception.¹² Some meditators also dedicate merit acquired through enlightenment toward the enlightenment of others. Although this understanding of the nature of ultimate reality differs remarkably from the personal God others address in prayer, Buddhists, nonetheless, display the same broad repertoire of prayer and ritual as other traditions. Insofar as a person is addressed, he or she is a saintly person who has achieved enlightenment and dedicated herself or himself to the enlightenment of others.

MEDITATION/CONTEMPLATION

The Western form of prayer that most closely corresponds to the silent meditation practice of Buddhist meditation is usually described as contemplation or mystical prayer. The language of prayer, inherited by Christians since the Reformation, employed such terms as mental prayer, contemplation, the prayer of quiet, and, more recently, centering prayer. Centering prayer is a modern redescription of the prayer, which frequently leads to contemplation, taught in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In contemplative prayer, a person enters a receptive, alert openness to the presence of God and to being affected by that Presence in concrete and specific ways. The Christian mystical tradition offers more than one model for the ultimate goal of the mystical process. Often this goal is described as "union with God." However, Bernard McGinn makes the point that this model accounts only partially for the goal as described in other important texts as "contemplation and the

vision of God, deification, the birth of the Word in the soul, ecstasy, and even radical obedience to the present divine will." He asserts that a consciousness of the direct presence of God is the common element in all of these models.¹³ Contemporary empirical research in Great Britain supports McGinn's conclusion drawn from historical texts. A sense of presence was the most common feature described in openended accounts of religious experience.¹⁴

This sense of presence is unpredictable and sets up an intermittent dialectic of presence and absence; its persistent feature in the classical texts of Western mystics, as well as in the accounts of ordinary people, is ineffability. There is a sense of transcendence, and the subjective ego finds itself drawn toward something beyond itself. Whatever is experienced as the Divine Other is not exactly like another person or object in ordinary categorical reality. There are an aura of mystery and a response of awe. There is a glimpse of something more primordial even than simply a presence. Language often fails to describe such experiences adequately; consequently, witnesses adopt the linguistic strategies of paradox, negation, and even vagueness to stretch the imagination of the reader to press beyond categorical knowledge. In the experience of contemplative prayer, there remains something in the experience that is obscure and which cannot ever be fully objectified. For example, Thomas Kelly calls it, "continually renewed immediacy"; Teresa of Avila, "Awareness absorbed and amazed"; Brother Lawrence, "The pure loving gaze that finds God everywhere"; Origen, "Christ filling the hearing, sight, touch, taste, and every sense"; and Jan Van Ruysbroek, "Receiving the clarity of God without any means; a single nakedness that embraces all things."¹⁵

Buddhist meditation does not operate from this same sense of a relational self nor does it foster an interpersonal relatedness with ultimate reality. In contrast, its goal is for the meditator to see through and dissolve all sense of a separate, experiencing self, distinct from any of the objects of its experience. It seeks to evoke a primordial experience of "no self," of radical emptiness (*sunyata*), of one's Buddha-nature. The linguistic strategies of the teacher lead toward quite a different conception of the self and of personhood which emerge out of the awareness that all elements of the self exist in a process of constant flux. This insight, once experienced, breaks the attachment of the desiring, clinging self to all other impermanent reality and ushers the person into *nirvana*, freeing him or her from illusion. Not only does the ordinary sense of the phenomenal self give way to "no self," but this deeper, more expansive sense of self is experienced as cooriginating with the

absolute in a common process. There is no separation between no-self and the absolute, nor, for that matter, between no-self and relative reality. There is simply no duality, only participation in a common process of interbeing.

Despite the dramatic contrasts between the experienced mystical reality in the East and in the West and despite the differing concepts and descriptive languages, there are remarkable similarities in the effects on the persons who cultivate and yield to experiences of self transcendence from within their specific cultural and religious perspectives.

AMERICAN CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE OF PRAYER

Since 1948, when sociological surveys began to track the prayer habits in the United States, Americans have remained, contrary to assumptions about secularization, a praying people. On average, almost nine out of ten Americans practice some kind of prayer at least occasionally.¹⁶ A recent sociological study sought to find correlations between the kinds of personal prayer and the experience of intimacy with God across Christian denominations. The analytic categories of the survey questions covered a wide range of prayer activity.

The researcher, Margaret Poloma, divided prayer into four categories: colloquial prayer, petitionary prayer, ritual prayer, and meditative prayer. In the Akron Area Study, colloquial or conversational prayer, which included intercession, praise, thanksgiving, or telling God anything else, was practiced by almost three fourths of the respondents. Although all but two percent of those in this study engaged in some form of colloquial prayer, there was a high possibility that their prayer was often a one-way conversation: "Prayers may or may not experience a God who dialogues with them."¹⁷ In terms of petitionary prayer, the overwhelming majority of prayers were willing to pray for personal guidance, forgiveness, or for the alleviation of world suffering. However, only forty-three percent of the AAS respondents claimed they prayed for material things.¹⁸ Ritual prayer was defined as reading or reciting a prepared script, such as memorized devotional prayers or reading from a book of prayers. According to a Gallup Poll, only half of those who prayed recited memorized prayers, and only twenty-two percent read from a prayer book. On this item there were major denominational differences. Catholics were more likely to use a prayer book than Protestants and more likely to recite memorized prayers.¹⁹

The most significant result of her study was the discovery that meditative prayer was qualitatively different from the other three

types. This prayer was described as "taking the stance of a listener — of being still and knowing that God is God." In the Gallup Poll, the respondents "spent time 'quietly thinking about God'; 'feeling the presence of God'; 'trying to listen to God speaking'; and 'worshipping and adoring God.'" Only eight percent of the respondents did not engage in any meditative practices. Fifty-two percent engaged in all four activities.²⁰

Not only was meditative prayer more passive or receptive, but it also focused more on God than it did on self. Although all four types of prayer correlated positively with feeling close to God, "those who pray more frequently, regardless of the type of prayer . . . , seem to experience a deeper intimacy with the divine."²¹ The strength of this sense of intimacy, however, varied in relationship to the form of prayer. Meditative prayer had the "strongest relationship with a felt closeness to God."²² Although many people use more than one type of prayer, those who engaged in some form of meditative prayer, with or without other forms, were more likely to report feelings of intimacy with the Divine than those who do not. The most frequently reported experience during prayer was a deep sense of peace and well being.

The same researcher further discovered that meditative prayer was an important indicator of life satisfaction, general happiness, and existential well being. The determining factor related to prayer was again the extent and depth of intimacy with the Divine.²³ Those who reported the widest range of prayer and more frequent prayer experiences²⁴ were more satisfied with their lives than those with fewer such experiences.²⁵ Likewise, measures of existential well being revealed that the way religion best contributes to a sense of meaning and purpose in life is "by providing a forum for intimacy with the divine."²⁶ The subjective sense of well being in this study seemed to be a "perceived relationship with God."²⁷

This study opens a very small window onto the experiences of a relatively large number of people. It gives some sense of the way praying Americans think about prayer and the way they experience it. It also suggests that there is both a search for personal religious experience through some form of prayer and that some form of meditative activity leads to such experience. In my own qualitative research on mediated religious experience which was not restricted to experiences during prayer, there appeared to be a clear relationship between the respondents' meditative practices and their sensitivity to experiences of God outside of prayer and in their relationships with others.²⁸

A MATTER OF EXPERIENCE

Experience is such an integral aspect of human life that to talk about prayer as experience seems commonplace. Experience is usually contrasted to theory, ideas about what something is versus what concretely transpires. As I reflected on the human experience of prayer, I had to distinguish it from the human experience of God and from the experience of ourselves. In relationship to the activity of prayer, the theme of experience implies for me a correlative experience of self and of God in Western terms, and of no-self and ultimate reality in Buddhist terms. Human experience of prayer includes both experiences of the relatedness of a finite self to Transcendence as well as those that yield only experiences of the limited, isolated self. In Buddhist meditation, concentration is sometimes strong and clear and sometimes very unstable. Sometimes the meditator experiences deeper and more intimate aspects of the experiencing self and sometimes the more superficial layers of consciousness. The experience of prayer seems to vary enormously depending on the form of prayer and the particular activities and passivities of the experiencing subject.

The term, "human experience," is a "common sense" term as well as an abstract philosophical category. Each human person has experiences which are unique and which can be only partially articulated and shared with others. Experience is always concrete, particular, and contextualized. Analyses of experience discriminate among several modes of human experiencing. Most commonly, these modes are sensory, conceptual, and preconceptual.⁴⁹ However, every discrete experience of any degree of complexity includes all three elements. The interpreting self precedes, enters into, and reflects on, anything or anyone encountered in awareness. In experience there are always these two factors: awareness and interaction between ourselves and everything and everyone that is around us or within us. There is no such thing as pure experience or some raw experience prior to interpretation. *Vipassana* meditation practice or insight meditation turns consciousness back on itself so that the observing self notes or notices experiences in consciousness of sensing, feeling, thinking — all these usually unnoticed activities of the interpreting self.

In the experience of prayer, preconceptual experience is dominant, although there are both sensory and conceptual elements in prayer experience. Michael Polanyi described this kind of experience and the knowledge that emerges from it as "tacit."⁵⁰ It refers to a vast range of human activities, such as skills, which are complex patterns of activity through which the person experiences or knows something in an intuitive, holistic way. These skills, in which

preconceptual ways of experiencing predominate, include such simple activities as riding a bicycle or driving a car, or more complex activities like participating in worship, appreciating a symphony, creating a work of art, or loving another person. This is a mode of knowing which is interpersonal and which can be interpreted in concepts and images, but always inadequately and only partially. There always remain elements in these experiences which cannot be directly grasped conceptually although actually experienced. Experiences of God are of this preconceptual kind, whether they take place within the activity of prayer or in and through other activities.

Because they can be only partially articulated, we can get only very limited access to the religious experiences of others, including their prayer experiences. Narrative accounts of such experience only approximate the richness of the experience. There are always aspects of the experience which remain inarticulated either because they cannot be said or because they are not noticed. Noticing is highly selective and profoundly affected by the conceptual maps and expectations which interpreting subjects have received from their cultures.⁵¹ Nonetheless, every religion's tradition and every teacher of prayer or meditation offer accounts of the experiences of God or of ultimate reality as cultivated or desired within their tradition in order to elicit or evoke similar ones in others. The great tradition of mystical texts, paradoxical stories, and sayings, such as those found in the Christian Scriptures or in the sayings of the spiritual teachers in any lineage, directs seekers toward their own unique experiences which will resemble these models.

Likewise, all the traditions of prayer and meditation in the religions of the world have some form of spiritual direction or personal initiation and coaching by an experienced guide who assists seekers in their process of spiritual growth and in deepening their experience of prayer or meditation. The more experienced guide often recognizes aspects of directees' experience from nonverbal clues which enable the guide to elicit more adequate attending on the part of directees to features of the experience that may not have been noticed in the original experience. It is often only in subsequent reflection on experiences of prayer and on preconceptual experiences outside of prayer that deeper dimensions of the experience emerge or the felt sense of an obscure presence of God becomes apparent, although it was part of the original experience. It is common in both Christian prayer and Buddhist meditation that mystical experience or enlightenment occurs outside of the time of meditation or prayer.

Both Christian prayer and Buddhist meditation, however, seek something other than discrete, exceptional experiences. Both forms of seeking and of surrender to ultimate reality are contextualized in a whole pattern of life. Practice or prayer does not stop when the designated time is over. Both activities lead to subtle changes in consciousness and behavior consonant with the depth experience of self and the ground from which the self continually emerges. We experience both God and ourselves only in gracious interaction, inclusive of the world and others, in and through all our human experience. Prayer or meditation does not make sense unless it implies a life which is lived consonantly with the reality experienced in prayer.

Experience is also preconditioned, a source of meaning, and ambiguous. I alluded above to the fact that experience is influenced by culture and personal history, that it is preconditioned. Each of us experiences our world through the culture into which we were born and socialized. The construction of the self and of identity is a cultural creation. This is one of the difficulties of using such broad terms as East and West. Contemporary crosscultural psychology recognizes that people socialized in different cultures have different psychologies and different senses of self. By and large in Asian cultures, the sense of self is actually described as a "we-self." The self is understood and experienced to be part of an extended family system. There is not the same autonomous or separate self which the West cultivates and fosters and which then leaves a family. The complex patterns of culture as well as the history of our personal experience gift us with habits of noticing and responding to some aspects of our experience and hinder our ability to notice and to respond to other aspects.

Secondly, experience is a source of meaning in our lives, although it is not altogether unambiguous. All judgments of value and belief originated in someone's or some community's particular experience. There is a certain authority which experience carries. When our experience corroborates, in either a short-term or long-term time frame, the beliefs, values, and behaviors encouraged by a particular religious or cultural tradition, we become more convinced of the meaning of this way of life. For example, as I care for others and as I experience others caring for me, I come to appreciate from within my own experience the agapic love of Jesus. I discover I am a different kind of person when I live this way, even if, at times, my love or service of another is not reciprocated, or if I feel my resistance to offering some service at a particular moment. If the systems of meaning and value I have received, however, exclude experiences like mine or if I do not

find echoes within my experience, I will begin to look for new ways of interpreting and understanding them. Gadamer identifies the recognition of the discrepancy between experience and tradition as the capacity to have "new experiences." From the new experience I contribute something fresh to the tradition which shaped my preconceptions about reality.

Finally, experience is ambiguous. Although experience contributes to meaningfulness, it does not always yield its meaning easily. "Contrast experiences," a sense that things ought to be different, and new experiences provoke crises of meaning. We may avoid the meaning of our experience; we may shield ourselves in self centered ways from the depth of our experience in order to avoid conversion; we may misinterpret and cling to "holy" experiences and thoughts. Our experiences of prayer partake of this same ambiguity. There is something about human experience that is inevitably mixed. We vacillate between hope and despair; presence and absence; grace and sin.³²

Despite these cautions about the slippery nature of experience, now I would like to explore some aspects of the experience of prayer in the Christian West and of meditation in the Buddhist East in which I discovered similarities without assuming the experiences are identical and without glossing over the distinct differences.

ASIAN CHRISTIANS AND EASTERN MEDITATION PRACTICES IN NEW YORK

Any particular way of sharply differentiating between East and West in spirituality is doomed to failure because of the present extent of mutual influence transpiring among all religious traditions and their practices of prayer. For example, I regularly teach a meditation class in which I introduce students who come from all over the world to practices of meditation and prayer from the major contemplative traditions. Since all these students are Christians, usually Roman Catholic, I teach these practices from within the experience of Christian prayer, the symbols of faith, and theological categories of Christianity. To that I add a unit on Buddhist practices within the conceptual framework of Buddhism. Among these students, some come from various regions of Asia. I have had adult students from Thailand, the Philippines, India, Korea, and some of the priests have been biracial.

We, as Christians, enter into and understand the experience of prayer differently from those who practice the same forms of meditation within the context of a different religious tradition. When we practice awareness exercises, meditate with icons, sit in Zen,

walk in mindfulness, we expand the possible categories for prayer and our experiences of consciousness. Each year, students have learned new ways to contemplate, to sit with Christ, to encounter the Mystery who invites us to communion, to welcome the body as an ally in the spiritual life through postures, movement, and chanting.

There have also been American students who were frightened by what they considered to be New Age spirituality or even "idolatry" because they were completely ignorant of any form of contemplative prayer in their own Christian heritage. They had no experience of silent prayer which could enable them to welcome and to explore changes in their interiority and awareness that might have been evoked by these new practices. Christians in Asia have often been isolated from the practices and beliefs of the nonChristians in their regions. Some of our Indian students practiced Yoga and may have had some experience in a Christian ashram. But, they varied in their familiarity with the stories, practices, and depths of Hindu or Buddhist meditation practice. They, too, had not received much instruction or encouragement in the development of contemplative prayer within Christian tradition. Ironically, some of them will return to Asia having unexpectedly discovered deep wells of spirituality and contemplative Christianity in America.

For the nonChristian East, however, such expansion does not occur in the same way. Western Christian teaching about prayer and contemplation is so rooted in a system of belief and so focused on relationship with God, however unnameable, that it is harder to distinguish the specific activities of prayer, practices of attention and intention, or even a reason to pray apart from a membership in a believing community. Even more, since the Reformation, particularly, Christian mystics, like Teresa of Avila or Francisco Osuna, and others who tried to teach prayer had to do so under constant scrutiny for doctrinal orthodoxy. As a result, experiential descriptions have been carefully edited or self-censored to correspond to the required formulations. Although a few Western mystical texts, like Eckhart's, paradoxically suggest experiences of the self in relationship to God as Mystery which appear to be more similar to those of Buddhist meditation, they were often neglected and discredited because of charges of heterodoxy.

Nonetheless, descriptions of experiences of growth in the spiritual life of Christians or Zen concentration to the point of *kensho* (a powerful moment of enlightenment) suggest several general similarities: the path of prayer or meditation is a path of transfor-

mation through which a person experiences both knowledge of self and of God, or it is a confrontation with both absolute and relative reality. This clarity of awareness in Buddhism or the opening of the heart to universal love in Christianity leads to living in relationship to the world and others with commitment and love. In Christianity, this is usually a form of redemptive love; in Buddhism, it is compassion originating in wisdom expressed through social engagement.³³

This process of transformation occurs either gradually or through more dramatic breakthroughs. There is no "time" in the absolute dimension of reality or in the mystical experience itself. However, in order to experience this dimension of reality, a person must be intent on discovering it and willing to change one's understanding and relationship with the ordinary, socially constructed self. The unhappiness caused by attachment to desire and clinging to every partial fulfillment of that desire must be broken either through the experience of "no-self," nonduality, seeing through the illusion of reality, or through successive relinquishment of desire and its partial fulfillment until it is focused totally on Transcendent Reality.

TRANSFORMATION

The process of mystical transformation changes the experience of the self. Beatrice Bruteau describes this phenomenologically as learning to shift the identification of self from the superficial level of the descriptive self, all those attributes we can name, to the real self or the interior self which simply is. John of the Cross describes the reality of this "self" as the core of the soul in which we "become God by participation." It is impossible to grasp this if one has never experienced going beyond the self we constantly create by our self-reflexiveness, the story about ourselves we continually tell ourselves, which incorporates our social experiences. Although this is an important aspect of ourselves, healthy or otherwise, it does not exhaust the reality of the self. In the West, we tend to think of the "real" self as a thing, something we can reify, but that is not entirely accurate. The real self is pure spirit, that part of the self which is already in communion with God's originating and indwelling Spirit. When our identification of ourselves gradually falls away from all of the projects of our egos and of our self-descriptions, the conventional categories of gender, age, occupation, personality types, and ethnic backgrounds, we discover our own mysterious transcendence. Like God who says I Am, so I am here, I am now, I am.³⁴

In order to dissolve our exclusive identification with our descriptive self and discover this real self, or what Thomas Merton called the "true" self, we go through some kind of spiritual awakening. For Christians, that awakening is usually constituted by some religious experience — some sense of the reality of God which enlivens or arouses the deeper self. The spiritual world, a reality of no space and no time, begins to emerge. Usually, it arises together with a sense of the Divine Presence. We perceive ourselves to be addressed by an Other. This Other always was and is the source from which we emerge. But, our consciousness usually presents it as nonself and radically other. In response, a whole series of reactions, often emotional ones, are set off in consciousness. The descriptive self with which we have identified is going to have to change, get out of the way, orient itself around this Other, not claim total attention. The whole person must come into harmony with the "real" self, grounded in God, until it too seems to disappear in a sense of oneness, union, living in this reality. Thomas Merton described the subtle way the "false self" may even try to take possession of the just emerging "inner self":

It will be ironical indeed if the exterior self seizes upon something within himself, and slyly manipulates it as if to take possession of some inner contemplative secret, imagining that this manipulation can somehow lead to the emergence of an inner self. The inner self is precisely that self which cannot be tricked or manipulated by anyone, even by the devil. He is like a very shy wild animal that never appears at all whenever an alien presence is at hand, and comes out only when all is perfectly peaceful, in silence, when he is untroubled and alone. He cannot be lured by anyone or anything, because he responds to no lure except that of the divine freedom.

Sad is the case of that exterior self that imagines himself contemplative, and seeks to achieve contemplation as the fruit of planned effort and of spiritual ambition. He will assume varied attitudes, and meditate on the inner significance of his own postures, and try to fabricate for himself a contemplative identity: and all the while there is nobody there. There is only an illusory, fictional "I" which seeks itself, struggles to create itself out of nothing, maintained in being by its own compulsion and is the prisoner of its private illusion.

The call to contemplation is not, and cannot be addressed to such an "I."¹⁵

Merton described this inner self as mysterious and as secret as God:

The inner self is not a part of our being, like a motor car. . . . It is like life, and it is life: it is our spiritual life when it is most alive. It is the life by which everything else in us lives and moves. It is in and

through and beyond everything that we are. If it is awakened it communicates a new life to the intelligence in which it lives, so that it becomes a living awareness of itself: and this awareness is not so much something that we ourselves have, as something that we are. It is a new and indefinable quality of our living being.

The inner self is as secret as God and, like Him, it evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it with full possession. It is a life that cannot be held and studied as object, because it is not a "thing." It is not reached and coaxed forth from hiding by any process under the sun, including meditation. All that we can do with any spiritual discipline is produce within ourselves something of the silence, the humility, the detachment, the purity of heart and the indifference which are required if the inner self is to make some shy, unpredictable manifestation of his Presence.¹⁶

By the time Merton wrote this description of the inner self, he had already been strongly influenced by his study of Zen Buddhism. However, he clearly appropriated this particular sense of self within his theoretical and experiential understanding of Christian contemplative experience. His analysis is quite subtle and demonstrates an awareness of the interaction between the socially constructed, partial sense of self with which we usually identify and the inner self which simply is and exists already in union with Transcendent Reality.

Karl Rahner developed his theological anthropology based on an understanding that human beings are constituted by, and in relationship with, the Holy Mystery from whom they originate and toward whom they tend. To enter the depth level of human experiencing is to discover the self to be related to this noncategorical mysterious other.¹⁷

The process of the discovery of this depth dimension and of coming into harmony may be long and arduous, relatively brief, but intensely disruptive, or an intermittent process. Not everyone seeks it or consents to this process of transformation. Many settle for much less. Everyone is, as Gerald May says, endlessly inventive in resisting the implications of religious experience.¹⁸ The early desert elders recognized the temptation to rest short of transformation and left this reminder. Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and explained his practice in a rather self-satisfied way. He actually thought he was doing quite well:

"As far as I can, I keep a moderate rule, with a little fasting, and prayer, and meditation, and quiet. As far as I can I try to cleanse my heart of evil thoughts. What else should I do?" Abba Joseph rose, and spread out his hands to heaven, and his fingers shone like ten candles: and he said: "If you will you could become a living flame."¹⁹

A ZEN BUDDHIST EXPERIENCE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Although Buddhism does not use the language of transformation, the teaching stories and descriptions of awakening and its effects bear some correspondence to transformation. Its teaching is that we are already unified and not separate. One only has to awaken to one's Buddha-nature. Meditation is the "skillful means"⁴⁰ by which one pierces through the ignorance of self which coexists with all existing things. Subjectively, an intense change in consciousness emerges. Frequently, *kensho*, or this experiential breakthrough in consciousness, occurs in the presence of the teacher. Maura O'Halloran, an Irish-American woman who died in a bus accident at the age of twenty-seven, wrote this description of her initial experience of enlightenment which occurred in a Japanese monastery just before her twenty-fifth birthday:

Sesshin [intensive meditation retreat] has begun.

Dokusan [individual interview with the teacher] I did *mu*⁴¹ with all my heart and all my soul and all my being. Everything was squeezed out until my head touched the floor.

"Is it your mind or your heart or your body saying *mu*?"

"I don't know." Tears are flowing without reason; I laugh without reason.

"What is the difference between I don't know and *mu*?"

"No difference." Go Roshi whacks me.

"Ouch!"

"Who feels pain?"

"I do."

Then, when I'm not looking, he jumps up, embraces me. . . . "You surprised me!" I tumble backwards, laughing. He holds my hand tightly, my thumb.

"This is I don't know."

"I know."

"You must see *mu* in everything." I leave *dokusan*, crying and laughing, with Tachibana Sensei apologizing for his English translation. That's okay. He encourages me.

I go to *dokusan* with Kobai-san.

"Where does *mu* come from?"

"I don't know — how can it come from somewhere? It doesn't have a place."

Kobai-san is very fish-like, cold comfort.

"We've all struggled with the problem."

"It comes from me," I told her.

"If that's your answer, go to *dokusan*."

In we go again. Go Roshi says . . . "You don't understand at all."

I'm crushed, devastated. Roshi says, "Next time, come alone."

After lunch we rest. I'm crying, feel wretched, forlorn. I can't do it. Tessansan has such strength in his *mu*; the fellow in white has

such persistence. I couldn't keep on like him. (I take big pauses between *mu*'s). He thumps his head like little Sandra [the most disturbed child at Glencraig], bleating and beating. I lie down, weeping and *mu-ing* and half sleeping. I resolve not to go to bed that night or any night until *kensho* [*satori*, or enlightenment].

Going into zendo, I hear Go Roshi say something about Soshin [Maura's Zen name] (probably saying, "I was wrong; she's hopeless"). I'm called to *dokusan*. I feel so dejected, empty-minded. It doesn't even occur to me to wonder why Go Roshi wants me to come alone.

"How is your *mu*?"

I *mu* for him with all my strength, raising myself high and squeezing every bit of breath into *mu* until my head touches the floor.

"Once more again," he says in English. (He doesn't speak English, but I don't register surprise).

I do so.

Then "Once more again."

My first and only thought was "He may make me do this for ages." Then he jumped at me, grabbed me — "This body is *muji* [the figure of *mu*], this head, eyes, ears."

Suddenly I'm laughing and crying *muji*. I don't even realize "Now I am *muji*," but I simply was *muji* and everything around me.

And he hits different parts of my body. "This is *muji*." Count 20 in *muji* — 20 parts of me, 20 *muji* in Kannonji, all around me. We're holding on to each other, laughing and laughing. "Heart *muji*," he says, thumping me. "And Go Roshi's heart *muji*," I say, belting him back. We're embracing.

"You have realized your Buddha-nature," says he.

I'm surprised. I was too self-conscious even to know that it was *kensho*. Only when I got outside and was looking at everything and really seeing *mu* did I finally know. Suddenly I understood why we must take care of things just because they exist; we are of no greater or of no lesser value.

At first I was so exhausted I felt neither joy nor sorrow, just relief. The next day I was ecstatic, couldn't stop smiling. Then all was as before — or at least so it seems. Everyone tells me I look different. It's hard to be sure. I can't be bothered looking for changes. I began the koasu and flew through about twelve. Maybe they came easily because of my reading, I don't know.⁴²

This experience is the climax of more than a year of intensive training which had included begging practice in the bitter cold in Northern Japan and the daily practice of mindfulness while engaged in the round of duties and responsibilities in the monastery. Maura, herself, is not so conscious as Go Roshi of her emergence into the sustained consciousness of her *satori* or *kensho*.

As an experienced teacher, he can tell by her whole way of being, not just by her responses to his questions. It is with his confirmation that she becomes reflexively aware of the profound change of consciousness which affects her. At the same time, relative reality, the experience of typical ego reactions, is simultaneously present, although not operative in a dominant way. She thinks, "he may make me do this for ages." She notices how cool Kobai-san is toward her. At the same time, she does not wonder why she is to come to *dokusan* alone. She thinks she is moving through koans quickly because of her reading and does not attribute it to the insight which comes with seeing her Buddha-nature. Her ego is so transformed at this point that it does not cling to, or inflate itself with, "possessing" this particular experience. After a brief period of ecstatic joy, "everything was as before."

The experience of "no-self" does not eliminate the ego, but simply relativizes it. As ego responds to various aspects of relative reality, life itself becomes the means of practice. Either she maintains her awareness in a state of deep concentration, or she simply notices her responses to the relative reality of the personalities of those with whom she shares duties and life in the monastery. They notice the changes in her more than she seems to. She remains aware of both the changing levels of her concentration and of a deeper perception into the nature of reality. Just before the *sesshin* described above, she reflected:

When I was responding to circumstances with my ego, feeling put out by criticism, or when Takeo-san would lose his temper over nothing, I'd think of Jiko-san [a fellow monk with whom she had worked] . . . Totally unflappable.

This morning Takeo-san blew up at Mayumi-san because he was slow making tea. At *chosan* she cried. I could empathize but could also realize how ridiculous it is to be put out by one of his explosions. He's worried about his new temple and says himself that he's neurotic. . . . I went out of my way to be decent to him so that I wouldn't feel resentment over what I knew was my stupid "self-notion." It worked incredibly well. When they are barking at me, they are victims of causes and conditions, but when I am gentle and kind, they respond accordingly. Then they, too, are [gentle people] and it's impossible to bear a grudge. It's true that if you love your enemy you have killed him for he ceases to exist.¹⁵

Maura is aware of what she is feeling, the circumstances which evoke the feelings, and chooses to respond to others in the consciousness of their real selves (our term, no-self in Zen). Maura-san's companions recognize the changes in her more than she does and reflect back to her the radiance of her face which she

cannot see in her mirror which is so tiny she cannot see her whole face at once. One says, "Your face is completely different from when you first came to Toshoji." Another, "Your face is shining; it is an enlightened face. Your friends will be surprised."¹⁴ This external change in her face and her posture which has become perfectly straight mirrors the steady concentration she maintains outside the meditation hall. She writes:

I've been reading an excellent book that draws the distinction between positive and absolute *samadhi* [intense effortless concentration]. This makes many things clearer, I understand the Go Roshi of *dokusans* and *sutras*, the Go Roshi of *chosan* and daily life. I understand why *soji* [cleaning] is so important and have slipped into positive *samadhi* in the kitchen.¹⁶

Although Buddhist training focuses intensely on practice and experience, the teaching and her reading help her interpret her experience. The experience is of a preconceptual type, but it is shaped by her growing understanding of herself and others through Buddhist teaching.

Go Roshi, Maura's beloved teacher, found her to be exceptionally pure of heart, and she progressed far more rapidly than is usually the case. Jack Kornfield distinguishes between this robust experience of emptiness and experiences of depression or numbness. Maura's experience enlivens her appreciation of the mystery of life and exemplifies the joy which is the true mark of emptiness. Zen stories reflect the characteristic confusions of neophytes as they try to distinguish between self and no-self as they begin to relinquish the ordinary sense of self. Kornfield recounts this story in order to illustrate a second misconception: people imagine they are impervious to the world or above it:

A samurai . . . came to a Zen master and boasted, "The whole world is empty; it is all emptiness." The Zen master answered, "Hah, what do you know of this? You're a dirty old samurai," and threw something at him. The samurai in an instant drew his sword — he was truly insulted — and an insult to a samurai is made at the cost of your life. The Zen master just looked up and said, "Emptiness is quick to show its temper, isn't it?" The samurai understood, and the sword returned to its scabbard.¹⁶

In Maura's *kensho* she knows who feels the pain. Yet, she is also totally *mu*. In both Maura's interview with Go Roshi and the Samurai's interview with his Zen master, the master distinguishes the authentic experience from the unauthentic by observing the student's responses to the actions, questions, or insults of the roshi.

After *sesshin*, life goes on. Maura does not seem to notice much change in herself after *kensho* except for the way she reads the *sutras* aloud with a big booming voice she enjoys. In her case, she has undergone multiple incremental changes in her consciousness and freedom from her conditioned behavior. Her personal "voice" in her journal, however, remains uniquely hers, clear, strong, and refreshing. Her personality has not disappeared; she simply functions most of the time from a deeper level of consciousness:

I planted veggies, built a compost retainer, am preparing new beds. I feel such a peace pattering around in the dirt with all the wiggly, slimy, ugly little creatures. The creatures digging and fertilizing the garden are worth no more or less than I. I'm careful about them now; try not to disturb them, carry them to appropriate homes when they take over indoors. At first I was put out that Kohai-san was doing the kitchen, but it's worked out perfectly. I'm learning more about Japanese cookery and get to work in the garden. I'm very, very happy.

I stood in the rain for the longest time without getting wet. Nobody knew. It was my koan. The rain noises were on cement, on stone, on my plastic mac. The bird in the apple blossoms shook the moisture from its feathers and sang. I, in sympathy, shook, in my mac and was silent.

To become is to annihilate. To become the quarrel does not really stop it. It both stops and continues it. Wet and not wet. Is and is not.⁴⁷

In this series of passages, we glimpse Maura's growing self knowledge and her awakening to the experience of absolute reality through her practice of Zen. It leads her into great peace and a pervasive awareness of "suchness," absolute reality without distortion. As she reaches the end of training, Go Roshi dreams of her becoming the head of a Zen teaching center in Ireland. She feels strangely happy, as if she has lived her life. From this new perspective, she describes her sense of commitment to others as a result of her new life:

Of late I feel ridiculously happy. No reason. Just bursting with joy. . . . Now I'm 26, and I feel as if I've lived my life. Strange sensation. Almost as if I'm close to death. Any desires, ambitions, hopes I may have have either been fulfilled or spontaneously dissipated. I'm totally content. Of course, I want to get deeper, see clearer, but even if I could only have this paltry, shallow awakening, I'd be quite satisfied. Facing into a long, cold winter is not only fine, but I know I'll enjoy it. Everything seems wonderful. Even undesirable, painful conditions have a poignant beauty and exaltation. So in a sense I have died; for myself there is nothing else to strive after, nothing

more to make my life worthwhile or to justify it. At 26, a living corpse and such a life!

I'd be embarrassed to tell anyone, it sounds so wishy-washy, but now I have maybe 50 or 60 years (who knows?) of time, of a life, open, blank, ready to offer. I want to live it for other people. What else is there to do with it? Not that I expect to change the world or even a blade of grass, but it's as if to give myself is all I can do, as the flowers have no choice but to blossom. At the moment the best I can see to do is to give to people this freedom, this bliss, and how better than through *zazen*? So I must go deeper and deeper and work hard, no longer for me but for everyone I can help. And still I can't save anyone. They must work themselves, and not every one will. Thus I should also work politically, work to make people's surroundings that much more tolerable, work for a society that fosters more spiritual, more human values. A society for people, not profits. What better way to instill the Bodhisattvic spirit in people?⁴⁸

In this last passage, one can see dedication to others emerging in her sensibilities. She planned to combine teaching with political action — a mark of socially engaged Buddhism. It is impossible to tell how much her preBuddhist past contributed to this social commitment. She had been educated by the Loretto sisters in Dublin and intended to work, like Mother Teresa, among Dublin's poor before Zen chose her. In college, she did volunteer work among drug addicts and the very poor of Dublin, and she had spent a summer caring for autistic and retarded children in Northern Ireland. By the time we meet her in her journal, she is thoroughly Buddhist and doubts whether there is a personal god. Today, she is revered as a Buddhist saint in Japan.

This reflection on Maura O'Halloran's Buddhist journey to enlightenment and compassion reveals her changing conception and experience of the way she locates her "self" in her experience. Both relative reality and absolute reality are simultaneous in her experience. She comes to know herself deeply, both her conditioned ego responses to life and herself as part of everything else, cooriginating from the void. She is a graceful, radiant presence in her monastic community, dreams of helping others achieve enlightenment for themselves from this condition of equanimity. Desires have either been fulfilled or released.

A CATHOLIC JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION

The Christian spiritual journey of transformation is frequently described as a path of desires rather than as one of extinguishing them. In the process of Christian contemplative prayer, we discover more of ourselves, as well as the Ground of ourselves, than we would otherwise. For many people in the Christian tradition, the

Ground of our desiring turns out to feel quite personal, although it always remains mysterious. We discover that our desires often disguise our heart's restless longing for communion or oneness with Jesus, God's Self-utterance, and ultimately with the Mystery we intend by the theological symbols of Godhead or Trinity. Prayer is the process in which we voice that desire, and, as the Ulanovs so exquisitely say, "Prayer is the place where we sort out our desires and where we are ourselves sorted out by the desires we choose to follow."⁴⁹

This path of expressive feeling leads to self knowledge, similar to that in Zen, and an increasing knowledge and awareness of God, who, according to Christian tradition, inhabits us. Theology constantly maintains vigilance over the language describing this experience. In order to safeguard God's sovereignty, theological discourse resists language which suggests identity with God, absorption in God, or loss of the self. Our discourse prefers differentiation in communion. It adopts the language of union and mutual relating. But, the mystics who allow themselves to be totally transformed by the experience of sinking into the Ground of their being which opens out into the Divine Beloved, strain against the limits of theological discourse by the use of paradox and often adopt metaphors similar to those used in all the world's mystical traditions. I do not claim that these experiences are identical because our experience is shaped and influenced by our understandings and our language. Nonetheless, it seems that the goal of all mystical traditions is experiential oneness with whatever constitutes ultimate reality.

Buddhism analyzes desire as the root cause of all suffering. To recognize the illusory nature of desire as the source of discontent and greed, practitioners experience their desires rising from, and falling back into, the stream of consciousness which the self is. This practice is the way to be freed from all forms of suffering. The Christian mystical way, which embraces the desirous self, also discovers that the superficial, conditioned ego often mistakes itself for the whole of the self and often mistakes its wants and needs, usually on the material or relational level, for what the soul wants, namely, union with God. By expressing feelings and discovering ever deeper, more expansive and less superficial objects of desire, the Christian also discovers the interior self and its already inherent satisfaction or fulfillment of this most fundamental desire.

It is the act of prayer, daily, persistently, and courageously, that enables us to hear ourselves at ever deeper levels. We are sorted out by our desires as we recognize them and recognize their teleology toward the Divine Beloved. This process leads us through

the painful path of self knowledge as the Presence of the Divine Beloved in the soul's sanctuary illumines all that resists it and all that is contrary to this compassionate and all embracing way of being. Without exception, the great mystics of the West suggest that there is no end to self knowledge about both our best possibilities and our worst faults and the actions which arise from them. So, too, they suggest that whoever we think God is will be changed and confounded in the process of mystical transformation. There is in Christianity, as in most religious traditions, a path through mediations (through images, symbols, people) and a path through emptiness and detachment. But, the great majority of Christian mystics place the heart's love of God and neighbor as the primary mode of self transcendence. The depth and quality of this transformation is rarely judged on the basis of mystical states, specific religious experiences, or particular states of consciousness. It is always validated by the mystic's increasing capacity to love others. Catherine of Siena is relentless in her teaching that all virtue and all vice are expressed only in relationship to one's neighbor.

The Cloud of Unknowing offers this description of the effects of the contemplative process which it names "the work of love." It bears striking resemblance to the experience others had of Maura O'Halloran:

As a person matures in the work of love, he will discover that this love governs his demeanor befittingly both within and without. When grace draws a man to contemplation it seems to transfigure him even physically so that though he may be ill-favored by nature, he now appears changed and lovely to behold. His whole personality becomes so attractive that good people are honored and delighted to be in his company, strengthened by the sense of God he radiates.

And so do your part to co-operate with grace and win this great gift, for truly it will teach the man who possesses it how to govern himself and all that is his. He will even be able to discern the character and temperament of others when necessary. He will know how to accommodate himself to everyone, and (to the astonishment of all) even to inveterate sinners, without sinning himself. God's grace will work through him, drawing others to desire that very contemplative love which the Spirit awakens in him. His countenance and conversation will be rich in wisdom, fire, and the fruits of love, for he will speak with a calm assurance devoid of all falsehood and the fawning pretense of hypocrites.⁵⁰

The brief excerpts from an interview I conducted with a sixty-year old sister suggest changes in her that are similar to those noted in Maura O'Halloran. This sister's sense of the presence of God was pervasive both within her experience of prayer and with-

in her experiences of the world, both in nature and with people. She placed the time of this transition to a deeper sense of her self and pervasive experiential awareness of the depth dimension of her reality some time in her forties:

More and more as I got older, since I reached the middle forties, I'm reaching more of that leveling off in my life and my spirituality. There is more appreciation and more of a centering, deeper down. The way I view life today is different. [There is more of a peace and I guess a gratitude for the past — gratitude for the steps and the journey that I had moved through. There's a mellowing, like the seasons. It's a fullness. It's like the ripening of the fruit that you're beginning now to be able to eat and enjoy. [It's] overpowering, more [like] experiencing the reality and a . . . more consistent sense of God's presence].⁵¹

She reported one dramatic experience of God twenty years earlier, when a hurricane struck and she was the superior of a convent. During that experience, she reported God calling her name in the midst of the storm. In response, she found she was released from her paralyzing fear, conducted a communion service in the chapel, and, having survived the night, made hot coffee in the morning. She felt she would have been incapable of these actions without having been empowered by God. From that time on, she was absolutely convinced of the existence of God, although she could not always experience God's presence so tangibly. In the interview, she talked about a shift that occurred between forty-five and fifty years of age when the experience of God in prayer remained consistently available. She seemed simply to breathe the presence of God. She had practiced a regular discipline of personal prayer, retreats, and liturgy for more than forty years. She determined the form of her prayer spontaneously. She interacted with God in expressive ways as well as in receptive ways. She felt most connected with God in a natural setting, but also during liturgy and during her prayer in the chapel. She described two different, but quite powerful, experiences of God and herself in natural settings:

The trees were kind of wintry. Experiencing the sun coming through that mighty tree, I just stood there and I felt a power, the power of the Mighty One, the Creator of it all coming right through me. The energy of God and the trees enveloped me. The power and the energy came out from me, first [just] encountering the tree. . . . then encountering God and myself in the tree.

In this event, she seemed to experience herself as connected and one with the tree, the earth, and God, in a moment of pro-

found communion. In the following one, she described an experience that happened while she was sitting under a tree, on the ground, when she felt a confirmation of a call to go to Africa at this later time in her life. She sensed herself both addressed by God and empowered by this God:

I felt called up on the mountains; I just sat there under a tree; and I really called out to God, "Here I am. Am I to go to mission at this age? Am I really called there?" And I felt the same type of power of God just coming to me there and really, I cried. I really cried and screamed, "Here I am Lord" and I can feel Him say, "Be not afraid." "Be not afraid." "Let Go." And I made my decision there. Just being there with the earth, I put my hands on the earth. Feeling the power [I said], "How could I ever doubt the God who created me and created this earth. Why should I fear?"

She clearly described changes in her sense of self as the cumulative result of her lifetime practice of prayer and interpersonal relationship with God. These experiences were not particularly unusual or spectacular for her, but simply the most recent ones. The first experience had occurred on a retreat day the weekend prior to the interview. The latter had occurred a few months before, but remained significant because she was leaving soon for Africa. It, too, had occurred during a retreat/discernment process. At that time, she was seeking an answer to a particular question.

Her decision to go to Africa, which she made on the basis of this confirming retreat experience, was in continuity with her first call to leave Ireland to minister, as a teacher, to poor blacks in the United States. She described the way her sense of God and her own ways of praying had been changed by these experiences with the black community:

I taught all races of people, but my great experience was working with Black people and experiencing their liturgies and their prayer life. I grew into their prayer. From their great trust in God and the way they were free to pray. Their body, their hands, their voice, the whole bit. And for me, that was a freeing into a new God [It had] a great influence on me, my appreciation of other people's religions. . . . Their religion and their way of praying helped me to pray better and also, to feel a God that's for all people. And I think that I am getting very aware of the God for all people from that experience. That whatever way God reaches us is o.k. They knew how to touch God. They knew how to touch the spirit, and for me that's empowering.

She reported another experience which had occurred the day before the interview in the midst of a group session in a spiritual

direction training program. This preconceptual experience is partially interpreted by a phrase from Scripture which spontaneously arose in her consciousness:

Yesterday, a phrase [of Scripture] came up, "You are my people and I am your God." I just felt like sitting with that phrase. It just came to me all of a sudden. I was part of this group of people and I didn't just feel that I was just this individual there. This prayer took in everybody sitting around me. [I was just] one of the people — the whole, all of us as we were. Whatever we became in our brokenness and our joys are just part of a whole, just really being part of that group and just entering into the group, entering into each one of them and that whatever they were and whatever I was myself at that moment, you know, together. It was powerful. When I came to the chapel, it came back to me. I just sat there with it and then I found myself just singing. . . .

When asked about the way her relationship with people had changed, she talked about a life long interest in people, usually finding herself enriched by others. However, she noticed that she was drawn to go deeper with them into their experience of God. Her deep connection with God is drawing her into a ministry of helping others to develop their own connection. At the same time, she recognized, "It's the same world and the same people, but it doesn't feel the same. There are things happening that were happening when I was younger, but I see it as different. [There] are more levels. And [along with] the awareness and [there is a] patience with people who are going through that process." She was less distressed by the faults of others. This sister was experiencing an "invigorating new life" as she responded to a call to become a missionary to a completely new people in a new country and to minister to the spiritual development of others, instead of teaching. There were joy, generosity, awe, and peace. She loved people deeply and trusted love for her. She appeared to live quite unselfconsciously within the Mystery which seemed both present and transparent to her.

CONCLUSION

Although the specific path of contemplative prayer and meditation followed by each of these women was very different, both are convinced, from their own experience and its confirmation by others, that they approximated their goals sufficiently to become a spiritual guide for others. Both are filled with joy. Both are convinced of the rightness of their life experiences, an inclusive sense that everything is o.k., just as it is. Both reveal in their descriptions a sense of self which is not obsessively self referred, but which is

more often deeply connected to Transcendent Reality than it is limited to the perspective of the superficial ego. Maura's Zen training followed a classical pattern of formal exercises personally directed by Go Roshi. This training included both direction during intense periods of meditation and the round of duties and ceremonies in which Maura participated. At the time of her *kensho* retreat, she was responsible for the kitchen. The sister's training was more haphazard, her practice more expressively spontaneous, and seemed to involve no particular spiritual director or teacher. The religious life she had experienced had given her a structure, a pattern of regular prayer, and encouraged her to integrate ministerial life with her interior life. Both appear to be living habitually in the realization of the goal of the human experience of prayer. Both are more referred to ultimate reality and more thoroughly themselves than they were at the beginning of their journeys. Both have been transformed through their experience of prayer or practice of meditation and their dedication to their sacred path in the whole of their lives.

Too often, the human experience of prayer stops short of this kind of spiritual transformation or realization. Both empirical studies and less formal anecdotal accounts reveal that many pray, that many are willing to approach the beginning of the path of prayer, that many live in a specific, conscious commitment or dedication to God or a sacred path. This consecration and this intention are most clearly symbolized and expressed in the variety of prayer forms and practices people choose to adopt. Too many, however, never experience the fully contemplative dimension, the mystical dimension, or the meditative process, which is an element of every religious tradition. It is this contemplative dimension which not only demonstrates the depth of the human experience of prayer, East and West, but also suggests the larger process of human transformation which manifests itself in an integrated life of active love of God and neighbor.

NOTES

¹*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," #2 (New York: The America Press, 1966).

²Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* (1979): 717.

³A comprehensive bibliography on the early phases of Christian-Buddhist dialogue can be found in Joseph Spac, *Buddhist-Christian Empathy* (Chicago: Chicago Institute of Theology and Culture, 1980). See also, Dom Aelred Graham, *Conversations: Christian and Buddhist*.

Encounters in Japan (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968); Susan Walker, ed., *Speaking of Silence: Christian and Buddhists on the Contemplative Way* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987); and Aloysius Pieris, "East in the West: Resolving a Spiritual Crisis," *Horizons* 15/2 (1988): 337-46. For examples of theological Buddhist-Christian dialogue, see "Spirituality and Liberation: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation," *Horizons* 15/2 (1988): 347-64; John B. Cobb, Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Zen* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988); and Leo D. Lefebure, *The Buddha and the Christ: Explorations in Buddhist and Christian Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

¹John S. Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

²See "Some Aspects of Christian Meditation," *Origins* 19 (December 1989): 492-98. For a considered reply from among those engaged in inter-religious dialogue, see John A. Raymaker, "The Dilemma Created by the Vatican Letter on Christian Meditation," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 27 (1990): 76-85.

³See my "As Refined by Fire," *Living Prayer* 28 (March/April, 1995): 3-7.

⁴See Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), for an excellent treatment of this psychological process.

⁵Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of Northern Carolina Press, 1975), 25-26.

⁶*Praying Their Faith* (Derby, England: Christian Education Movement, 1992), 20.

⁷See Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody, *Prayer in World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), for an accessible, one volume treatment of prayer in the various world religions.

⁸Tich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, has widely taught a form of Theravadan mindfulness practice in the West after he was exiled from Vietnam. His profound concern with peacemaking efforts as a responsibility of those who meditate promoted a "socially engaged Buddhism" rather than a primarily meditation hall Buddhism. See *Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); *The Sun My Heart: From Mindfulness to Insight Contemplation* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1988); and *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam, 1992). A helpful introduction to Zen meditation remains: Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970). For guides to Vipassana meditation practices as taught by trustworthy American teachers who went through training in Asia, see Joseph Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight: A Simple and Direct Guide to Buddhist Meditation* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), and Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life* (New York: Bantam, 1993). For technical essays on these Buddhist traditions, see Takeuchi Yochinori, ed., *Buddhist Spirituality I: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, Early Chinese*, Vol. 8, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

⁹Mary Jo Meadow describes this practice for Christian practitioners drawing on the original Buddhist teaching texts in *Gentling the Heart: Buddhist Loving-kindness Practice for Christians* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

¹⁰Bernard McGinn, *Foundations of Christian Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, vol. 1, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xvii.

¹¹"In all these cases the subject enters into a new relationship with something in the environment. Something he sees suddenly becomes a 'you,' and he sees (and reacts to) it as 'friendly,' 'hostile,' 'smiling' or whatever" [Timothy Beardsworth, *A Sense of Presence: The Phenomenology of Certain Kinds of Visionary and Ecstatic Experience Based on 1000 First-hand Accounts* (Manchester, England: Religious Experience Unit, 1977), 4.].

¹²Gerald May, "The Experience of Contemplation," *Spiritual Book News* (May, 1992).

¹³Margaret M. Poloma, "The Effects of Prayer on Mental Well-Being," *Second Opinion* 18 (January): 38.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁵Those most likely to do so were "born again," over 50 years of age, nonwhite, and had less than a high school education. *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶*Ibid.* Twenty-nine percent of the Catholics versus sixteen percent of the Protestants used a prayer book. Seventy-two percent of the Catholics versus forty percent of the Protestants recited memorized prayers.

¹⁷*Ibid.* Poloma also drew out data from a Gallup Poll to extend her sample beyond her Akron Area Survey for this report.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*, 46.

²¹For this study, these experiences were described in the following way: 1. Experienced a deep sense of peace and well-being, 70%; 2. Felt the strong presence of God, 59%; 3. Received what you regarded as a definite answer to a specific prayer request, 46%; 4. Received what you believed to be a deeper insight into a spiritual or biblical truth, 40%; 5. Felt divinely inspired or "led by God" to perform some specific action, 35%. (The percentages represent those in the AAS who reported the frequency of these experiences as either regular or occasional.) *Ibid.*, 43. See Margaret Poloma and George Gallup, Jr., *Varieties of Prayer: A Survey Report* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), for the original study.

²²*Ibid.*, 47. See Margaret Poloma and Brian Pendleton, *Exploring Neglected Dimensions of Religion in Quality of Life Research* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), for the full study upon which this summary article reports.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*, 47. In the Akron Area Study, there were 560 participants. Of these, only 12 percent did not use any meditative forms of prayer, while a very small number, 5%, regularly used all five forms of meditative prayer. The AAS added to the Gallup descriptions a question concerning reading the Bible and thinking about what was read. Only 20 percent reported never praying this way with the Bible.

²⁵Janet K. Ruffing, "The World Transfigured: Kataphatic Religious Experience Explored Through Qualitative Research Methodology," *Studies in Spirituality* (forthcoming): 1-33.

²⁶See Denis Edwards, *The Human Experience of God* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1983), for a brief treatment of "experience."

³⁰Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

³¹Bernard McGinn claims that historians can never gain direct access to experience. They can only reflect on the evidence of experience as it is recorded in written texts (*Christian Mysticism*, xiv).

³²Michael Downey, ed., *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville: Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1993), s.v. "Experience," by Tad Dunne.

³³See Fred Eppsteiner, ed., *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1985).

³⁴See Beatrice Bruteau, *Radical Optimism* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

³⁵Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation (I)," *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983): 5.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 6.

³⁷Karl Rahner, "The Experience of God Today," *Theological Investigations VI*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), and the relevant sections in *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978).

³⁸Gerald May, *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit: A Psychiatrist Explores Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1982), 85.

³⁹"The Sayings of the Fathers" (XII, 8), in *Western Asceticism*, ed. Owen Chadwick, Volume XII, The Library of Christian Classics (Maryland: Westminster Press, 1958), 142.

⁴⁰"The Buddhist view of all teachings and practices as tools to lead one to awakening and not as absolute truth" (Lefebure, 199).

⁴¹Go Rōshi gave Maura this koan in her first individual meeting with him. It means "nothingness." In this instance, her koan is not a paradoxical story, but a single word that points to ultimate truth. Maura wrote home: "You see, my koan is *mu*, I'm supposed to bellow this (discreetly, where necessary) at every available opportunity. I scared the wits out of the poor cook, who thought the noise was her cat being brutalized." Maura's work with *mu* includes vocalizing it as well as keeping it in consciousness to keep her focus and intention on penetrating to the reality symbolized by *mu*. [Maura O'Halloran, *Pure Heart Enlightened Mind: The Zen Journal and Letters of Maura "Soshin" O'Halloran* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc., 1994), 24.]

⁴²*Ibid.*, 102-105.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 97-98.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 98-99.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁶Jack Kornfield, 205.

⁴⁷O'Halloran, 109.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 232-33.

⁴⁹Ann and Barry Ulanov, 20.

⁵⁰*The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling*, trans. and ed. William Johnston (Garden City, New York: Doubleday), Ch. 55, 119-20.

⁵¹Interview conducted in Burlingame, California, 3/15/91, used with permission.

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