Journey to the Light: *Vipassana* Meditation and *Hesychastic* Prayer

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Abstract
This article is a comparative study of two orthodox religious practices: the Orthodox Buddhist practice of *vipassana* meditation and the Orthodox Christian practice of *hesychastic* prayer. The article acknowledges that both religions share the common idea of meditation/contemplation as an inner journey toward enlightenment. On the one hand, the Buddhist *yogi* is enlightened by observing the constantly changing nature of one's mind-body relationship and hopes for being reborn as a *deva* or *brahma* (god/celestial being). The Christian *hesychast*, on the other hand, is awakened by the Spirit of God in the *deification* (sharing divine likeness) process through contemplative prayer. The *hesychast* is enlightened by unifying his or her mind-heart with the trinitarian God. Both practices help to transform the practitioners to shine in this world. However, the deified *hesychast* lives in light of eternity.

Keywords
*vipassana*, *hesychast*, *yogi*, meditation, contemplation, enlightenment, interior journey

Introduction
Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, who started its mission more than two thousand five hundred years ago and became the Buddha, that is, the Fully Enlightened One. Even so, Buddhism did not achieve success in the Western hemisphere until the middle of the twentieth century. The popularity of Buddhism around the world today is connected with the *vipassana* meditation practice introduced by the
most venerable monk Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982)\textsuperscript{1} and some lay leaders\textsuperscript{2} from Myanmar (Burma), such as Saya Thetgyi (1873-1945),\textsuperscript{3} Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899-1971),\textsuperscript{4} and Sayagyi Goenka (1924-2013).\textsuperscript{5} There are various schools of Buddhism, but Theravada Buddhism is recognized as Orthodox Buddhism and Myanmar is widely regarded as one of the leading countries of Orthodox Buddhism.

In today’s Christian circles, some Roman Catholic priests such as Thomas Merton (1915-1968),\textsuperscript{6} John Main (1926-1982),\textsuperscript{7} and their followers recognized the need for the renewal of ancient Christian spirituality and spiritual practices in the West. They also dialogued with prominent Asian non-Christian religious leaders, such as the fourteenth Dalai Lama and Dr. Swami Satyananda (1909-1961), and renewed the Christian concepts and practices of contemplation. In this regard, it is necessary to note that ancient Christian contemplative practice has been faithfully and imperceptibly handed down by generations of monks in the Orthodox Churches to the present day.\textsuperscript{8} Unfortunately, the valuable ancient spiritual practice of inner tranquility has more or less fallen out of favor in Protestant Christianity.

In this article, I explore how the Orthodox Christian practice of contemplation, that is, hesychastic prayer, relates to the Orthodox Buddhist practice of \textit{vipassana} meditation. This article is a correlational study with the purpose of achieving some new insights. It is hoped that the findings will shed light on how these two profound orthodox religious practices

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\textsuperscript{3} “Saya Thetgyi (1873-1945)”, Treasures (pariyatti.org) (accessed May 27, 2023).

\textsuperscript{4} Sayagyi U Ba Khin | Vipassana Research Institute (vridhamma.org) (accessed May 27, 2023).

\textsuperscript{5} Sayagyi Goenka was born and brought up in Myanmar (Burma). Later he migrated to India and from there he taught \textit{Vipassana} Meditation all over the world. S. N. Goenka | Vipassana Research Institute (vridhamma.org) (accessed May 27, 2023).


\textsuperscript{7} The Roots of the WCCM. https://wccm.org/about/ (accessed May 28, 2023).

relate to each other. The comparison involves three stages: Interior Journey, On the Journey, and To the Light.

**INTERIOR JOURNEY**

The word “meditation” or “contemplation” has a unique meaning in a specific context. It is observed by devout people in various religious traditions. In our day, even some secular people are practicing it for their own well-being. Surprisingly, *vipassana* meditation and *hesychastic* prayer share the common concept of an inner journey that takes time to reach its destination: to the light. Strictly speaking, it is a mental movement with the purpose of attaining enlightenment. It is a practical and experiential reality that leads a devout practitioner on the way to becoming an enlightened one. The prerequisites of this interior journey are a quiet environment and the cultivation of virtues.

**Self-Journey vs. Spiritual Journey**

The author of the *vipassana* meditation technique is Gautama Buddha. Through his own practical learning experiences, the Buddha achieved *panna* (wisdom/insight), which is the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, namely, the truth of *dukkha* (suffering), the origin of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and the path that leads to the cessation of *dukkha*. From the Fourth Truth, he discovered the Noble Eightfold Path (*mega*) consisting of the Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Finally, he attained *nibbana* (the end of suffering) as a consequence of enlightenment.

*Vipassana* meditation is the development of *panna* that leads the yogi (meditator) to the realization of *nibbana*. In order to be enlightened, one needs to practice the three phases—*sila* (virtue/morality), *samadhi* (concentration/tranquility), and *panna* (wisdom/insight). At this point, *panna* is defined as the awareness or perception of the nature of three composite things—*anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), and *anatta* (impersonality). In light of the Mahasi tradition, enlightenment suggests an escape from the wrong view of self—which means rebirth in the miserable conditions of *samsara* or the miserable states of existence—along with
realization of nibbana. For the moment the yogi gains panna through the practice of vipassana, one realizes and experiences the ultimate peace of nibbana. That is why today’s Western world identifies the vipassana practice as insight meditation.

Goenka (1924-2013), a prominent Buddhist lay leader, gives a simple explanation of vipassana as “seeing things as they really are.” He adds that vipassana is “a way of self-transformation through self-observation” or “a practical method of self-awareness.” It is comparable to the Buddha’s personal experience. As the fully enlightened one, Gautama taught himself to achieve the goal of meditation. He then taught his disciples to follow his example. This is frequently quoted as the last words of the Buddha: “Decay (anicca) is inherent in all component things. Work out your own salvation with diligence.” Mahasi Sayadaw soundly maintains that “the method of the Buddha does not require any kind of instruments or outside aid.”

On the very first day of vipassana retreat courses, the yogi is encouraged to work diligently, patiently, persistently, and constantly. It would be fair to say that there is no concept of an outside “spirit” or “spiritual being” in the journey of Theravada vipassana meditation. It is a self-journey to the self-realization of the stage of self-liberation by exercising self-awareness. There is no inward and outward transcendental-personal assistance on the way to the destination of the yogi’s interior journey. The yogi has to launch

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11 Vipassana Meditation (dhamma.org) (accessed May 27, 2023).


the self-journey with a map, a technique of vipassana meditation, left by the Buddha.\textsuperscript{15}

On the other hand, the Christian concept of hesychastic prayer is a spiritual journey to God the Creator. The English translation of the Greek word hesychia is “stillness” or “silence.” Hesychism is a form of Christian prayer and contemplation.\textsuperscript{16} The hesychastic tradition is based on ceaseless repetition of the Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.” Its emphasis is on prayer, contemplation, and mystical life.\textsuperscript{17} The word hesychia was introduced by St John Climacus in the first half of the seventh century\textsuperscript{18} even though the hesychastic practice can be found from the fourth century. According to many sources, the same practice was initiated by the Desert Fathers on Mount Sinai in the fourth century and flourished in the fifth century.

Father Matta El-Meskeen (1919-2006), a Coptic Orthodox monk and the spiritual father of 130 monks in the Monastery of St. Macarius the Great in Egypt,\textsuperscript{19} states that there are three stages of prayer. Stage one is the vocal prayer, the foundation or introduction that ushers one into a realistic dialogue with God. The second stage is meditation or inward prayer.\textsuperscript{20} The third and last stage is contemplation, which is “a mode of concentration.”\textsuperscript{21} An Eastern Orthodox theologian, Kallistos (Timothy) Ware (1934-2022), reflects on St. John Climacus’s tradition and appreciates the value of hesychasm as an inward journey that is the mind’s journey to the heart. He explains that the hesychast “is not someone who has journeyed outwardly into the desert, but someone who has embarked upon the journey inwards

\textsuperscript{15} Mahasi Sayadaw, \textit{Satipatthana Vipassana}, 1-3.
\textsuperscript{19} “Father Matta El Meskeen (Matthew the Poor),” \texttt{ORTHOKAIROS}, \url{http://orthokairos.weebly.com/fr-matthew-the-poor.html} (accessed August 1, 2023).
\textsuperscript{20} Matta El-Meskeen (Matthew the Poor), \textit{Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way} (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 40.
\textsuperscript{21} Matta El-Meskeen, \textit{Orthodox Prayer Life}, 41.
into his own heart; not someone who ‘returns into himself,’ shutting the door of his mind.’”

The purpose and goal of the inner journey of the hesychast is theosis or deification, which means to be in union with the God of the universe and the source of wisdom. According to Kallistos Ware, deification happens when the hesychast shares the divine glory. Orthodox Christians generally believe that God’s glory or divine energy is sharable. This divine energy encompasses wisdom, holiness, love, and power, to name but a few. Basically, in the concept of Christian spirituality, deification is the stage of union between the two—the divine and the hesychast. In fact, Christian life starts with a relationship with God by believing in Jesus Christ’s salvation and sharing his sonship in the Spirit. Christian contemplative practice is a relationship between two persons—the Spirit of God the Creator and the spirit of the hesychast.

Jan Waltmann says that contemplative prayer is initiated by the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of Christ. St. Sophrony (1896-1993) helps us better understand the meaning of the hesychastic prayer by explaining that it is indeed a spiritual matter. “True prayer to the true God is contact with the Divine spirit which prays in us. The Spirit gives us the wisdom to know God. The Spirit draws our spirit to the contemplation of eternity…this method of approach to God turns out to be the beginning of prayer as communion.” One might say that Matta El-Meskeen’s book Orthodox Prayer Life is the result of his own experiences of prayer and meditation unified with his reflection and commentary on the sayings of Eastern saints together with the spirits of these saints that grew over the years.

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22 Kallistos Ware, The Inner Kingdom (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 93.
24 Ware, The Orthodox Church, 231.
27 Matta El-Meskeen, Orthodox Prayer Life, 11; See also The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way.
hesychast, the prayer life is not a solitary journey but an inward journey with the Spirit of God together with the spirits of saints in history.\textsuperscript{28}

The Orthodox Christian practice of hesychastic prayer is different from vipassana meditation in that it is a spiritual journey initiated by the Holy Spirit in order to be united with the Creator God who is the source of light, life, and breath. As Norris J. Chumley puts it, hesychastic prayer “fills the heart, mind, and spirit with the realization that God exists and that he wills for us to be in continuous communion with him.”\textsuperscript{29} The Spirit of God is a living experience and companion in the inward journey of hesychastic prayer. Or, as Matta El-Meskeen puts it, the Orthodox Christian interior prayer is the fruit of the spiritual life and the spiritual life leads the hesychast to interior prayer.\textsuperscript{30}

Virtue: Sila vs. Praktiki

In order to take the first step on an inner journey, both the yogi and the hesychast require some kind of moral conduct. In Buddhism, sila (moral virtue) is vital and the very first stage in vipassana meditation practice. Without sila, no one can continue the journey. To reach the other two essential stages of vipassana—samadhi\textsuperscript{31} and panna\textsuperscript{32}—it is fundamental for the yogi to observe sila. U Dhammaratana maintains that “one who practices vipassana is expected to have already covered the first two stages,”\textsuperscript{33} sila and samadhi. For laypeople, the minimal measure of moral conduct is the observance of the Five Precepts—abstaining from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxicants—which are the basic code of all schools of Buddhism.

Yet, the yogi is urged to comply with the Eight Precepts\textsuperscript{34} or the Ten Precepts.\textsuperscript{35} For monks, it is the observance of the code of monastic

\textsuperscript{28} See also The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way.
\textsuperscript{29} Chumley, Mysteries of the Jesus Prayer, 5.
\textsuperscript{30} Matta El-Meskeen, Orthodox Prayer Life, 55.
\textsuperscript{31} Samadhi is a state of intense concentration achieved through meditation or a state of meditative consciousness.
\textsuperscript{32} Panna means wisdom or understanding of the true nature of phenomena.
\textsuperscript{33} U Dhammaratana, “Significance of Vipassana,” 4.
\textsuperscript{34} The Eight Precepts of Buddhism are abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual activity, telling lies, intoxicating drinks and drugs, eating after noon, entertaining and beautifying the body, and using luxurious furniture.
\textsuperscript{35} The Ten Precepts are abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual activity, telling lies,
discipline. It could be said that the precepts that are essential for *sila* are more like abstinence or asceticism on the journey of *vipassana* meditation. It is noteworthy that the yogi who practices virtues has a bright hope for life after death. In keeping with Mahasi Sayadaw, “Anyone who is well-disciplined in moral conduct will be reborn in a happy realm of existence as a human being or a celestial being (*deva*).”

Similar to the Buddhist mandate of ascetic practice in the development of *vipassana* meditation, the various kinds of asceticism such as fasting, silence, and solitude are crucial for the Christian *hesychast*. However, there is no specific and common list of moral codes in Orthodox *hesychasm*. Various Orthodox traditions suggest various lists of moral codes. In line with St. Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580-662), there are three stages in the Orthodox *hesychastic* prayer: *praktiki* (the practice of the virtues), *physiki* (the contemplation of nature), and *theologia* (the contemplation of God). *Praktiki* starts with repentance. St. Sophrony, who spent seven years in the desert on Mt. Athos and the Holy Mountain, testifies: “I did not understand myself what was happening to me…. Things became clear to me: The Lord had granted me the grace of repentance.” The Holy Spirit helps the *hesychast* to repent from his or her own sins so that his or her heart will be purified and ready to enter the presence of God.

Matta El-Meskeen perceives that the *hesychast* monks “mortify the lust of the Adamic life and the will to sin.” He also acknowledges the intoxicating drinks, and drugs, eating after noon, entertaining and beautifying the body, using luxurious furniture, harboring anger or encouraging others to be angry, speaking ill of the Triple Jewel such as the Buddha, the Dharma or the Sangha or encouraging others to do so.

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36 According to Mahasi Sayadaw, there are two kinds of morality and concentration: mundane (with the goals of mindfulness, loving-kindness, peace, …) and supramundane (with the goal of understanding the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path). By means of mundane morality and concentration, one may perhaps be reborn as a *deva* but there is no definite security. He suggests that one cultivate the higher form of supramundane practices or insight meditation (*vipassana-bhavana*). See Mahasi Sayadaw, *Satipatthana Vipassana*, 1-3.

37 It is widely accepted that Maximus’s three-way contemplative practice was initiated by the third-century ascetic and theologian Origen of Alexandria.


prerequisite of “love, simplicity, and purity of heart”\(^{42}\) in the journey of prayer. According to St. Dionysius the Areopagite, purification is the first stage of the three Orthodox spiritual ways: purification, illumination, and union.\(^{43}\) St. Diadochus, one of the fifth-century ascetics, suggests the purification of the heart by means of the remembrance of Jesus.\(^{44}\) It appears that \textit{praktiki} is closely related to Psalm 24:3-4—“Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god.” One may say that Orthodox \textit{hesychasm} is more specific and solid in its moral demands than the required virtues in the first stage of \textit{vipassana} meditation. Besides, while the \textit{yogi} observes \textit{sila} by himself or herself, the Holy Spirit assists the \textit{hesychast} in following the biblical standard of morality and purity of heart.

\section*{ON THE JOURNEY}

The second stage of the interior journey is the practice of concentration. In Buddhist \textit{vipassana} practice, \textit{samadhi} is “the fixed or tranquil state of mind” or mindfulness. In \textit{samadhi} practice, the undisciplined mind, which is in the habit of wandering to other places, is trained to be controlled by means of concentrating on the deep interconnection between mind and body. In the Orthodox Christian tradition, however, it is not only an interconnection between mind and heart but also includes a relationship between God, the author of the universe, and the \textit{hesychast} in the contemplative’s life.

\subsection*{Practice of Concentration}

It is said that unless one’s \textit{samadhi} is good, one will have no opportunity to practice \textit{panna}, which is the last stage of \textit{vipassana} meditation. \textit{Samadhi} is a kind of “control of the mind or leading to one-pointedness.”\(^{45}\) Mahasi Sayadaw clarifies it in this way:

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\item 42 Matta El-Meskeen, \textit{Orthodox Prayer Life}, 42.
\item 43 Kallistos Ware, \textit{The Orthodox Way}, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 105.
\item 44 Arhimandrite Lev Gillet, \textit{The Jesus Prayer} (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 37.
\item 45 Sayagyi U Ba Khin | Vipassana Research Institute (vridhamma.org) (accessed May
The ordinary or undisciplined mind is in the habit of wandering to other places. It cannot be kept under control, but follows any idea, thought or imagination, etc. In order to prevent this wandering, the mind should be made to attend repeatedly to a selected object of concentration. On gaining practice, the mind gradually abandons its distractions and remains fixed on the object to which it is directed. This is samadhi.46

According to Venerable Sujiva, there are four foundations in practicing samadhi: body contemplation (breath, postures, clear comprehension, parts of the body, impurities), feeling contemplation (pleasurable, painful, neither pleasurable nor painful), consciousness contemplation (such as lust, freedom from lust, anger, freedom from anger), and mental object contemplation (five hindrances, five aggregates of clinging, six internal and six external sense-bases, seven factors of enlightenment, and four noble truths).47 In order to build up samadhi, various meditation centers introduce various methods. Most vipassana meditation centers value mindfulness of breath (Anapana sati) considering that it was expounded by Buddha in the Maha-satipatthana Sutta.

Yet, it is said that Mahasi Sayadaw applies the “rising” and “falling” movements of the abdomen for beginners and then he uses some other methods. Venerable Sujiva says: “There is considerable flexibility and variation in the instructions given by different teachers.”48 In Anapana sati, the breath is used as an object of concentration. It is a practice of focusing on the tip of the nose when inhaling and exhaling. For some, it is a practice of focusing on breath-in/breath-out or/and long breath/short breath moment by moment. This practice helps the yogi control his or her mind and obtain tranquility, which is required for developing panna.

Comparable to samadhi practice, various concentration methods are offered in Orthodox hesychasm. Chumley claims that thoughtful recitation of the Jesus Prayer was “the wellspring of Christianity’s first mystical tradition” and “it remains a central part of spiritual life in Eastern Church

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46 Mahasi Sayadaw, Satipatthana Vipassana, 2.
traditions.”49 This traditional practice is a response to the Apostle Paul’s call to the church to pray without ceasing (1 Thes 5:17). The hesychast repeats the Jesus Prayer until it becomes internalized, and he or she experiences deification. The hesychast repeats the name “Jesus” because it is the name above all names (Phil. 2:9-10) and it is the name that saves (Acts 4:12). It is the name that Jesus himself invites his followers to use when making their requests to the Father (Jn 16:23-24).

In Orthodox understanding, said Waltmann, “this name has in it God’s power and presence.”50 He also goes on to say “The thoughtful repetition of these few simple words ushers the heart into the very stillness of God wherein it is possible to wait and listen and be embraced by his love, despite the bustle of external activity.”51 Chumley travels through the spiritual landscape of Orthodox Churches, learns from monks and nuns, practices the Jesus Prayer, and testifies that “Father John and I know from personal experience that the Jesus Prayer has the power to still the clamor and distractions of the world, to offer calm and reassurance to those who feel agitated and anxious, and to eliminate the illusion that a vast, unbridgeable gulf separates us from God.”52

In the spiritual tradition of St. Maximus, furthermore, physiki is the second stage of the Orthodox prayer life.53 In this stage, by contemplating on created things, the hesychast discovers God’s presence in everything. Physiki leads the hesychast to the third stage, the direct vision of God.54 In the tradition of Matta El-Meskeen, suggestive of Lectio Divina in the Benedictine tradition, Bible reading is another practice of concentration. He suggests that the hesychast read the words slowly and relishes them while he or she is repeating them in an audible voice.55 For Matta El-Meskeen, this meditative reading represents a preliminary stage of stillness. He perceives that “meditation adheres to the same words and expressions and is confined to their plain meaning in the Bible. Contemplation becomes free and no

49 Chumley, Mysteries of the Jesus Prayer, 3.
50 Waltmann, “A Beginner’s Journey into the Jesus Prayer.” 104.
52 Chumley, Mysteries of the Jesus Prayer, 5.
53 Ware, The Orthodox Way, 105.
54 Ware, The Orthodox Way, 106.
55 Matta El-Meskeen, Orthodox Prayer Life, 44.
longer restricted to the written word. It depends on the totality of personal perception and the extensive horizons of insight and knowledge.”

Both the vi āp sana meditation and the hesychast prayer have different objectives for practicing concentration. The yogi mainly practices samadhi through awareness of inhaling / exhaling or other practices in order to be mindful as a preparation for the next stage: panna. Contrary to the yogi, the hesychast observes concentration through repeating the Jesus Prayer and becomes closer to the Creator God and, finally, reaches the stage of deification. Some hesychasts may include the practice of contemplation on nature and meditation on Scripture verses as a preparation for the final stage of deification.

Concentration Through Interconnection: Mind-Body vs. Mind-Heart

On the journey of both vi āp sana and hesychasm, the mind is trained by means of linking it with the body and/or heart. In vi āp sana practice, the center of attention is on the deep interconnection between mind and body. Buddhists believe that the connection of mind and body “can be experienced directly by disciplined attention to the physical sensations that come from the life of the body, and that continuously interconnect and condition the life of the mind.” It is also explained as follows:

It is this observation-based, self-exploratory journey to the common root of mind and body that dissolves mental impurity resulting in a balanced mind full of love and compassion. The scientific law that operates one’s thoughts, feelings, judgments and sensations become clear. Through direct experience, the nature of how one grows or regresses, how one produces suffering or frees oneself from suffering is understood. Life becomes characterized by increased awareness, non-delusion, self-control and peace.

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56 Matta El-Meskeen, Orthodox Prayer Life, 48.
57 Gillet, The Jesus Prayer, 74; Saint Sophrony, His Life is Mine, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (New York: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1997), 112-120.
58 Vipassana Meditation (dhamma.org) (accessed May 27, 2023).
59 Vipassana Meditation (dhamma.org) (accessed May 27, 2023).
On the other hand, the practice of the Jesus Prayer is known as “the prayer of quiet” or “the prayer of the heart.” “Prayer is shared by the mind and the heart,” said Matta El-Meskeen, “linking thought and feelings.” In line with St. Theophan (1815-1894), prayer is “to stand before God with the mind in heart.” Chumley’s explanation of St. Theophan’s theology of prayer is clearer. He claims that “the heart is a conflicted place, an inner chamber where we conceal our worst impulses, but also an inner temple where we commune with God. The mind, on the other hand, is the seat of skepticism, uncertainty, and doubt.”

What is more, through repeating the Jesus Prayer, reading the Bible, and meditating on nature, the mind and heart become one. At the same time, the love of God inspires compassionate prayer “in which soul and body take part together.” “Between ourselves and the transcendent God there is,” Ware says, “a relationship of love.” Contemplative prayer is not instant spirituality. Instead, it is a time-consuming spiritual discipline because, as Matta El-Meskeen explains, it is like the soul waiting in anticipation and “longing to see its lover as if she were coming from afar.” The prayer makes the heart awaken to the presence of Christ and his love. As it happens, Orthodox hesychasm is not only an experience of heart and mind reunification but also a heart-to-heart relationship between the hesychast and the trinitarian God.

To the Light

The last and most important stage of vipassana meditation practice is panna, which is the effort to understand the nature of the mental and physical phenomena within one’s own body correctly. Subsequently, the yogi is aware of nibbana and free from the wrong view of self and the round of rebirth in the miserable realms of hell, the animal world, and

60 Matta El-Meskeen, Orthodox Prayer Life, 40.
61 Chumley, Mysteries of the Jesus Prayer, 17.
63 Ware, The Orthodox Way, 12.
64 Matta El-Meskeen, Orthodox Prayer Life, 65.
65 Some schools of Theravada believe that panna can also be practiced directly without samadhi practice.
the sphere of *petas.* Rather, they “will be reborn in a happy realm of existence as a human being or a *deva.*” In contrast, the goal of *hesychastic* prayer is *deification* and enlightenment is its consequence. This final stage is crucial for both *yogis* and *hesychasts* to have mystical knowledge along with mystical experiences. In summary, the meanings of the interior journey and experiences of practitioners differ from one another since they exercise mental discipline in their own special ways with their unique purposes.

**Enlightenment: Nibbana vs. Deification**

The Venerable Chanmyay Sayadaw states, “The aim of *vipassana* mediation is to free oneself from all kinds of *dukkha,* mental suffering, and physical suffering through realization of the body-mind processes and their true nature.” For Mahasi Sayadaw, it is to be freed from “the wrong view of self” or escape “from the round of rebirth in the hell realms, the animal realm, and the *peta* realm” using body-mind concentration practice. Besides, it is frequently said that meditation alone could lead to the attainment of * nibbana.* If that is the case, * nibbana* is more desirable than enlightenment. In reality, * nibbana* is the consequence of enlightenment that the *yogi* gains with the practice of *panna.* *Panna* can be attained by observing body-mind phenomena and leads to understanding the three essential characteristics of existence: *anicca,* *dukkha,* and *anatta.*

In line with Buddha’s teaching, the true nature of a living being consists of two exclusive elements: body or a mass of materiality (rupa) and mentality or a faculty of knowing (nama). The faculty of knowing an object is absent in the materiality insofar as it is uniquely the property of the mentality. Nonetheless, mentality arises depending on materiality. That is to say, seeing or eye-consciousness arises through the eye; hearing or ear-consciousness through the ear; smelling or nose-consciousness through the nose; tasting or tongue-consciousness through the tongue; sense of touch

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67 *Petas* are the departed souls living in a miserable state due to some former misdeed. See Mahasi Sayadaw, *Satipatthana Vipassana,* 24.
or body-consciousness through the body. Eye, ear, nose, and tongue belong to materiality whereas seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and sense of touch belong to the mind. Mind-consciousness comprises thoughts, ideas, and imaginings, to name but a few.\(^\text{72}\)

In the Mahasi tradition, immediately after the yogi gains enough concentration (\textit{samadhi}), he or she attempts to develop \textit{panna} by acknowledging three elements: \textit{anicca}, \textit{dukkha}, and \textit{anatta}. In the practice of \textit{panna}, the yogi keeps his or her mind on materiality and mentality as the living being’s true nature until such time as he or she can appreciate that all his or her activities such as seeing, hearing, smelling, testing, and sensation of touch in movement and in changing are done by mentality and not by materiality. Subsequently, the yogi recognizes that all things, one after another, arise and pass away immediately. The yogi discerns that all things are impermanent and attains the first element of \textit{panna}: \textit{anicca}.\(^\text{73}\)

This \textit{panna} consequently leads to the realization of the second element which is \textit{dukkha}. While practicing meditation, the yogi experiences painful sensations such as tiredness, heat, and aching in his or her body. Mahasi Sayadaw affirms that all kinds of pain in the body are suffering (\textit{dukkha}). Eventually, the yogi acknowledges that all these body-mind phenomena occur according to their respective nature and conditions. They are not following anybody’s will nor are they subject to anybody’s authority. They constitute no person. In this way, the yogi experiences the peace and harmony between mind-body phenomena and gains awareness of \textit{anatta} (not-person), the third element of \textit{panna}. The fruit of \textit{vipassana}, the realization of \textit{anicca}, \textit{dukkha}, and \textit{anatta}, is \textit{nibbana}.\(^\text{74}\) Through personal practice and direct experience of the consciousness of \textit{anicca}, \textit{dukkha}, and \textit{anatta}, the yogi could claim that “\textit{nibbana} is realized.” That is the supramundane knowledge or the enlightenment which is the goal of the yogi’s inner journey. At this point, \textit{nibbana} is not the primary concern but it is the consequence of one’s enlightenment.

At the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders at the UN on August 29, 2000, Goenka stated that conversion is


not from one organized religion to another organized religion; rather, conversion is from misery to happiness, from bondage to liberation, cruelty to compassion. Enlightened persons have given the method, the technique on how to have peace, how to have harmony. Observing the nature of body and mind, one understands and learns peace and harmony. It is only an enlightened person who can build his or her own peace as well as peace among humanity.75

It could fairly be said that the Orthodox Buddhist perception of *vipassana* meditation does not care about a Supreme Being; rather, its emphasis is only on the process of one’s own mind and body in the very present moment in the present world (the nature). It is more like a mind exercise for one’s own mystical knowledge and experience. Many yogis testify that *vipassana* meditation supports peace and harmony within human bodies. *Vipassana* practice also helps transform their worldview as well as their lifestyles. Finally, they participate in building a peaceful world.76 On top of that, *vipassana* meditation assists the yogi in attaining *nibbana*, from “attachment to this world,” where there is a lot of suffering, to “detachment from this world.”

The Orthodox Christian prayer life transforms the *hesychast* from being “detached from God” to “attached to God” who is the Source of wisdom or light. The goal of prayer life is the attainment of likeness to or union with God: *deification*. St. Cyril (ca. 376–444) believes that union with God means “being partakers of the divine nature (2 Pt 1:4).”77 Joost van Rossum observes that St. Gregory Palamas (ca. 1296-1359) similarly understands *deification* as “to participate in God in a very real way, without becoming identical with Him.” For that reason, he insists, the *hesychasts* “speak about the experience of the Holy Spirit in a very realistic manner, but at the same time they stress that God’s nature remains totally ‘inaccessible.’”78

Matta El-Meskeen shares his experience of *deification* through prayer in this way: “The more the mind is quiet and silent, the more divine truth

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76 The result of my online research studies on this topic.
77 Matta El-Meskeen, *Orthodox Prayer Life*, 103.
78 Rossum, *The Experience of the Holy Spirit*, 31
radiates, shies, and is transfigured within it.”79 Contemplating through the recitation of the Jesus Prayer or Scripture verses in the presence of the Holy Spirit, the hesychast “would be under the strong influence of love, making his mind extremely alert. All his senses would be controlled by and his will focused upon prayer. His heart would also be spiritually ready for receiving any directions from the Holy Spirit.”80 At that very moment, the hesychast attaches to the divine Spirit, which is the Holy Trinity, and loses his or her self-awareness.81 Finally, he or she comes under the control of the divine Spirit with shared divine energy and wisdom. Ware brings a trinitarian approach in his clarification of deification as follows:

According to John 17:21, the three persons of the Trinity dwell in one another in an unceasing movement of love, so we humans, made in the image of the Trinity, are called to dwell in the Trinitarian God. Christ prays that we may share in the life of the Trinity, in the movement of love which passes between the divine persons; He prays that we may be taken up into the Godhead.82

It is generally accepted that the Christian will receive a share in the divine nature when the Holy Spirit dwells in him/her and when he/she is in him. In his in-depth study of Byzantine theology and iconology, Andreas Andreopoulos understands that some hesychast monks can be deified, even more so if they are sleeping, inasmuch as they use the Jesus Prayer without ceasing:

Hesychast monks can even feel themselves praying during sleep—something hesychasts described by referring to the phrase “I was asleep, but my heart waked” from Song of Songs 5:2. As the prayer is internalized, the monk withdraws into an inner space of his soul, clears his passions and his ego, and invites in the grace of God, which is sometimes experienced as a resplendent light.83

79 Matta El-Meskeen, Orthodox Prayer Life, 56.
80 Matta El-Meskeen, Orthodox Prayer Life, 41.
81 Gillet, The Jesus Prayer, 58.
82 Ware, The Orthodox Church, 231.
83 Andreas Andreopoulos, Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 214.
Furthermore, Sophrony values the Orthodox prayer as “the way to knowledge.” It is the way to the source and author of Light. It is said that St. Cyril often uses the words “light” and “enlightenment” in his definitions of God. In this sense, the hesychasts attain wisdom from God through contemplative prayer. St. Sophrony states, “Belief in Him [God] brought a more abundant outpouring of Light, and my faith was intensified by new knowledge.”

Unlike the vipassana practice in which the central focus is knowledge and experiences of the science of mind-body phenomena in order to have the realization of liberation from the suffering in this world, the purpose of hesychasm is to share divine energy and wisdom through spiritual contemplation and mystical experiences. Thus, St. Sophrony maintains that once the hesychast is deified, he or she receives some kind of wisdom with which he or she is able to discern all phenomena (in the past, present, and future) in the physical world as well as in the spiritual world.

**Enlightened One: Buddha vs. Deified One**

It is indisputable that any yogi can be a buddha as a result of vipassana meditation, but he or she cannot be a fully enlightened one as Gautama Buddha was. In the same way, no hesychast will ever become God of the universe even though he or she is deified through contemplative prayer. Then again, it is stated that both the vipassana meditation and the hesychast prayer practices help to transform the lives of practitioners and they appreciate the world differently. Alexander Wynne in research on early Buddhist sources, especially in the Ariyapariyesana Sutta, observes: “It is absolutely clear that all the early Buddhist uses of sīṭībbūto refer to the liberation of thought to be attained in life: it does not refer to the liberated state achieved at death.”

Vipassana meditation enables the yogi to calm down, develop wisdom and freedom, and solve practical issues. Myanmar democracy icon and

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85 Matta El-Meskeen, *Orthodox Prayer Life*, 95.
Nobel Peace winner Aung San Suu Kyi practices meditation and affirms that it heightens awareness and helps confer clarity of mind to make key decisions. As she puts it, “If you’re aware of what you are doing, you become aware of the pros and cons of each act. That helps you to control not just what you do, but what you think and what you say.”\(^8^9\) Besides, *vipassana* practice can enhance general physical and psychological well-being by overcoming such problems as minor depression, headache, migraine, hypertension, diabetes, arthritis, anxiety neurosis, depressive neurosis, phobias, addictions, and some personality disorders.\(^9^0\)

Likewise, the Christian practice of contemplation helps solve the hesychast’s practical needs and daily life problems.\(^9^1\) Through receiving divine truth and contemplating it, the hesychast also performs good works in addition to attaining direction and discernment to judge things from a spiritual point of view.\(^9^2\) Through *deification*, the hesychast becomes a visionary, a healer, and an exorcist. Once, a hesychast was asked by a steward couple to stay for dinner at their home. When they were all together having dinner, the wife choked on a fish bone. Even though they tried every means to relieve her from the severe pain in her throat, it did not work. Finally, the hesychast went back home. That night, in his vision, he heard a clear voice from his spiritual adviser. It was detailed instructions on how to heal her. He went back to the couple and helped her according to the instructions. She was finally cured.\(^9^3\)

When the news of the woman’s healing by the hesychast rapidly spread around, people whispered that he was a prophet, a doctor, and a wizard. They started going to him with various problems hoping that they would be relieved by him. The hesychast was “afraid of falling into vainglory and being harmed by all these distractions.” So, he secretly left them at

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\(^9^1\) The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way, 12.

\(^9^2\) Matta El-Meskeen, Orthodox Prayer Life, 57.

\(^9^3\) The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way, 56-58.
night and continued his journey.\textsuperscript{94} It is reported that God often gives the transcendent gifts of miracles and healing to \textit{hesychast} monks directly or indirectly. Some receive visions, revelations, and prophecies.\textsuperscript{95} Despite the fact that there are similar phenomena between the interior journeys of \textit{vipassana} and \textit{hesychast} prayer, there is a divergence between the two. That is, the \textit{hesychastic} life travels through the physical realm as well as the spiritual realm. He or she is also confident that the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of Christ) is with him or her whether his or her soul is released in death.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The \textit{vipassana} meditation and the \textit{hesychastic} prayer are silent and inward journeys. The yogi launches the journey by himself or herself; the \textit{hesychast’s} journey is initiated and accompanied by the Holy Spirit. Each journey offers a unique way to go with a unique purpose. The yogi continues the \textit{vipassana} through practicing \textit{samadhi}; the \textit{hesychast} progresses through recitation of the Jesus Prayer (and/or meditation on scripture and nature). The yogi develops the \textit{vipassana} meditation by practicing \textit{panna}; the \textit{hesychast’s} practice leads to \textit{deification}. Both journeys have the same destination: enlightenment. The yogi is awakened by noting the nature of body-mind phenomena; finally, \textit{nibbana} is realized, his or her life shines in this world, and he or she will be reborn as a \textit{brahma} whose lifespan lasts “one, two, four, or eight world cycles, up to a limit of 84,000 world cycles.” At the end of his or her lifespan, “the \textit{brahma} will die and be reborn as a human being or a \textit{deva}.”\textsuperscript{96} By contrast, the \textit{hesychast} encounters the eternal God of the universe and shares the divine glory and the light everlasting even if he or she is living in this world. In other words, the light achieved by the \textit{hesychast} is connected to eternity.

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\textsuperscript{94} The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way, 58.
\textsuperscript{95} Matta El-Meskeen, Orthodox Prayer Life, 63.
\textsuperscript{96} Mahasi Sayadaw, Satipatthana Vipassana, 2