



Buddhism Compared to Orthodox Christian Asceticism

“It is unfortunate that there is widespread confusion, not to mention delusion, in the inexperienced, whereby the Jesus Prayer is thought to be equivalent to yoga in Buddhism, or ‘transcendental meditation’, and other such Eastern exotica. Any similarity, however, is mostly external, and any inner convergence does not rise beyond the natural ‘anatomy’ of the human soul. The fundamental difference between Christianity and other beliefs and practices lies in the fact that the Jesus Prayer is based on the revelation of the One true living and personal God as Holy Trinity. No other path admits any possibility of a living relationship between God and the person who prays.

Eastern asceticism aims at divesting the mind of all that is relative and transitory, so that man may identify with the impersonal Absolute. This Absolute is believed to be man’s original ‘nature’, which suffered degradation and degeneration by entering a multiform and ever-changing earth-bound life. Ascetic practice like this is, above all, centred upon the self, and is totally dependent on man’s will. Its intellectual character betrays the fullness of human nature, in that it takes no account of the heart. Man’s main struggle is to return to the anonymous Supra-personal Absolute and to be dissolved in it. He must therefore aspire to efface the soul (Atman) in order to be one with this anonymous ocean of the Suprapersonal Absolute, and in this lies its basically negative purpose.

In his struggle to divest himself of all suffering and instability connected with transient life, the eastern ascetic immerses himself in the abstract and intellectual sphere of so-called pure Existence, a negative and impersonal sphere in which no vision of God is possible, only man’s vision of himself. There is no place for the heart in this practice. Progress in this form of asceticism depends only on one’s individual will to succeed. The Upanishads do not say anywhere that pride is an obstacle to spiritual progress, or that humility is a virtue. The positive dimension of Christian asceticism, in which self-denial leads to one’s clothing with the heavenly man, to the assumption of a supernatural form of life, the Source of which is the One True, Self-revealing God, is obviously and totally absent. Even in its more noble expressions, the self-denial in Buddhism is only the insignificant half of the picture. In the mind’s desire to return to its merely ‘natural’ self, it beholds its own nakedness in a ‘cloud of divestiture’. But at this point there is a grave risk of obsession with itself, of its marvelling at its own luminous but created beauty, and worshipping the creature more

than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). The mind has by now begun to deify or idolise its self and then, according to the words of the Lord, 'the last state of that man is worse than the first' (Matt. 12:45).

Such are the limits of Eastern styles of contemplation, which do not claim to be the contemplation of God, and are in fact man's contemplation of himself. This does not go beyond the boundaries of created being, nor does it draw anywhere near to the Truth of primordial Being, to the uncreated living God Who has revealed Himself to man. This kind of practice may well afford some relaxation or sharpen man's psychological and intellectual functions, yet 'that which is born of the flesh is flesh' (John 3:6) and 'they that are in the flesh cannot please God' (Rom. 8:8)."

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