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PRAYER - YOGA - MEDITATION: WAYS TO EXPERIENCE

The non-dualistic philosophy which we find in Hinduism, Buddhism, the Christian Trinitarian approach and basically in all philosophies based on mysticism is always connected with a certain practice of meditation. Christian theologians argue sometimes that this meditation is contradictory to a proper understanding of prayer, because in prayer we realize our dependency and difference from God, whereas non-dualistic meditation would claim to lead towards perfect unity. Hence, it is useful to inquire into the relationship between prayer and meditation once again.

Both prayer and meditation are concerned with the problem of human receptivity in the spiritual realm. Thus, in Vedāntā, what is spoken about is much less a meditation which would lead into an experience of something totally different from what is known, but a *realization* of what all the time really *is*. This is not so different in the Christian tradition, although the Latin tradition of the church and later in this line, protestantism as well have sometimes over emphasized the distance and difference between man and God who finally became the "wholly other" in Dialectical theology. But insofar as Christian faith is a Trinitarian faith, it is evident that God as *creator* is being experienced as the everlasting all-comprehensive reality, and this insight has never been abandoned from Augustine to the mystics and even Luther. Similarly, redemption is an event which has already occurred and is present now as an offer, in order to become actualized as sanctification by the universal power of the Spirit. The Spirit *is* present, God's grace *is* there. Hence, the path of spiritual experience is to become receptive to this power of God in faith, love and hope. At least structurally there is a great similarity between the ex-

perience of *mukti* or *metanoia* in Vedānta and Christianity. And this holds good also for Buddhism, at least Mahāyāna.

The problem of man is not that he *is* lonely, forsaken or god-less. Rather, the tragedy is, that most people are not *aware* of the saving presence which encompasses them all the time. Awareness, however, is not only a cognitive act, but change in the root-experience of man which transforms *all* aspects of humanness. Awareness of God—in Sanskrit *vidyā*—must not be reduced to an intellectual cognition, but is *metanoia*. This reduction, however, is a problem not only for contemporary Christianity, a similar tendency can be observed also in the history of Vedānta in India. This awareness or awakening (*buddhānta*) reflects not only a change of content of consciousness, but consciousness as such appears in a different light. It does not require further explanation that also in Christianity the expression of awakening is used for the moment of *metanoia* (Eph 5, 14: Mt. 24, 42 etc.).

The reason for the broken experience of man or his sinful reality is not God but man himself who cannot penetrate to truth/being (*sat*) because of the fragmentation of his consciousness. This, according to biblical tradition, is caused by the egocentric self-will against God (disobedience). Man, henceforth, is not receptive or in the Spirit. Rather, he projects all the time his own patterns, wishes and stimuli onto reality. This basically wrong attitude could be characterized as an identically grasping one or as cognitive aggressivity. In natural sciences a methodology has been successfully developed, to eradicate the sources for such faulty perception to a large extent, but this is possible only for this limited realm. In personal encounters as well as the realm of value and meaning the problem becomes all the more obvious. The result is that man does not live any more in the rhythm of the One, but creates disharmony. He fails to perceive in the holistic perspective and remains caught up in a “provincial perception” which is reflected in the sensual, intellectual, desiderative and emotional faculties. This is what we mean when we call man a sinner.

In order to get attuned again to the “rhythm of God” or to become receptive to the Whole, man prays. Prayer is essentially a form of human receptivity for the Whole. Prayer is a graded path which can be mastered and gone through as an experience in praying only.

Christian tradition is aware of many different possibilities, to distinguish between different forms of prayer and to order it structurally into a graded path from the external towards the internal reality. We do not attempt here to list the various models, but shall try to put forth a very general scheme which comprises more or less all different forms of prayer: 1. Petition 2. Praise of God 3. Personal Prayer 5. contemplative Prayer.

1. At the beginning we have usually *petition* which has its roots in the weakness and fragility of man. Just as the new-born baby cries for the mother, the Christian may cry with Jesus simply "Abba", which articulates both his own weakness as well as the expectation of fulfilment. This prayer integrates the daily experience of the person concerned with the framework of life. God is called an *external* being, and different ideas and explanations for this kind of prayer are certainly shaped also by early childhood experiences with father and mother. Petition implies also the relationality of man and God. It is more interested in "things" than in God himself and testifies a more or less naive egocentrism of the praying one. Jesus' own warning in this regard (Mt 6,7-8. 25ff.) has not been taken very seriously in the ordinary *praxis pietatis* of many Christians: However, a special form of petition is intercession, which is essentially more altruistic. But here also God is supposed to fulfil our wishes in interfering from outside.

2. On the basis of the experience with petition man penetrates deeper, namely, into thanksgiving and *Praise of God*. This prayer is much less an expression of the weakness of man, than of experienced fulness and joy which man has been granted. But even here God is experienced externally: and yet the praying person enters already into the realm of inner experience in realizing that joy and praise are not just his own feelings but effects of grace inspired by the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, God still is a "He" to whom we owe respect and honour.

3. In *Personal Prayer* the experience of power in and through the Spirit is tremendously intensified. God becomes a "Thou". This stage in prayer corresponds with the I-Thou-Experience of God and man which has been so beautifully described by Martin Buber. God is not any more just an external content of thought, an image etc., but living *inner* reality in relation of partnership towards the praying subject: He enters into an *inner dialogue* with the praying person. Man

experiences spontaneously the fulness which has flown into him and which is regenerated continuously in and during the exchange with the inner presence of God. Though God is totally present as this *inner power*, the intimacy of this encounter has its root in a certain *duality*. The person does not seek anything other than communion with God. All “things” have become unimportant. However, if contemplation is deep enough, the presence of the thou will become so powerful that it determines totally the I of the praying subject. The inherent duality, i.e. the difference of subject and object, begins to disappear. From this experience of the most intimate communion with a personal God being apart from oneself emerges gradually an experience of *transpersonal union of life*. C. albrecht¹ a master of inner experience himself and psychologist as well, quotes an old ecclesiastical prayer which indicated the super-clear bliss of this stage: *Accendat in nobis Dominus ignem sui amoris et flammam aeternae caritatis*. Further examples from Christian literature or the prayer books of all religions would fill countless volumes. Yet, this experience leads into or actually belongs already to the next stage: the *contemplative unification of consciousness*.

4. *Contemplative Prayer* begins and ends in silence. The beginning silence is a rest of the mind and encompasses gradually the whole man. Thus, spiritual receptivity is enhanced in an uncomparable way. When all contents and ideas have vanished and the Spirit rests concentrated totally in itself, a sudden or more gradual transformation of consciousness or the ground of consciousness will occur.

At the beginning of contemplative prayer the mind usually is concentrated on God or Jesus—or any other expression of the Ultimate—i.e. an objective content fills consciousness. The concentration, however, penetrates so deeply and perfectly into Jesus, that He disappears as an object. One’s own volition and cognition disappear as well, i.e. the whole duality of ordinary consciousness is dissolved. The subject of this happening, which is loving knowledge or knowing love, is now only Jesus’ consciousness. Everything is perceived in “His light” as if one had gone through the door of compressed concentration into a new room which again displays the multiplicity of the world, but now in the light and perspective of its unity.

1. C. Albrecht, *Psychologie des Mystischen Bewusstseins*, (Mainz : 1976), 244.

Strange to say, during this process one's own consciousness does *not* disappear. One does know, that one is a Self—yet totally merged into Jesus, flown together with His consciousness. It is as if two consciousnesses, i.e. centres of personality, had merged into *one* process of life. All impulses for psychic-mental activity are united now with the divine dynamism, are synchronized, as it were, and tuned to the same rhythm.

The second phase of contemplative prayer can lead into a further deepening of the unity with God. Now, reality is not only seen in a different light, but one sees this light "from within". Or in other words: Jesus' consciousness does not only transform the consciousness of the praying subject, but the bundled power of consciousness has penetrated so perfectly into the divine consciousness, that it experience Jesus as He experiences Himself, i.e. as a centre in the inner trinitarian love, in this process of Giving-Himself-in-God totally. God is by no means any more object but pure subjectivity which reflects and experiences itself. Again, one's personal Self does not disappear but is granted fullness in this union of love. We can say it is the *prolepsis* of the final *participation in the Divine Nature* (2 Pet 1,4). In this union there are neither two nor one, but precisely this unique non-dualistic *perichoresis*.

Personal experience of union which begins in the dualistic realm transcends the self into this *transpersonal Non-Duality*, thanks to its own dynamism. This complex non-duality is the mark of fulfilled personal communion, indeed.² Here, Being has become totally aware of itself in communion with itself, which appears as glory, beauty and bliss—*saccidānanda*—Being, Awareness, Bliss. In contemplative prayer the weakness of man is transformed into strength, because the power of the Holy Spirit is the fulfilment of authentic humanness. The totally unified awareness, therefore, is not a dead *Nihil*, but integrates in contemplative receptivity the whole of reality. It experiences the *Unity of Reality*.

This is how many great spiritual masters have described their own experience with prayer. Jesus Himself used to pray for whole nights

2. Cf. the most interesting article by Mrs. Bruteau on the subject: B. Bruteau, *Insight and Manifestation, A way of prayer¹ in a Christian Context—I*, in: Prabuddha Bharata, July 1983, 308.

(Lk 6, 12) with such an intensity that physical changes could be observed (Lk 22, 44). The whole of one's being must be in full participation in the Life Divine. This is the inner trinitarian creativity which Jesus became so totally aware of that He experienced Himself in the expression of His Jewish heritage—"Son of God" (Jn 14,10-11, 16; 15, 10. 26; 16, 25; 17, 5 etc.). Prayer is to open oneself to this presence of God completely, so that finally the participation in the inner trinitarian life is made possible (Jn 17 21ff; 2 Pet 1,4). Finally this participation is the fulfilment of the whole of creation, and the New Testament speaks occasionally in terms of such ideas: that Jesus is *in* God, the Believers *through* Jesus *in* God and, finally, the whole creation *through* redeemed humankind in Jesus *in* God (1 Cor 15, 23-28, Jn 17, 20ff.; Rom 8, 20-23 etc.)

Even for the Western Christian tradition, especially Augustine, the mystics and Luther, God was "more internal" to the soul than the soul is to itself. Especially Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross witness to this non-dualistic experience in contemplative prayer in the most profound way. For Teresa already petition is the first step towards the higher union with God, because the mere mental repetition of words without meditation and concentration on Jesus or God would be fruitless, anyway.³ Her ideal is to combine meditative concentration with vocal prayer, at least for the beginner.⁴ Prayer, for her, is the language of love. Recollection and self-experience are most important steps on the way towards *contemplation infused by grace*, prayer of union and, finally, the experience of the mystical marriage, which transforms the whole of life and is nothing other than the expression of the *indwelling trinitarian love*.⁵

Concentration, therefore, is not only a proper means for a kind of prayer which is understood dualistically, but a *step* on the way of prayer which leads to union with God. This becomes still clearer if one takes into consideration Paul's advice for *ceaseless Prayer* (1 Thes 5, 17; Eph 6, 18). Here, prayer is obviously not an occupation among other

3. Teresa of Avila. *The Way of Perfection*, ch. 24.

4. J. Aumann, *The Practice of Prayer According to St. Teresa of Avila*, in: *Asian Religious Traditions and Christianity*, (Thomasian Forum 2, Manila: 1983), 204.

5. Aumann, *op. cit.*, 23 Cf.

activities, but a *basic attitude* which penetrates *all* activities. But how is it possible to practise such an attitude? Here lies precisely the inestimable value of Yoga and meditation⁶ for any religious practitioner including any Christian.

Meditation is the spiritual aspect of the holistic spiritual-psychosomatic Yoga-path. *Yoga* is integration, union of different aspects and polarities. In the state of our normal rational consciousness we experience reality usually disintegrated, as a medley of unrelated events and therefore not as harmony. The result is a loss of identity and fear, which again is the cause for aggression and further disintegration. This circle becomes a vicious circle. Especially contemporary people will perhaps accept this in view of their own life experience, and the increase in psychosomatic disorders is only an expression of much deeper suffering.

In Yoga not only man but the whole of reality is understood as physico-spiritual continuum, as a universal ecological organism, which is to be integrated and preserved. This is the actual task man has to accomplish in his life and is, therefore, responsible for the balance in the whole cosmos. For the Yogi this task can be fulfilled because he does not believe in a God-forsaken chaos but experiences reality as an ordered Whole which is structured and guided by the divine energy. This does not change even if guilt and ignorance of man (*avidyā*) generate disharmony.

In the beginning there is even for the Yogi faith (*śraddha*) in the goodness of God or the harmony of reality which is hidden and already real behind the disorder of reality. This is what is revealed in the scriptures (*veda*) and testified by the experienced masters of the past (*guru, rsi*). Yet, it has to be realized by one's own authentic experience (*anubhava*). The Yogi has to learn first to hear (*śravaṇa*) and to listen to what the revealed scriptures say in order to reflect upon it (*manana*). *Manana* can be any kind of discursive mental activity which may contribute to the understanding of the Real. Yet as long as knowledge remains external it is useless for man. It has to be

6. Christian tradition has always distinguished between *meditatio* and *contemplatio*. Meditation is concentration on any object where as Contemplation is a trans-objective union of consciousness in God.

applied in daily life so that man concentrates on the essentials and changes his life. This happens most of all in contemplation (*nididhyāsana*) which penetrates finally all activities and shapes all motivation in a new way. Since at least in Advaita Vedānta, several Yoga-schools and Mahayana Buddhism the world is understood holistically, any change on one level or in one realm of reality has consequences for the Whole. This is the theoretical criterion for the efficacy of certain Yoga exercises. However the metaphysical interpretation of this holistic conception differs so far as details are concerned. This is not important for us here as long as it allows us to suggest also a Christian-Trinitarian interpretation of Yoga which corresponds with the non-dualistic experience.

Patanjali whose *Yoga-sūtra* has been and is the classical key source for all Yoga systems, gives a very basic definition of *Yoga* in his first *sūtra*: “Yoga is the silencing of the stream of consciousness (*citta*).” *Citta* is not only intellect or the stream of mind, but refers to the ground of all mental-psychic-spiritual activities, i.e. it includes heart and mind in Western terms. This rest expresses itself most of all in the perfect concentration of the mind “on one point” (*ekagrata*). Consciousness is compared with the sea. Its surface is rippled by many single thoughts. Once perfect calmness prevails, consciousness appears in its true suchness: one can see right up to the ground. What one sees is that the nature of consciousness and God are non-dual (*ātman-brahman*). In other words: this stillness is perfect receptivity. Apart from the fact that the depth of water is an archetype for consciousness (including the pre-conscious) in many cultures, the maximum disorder of interferences at the surface explains very well the ordinary state of affairs of our mind, if it is not concentrated. Deeper absorption of consciousness is possible on account of several exercises for concentration. Rarely or only in specially gifted people this absorption may occur spontaneously, and according to my own observations, it is quite natural in children. Basically, any non-reflective opening of the mind can lead into such an absorption (as one can be absorbed into an artistic experience, a musical event etc.). In concentration what happens is an “emptying and unification” of consciousness, which makes the occurrence of disturbing elements most unlikely or impossible, i.e. external agitation which could disturb the stillness is “filtered out”.⁷

7. Albrecht, *op. cit.*, 142.

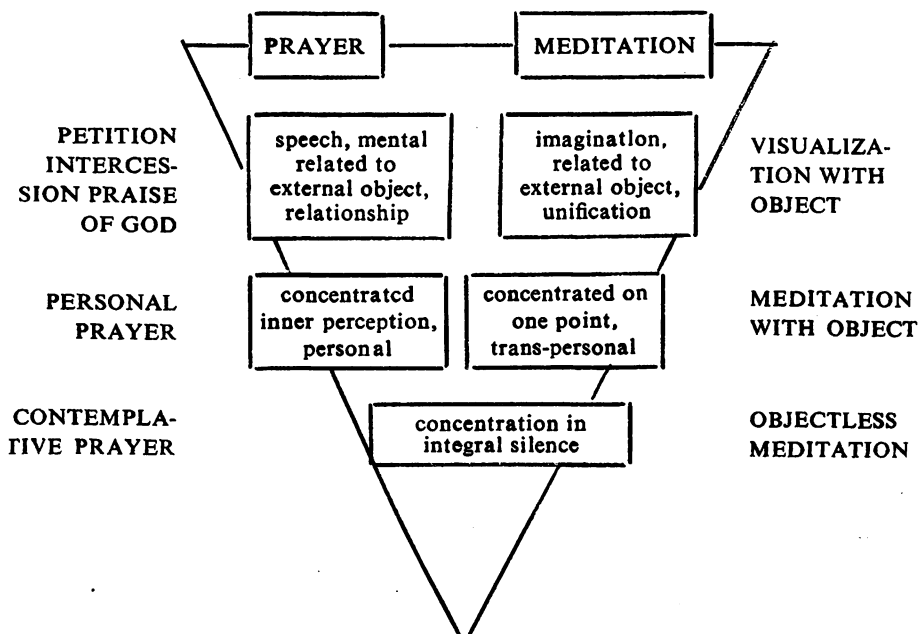
Often there is some confusion concerning the terms concentration and meditation in terms of Yoga psychology, between *dharana* (concentration) and *dhyana* (meditation). Here as well it is Patanjali who gives the clearest direction: "Concentration is the limitation of mind on one point" (III, 1), whereas meditation is "continuation of knowing therein" (III, 2), i.e. the *lasting* concentration of the unhindered stream of consciousness.

To use language which might sound more familiar to ears trained in Christian tradition, we can say, that *Yoga* is nothing but the leading of the whole man into total *silence* so that he becomes able to *listen* authentically. We do not intend to deal in detail with the practice of *Yoga*. We would like to state this, however: Consciousness cannot be silenced by a thought-effort or some kind of *control*, because this would require a new and an even stronger self-stimulation of consciousness, which would create more tension etc. Therefore, as a means, the regulation (not control) of breath and the underlying vital energy (*prāna*) through the practice of *prānāyāma* is very important. Yet for a regular and unobstructed flow of breath certain exercises for flexibility and balanced energy flow of the body (*asana*) are important. They can be mastered by certain sequences of movement etc. Silence, concentration, receptivity etc. are a matter of the *whole* psychophysical system, so that the spiritual level may be activated in order to transform all the other levels. *Yoga* has its end in the equilibrium of all parts and systems of man. *Yoga is the preparation for perfect spiritual receptivity.*

Therefore, in depth meditation and prayer are identical. They are different, however, at the surface or at the beginning of the spiritual path.

We have to take into account that as details these different steps or stages can be interpreted quite differently. I do not claim that this systematization comprises the whole reality of prayer and meditation. The relationship between the different levels is also more subtle than figured out here. Nevertheless, this scheme is intended to typologize the relation between prayer and meditation so that the basic idea can be shown: *Prayer, Yoga and meditation are not contradictions but require each other* in order to realise their full depth. The contradiction appears only on the first level of prayer. We have already stated

why meditation is essential for a deeper life of prayer. Now we shall add that prayer is also essential for meditation, because it makes us realize that meditation is not the effort of the Ego, but actually the work of the Spirit in us.



Now we should clarify how the personal experience of God, which is presupposed in prayer, relates to the non-dualistic and transpersonal experience in meditation. Again one can ask the question: Where is the *personal Self* in the advaitic experience? First, we should clarify the question and distinguish between individuality and person or Ego and Self. All possible variations for an answer have been given both in Christian eschatology as well as in the different Indian philosophies. Even if we connect individuality with the Ego centre and distinguish this from the person which is the result and very essence of interrelatedness, the simple question remains: Is there a conscious centre in the unification with God (the Absolute, *brahman* etc.) which would be in *continuity* with the ordinary consciousness of man as well as with the whole biographical experience of a distinct person? In other words: Is the daily experience of ordinary consciousness integrated into the

advaitic experience, or is it excluded? Has individual life and the sum of all experiences an ultimate meaning for the transtemporal level of reality or not?

In Advaita Vedānta this question may be answered negatively, since all dualistic experience is under the spell of *māyā* which creates the delusion, though in other Indian systems the answer can be very positive. *Ātman* is in no way influenced by the *jīva* as the *nirguna brahman* may appear *saguna*, i.e. personally, but it does not have this personality in itself. It is only imposed by *māyā*. Thinkers like Rāmānuja, however, tried to include locate the personal dimension within the Absolute, and even in Advaita Vedānta there are arguments on similar lines. Usually this implies that a consequent non-dualism is given up. I suppose that a real synthesis is achieved by Abhinavagupta and other exponents of Kashmir Śaivism.⁸ But this school did not have a lasting influence on India as a whole. Yet, the whole Buddhist thinking declares in Mahāyāna with Nāgārjuna: When we think the Absolute impersonal, the contradiction to the personal remains, hence, the final union is not thought. Therefore, the Absolute (*buddhatva*) is *neither* personal *nor* impersonal but integrates both aspects in their negation which has been demonstrated logically in Nāgārjuna's famous tetralemma.

Within a slightly different conceptual framework one has raised the objection that the Yogi in a state of unified awareness (*samādhi*) may realize the *ātman* as the deeper Self, but this might be not identical with the *pāramatman* or God. One could speak only about a certain self-experience but not about an experience of God. This would be the basic objection against a monistic interpretation of the *ātman/brahman* reality. There is this kind of monistic interpretation in India, but it is by no means the only possible one. A real non-dualistic (*a-dvaita*) concept would rather see the unity *in* distinctions and therefore express the subtle experience which we can make when observing the *samādhi* state carefully: The total contemplative absorption is

8. K. C. Pandey, *Abhinavagupta*, (Varanasi: Chaukhamba Publ. 1963); L. N. Sharma, *Kashmir Śaivism* (Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan) Varanasi 1972; Motilal Pandit, *Abhinavagupta's contribution to Kaśmīra Śaivism*, in: *Indian Theol. Studies* XX/2-3, 1983, 137ff.; M. V. Brück, *Holistic Vision in Eastern Religions-Reality as Consciousness*, in: *Indian Theol. Studies*, XXII/I. Bangalore 1985.

neither unconscious nor subconscious, but *superconscious*. The discursive thinking ceases, but what remains is a superclear awareness which has shed all irritations projected by the Ego (such as intentions, wishes, emotions, fears, doubts etc.).⁹ The real nature of consciousness, i.e. pure consciousness, is experienced. It is consciousness (*cit*) which makes us experience being (*sat*) in the bliss (*ānanda*) of union. One should not forget those subtle differentiations, and it is not by chance that they correspond with the perichoretic relations within the Trinity.

I would like to suggest that the advaitic integration, as it can be really experienced by Yoga and meditation, is the most appropriate expression for the Christian experience which is symbolically presented in the concept of the Trinity. Personality as relationship is achieved *through* the individuation of Father, Son and Spirit, but these three dimensions are continuously in the *kenotic process* of self-abandonment into the process of the Trinity. With regard to our earlier question this means, that the individual, the historically concrete appearance, individual experience and the distinct life of a particular man is really being integrated into the ultimate trans-individual and transpersonal ground of Reality.

This, however, is the decisive criterion for a Christian experience and its interpretation. It is not an abstract spiritualism but a mysticism of the concrete. In Advaita Vedānta but also in many forms of Christian mysticism this is not clear enough. On the conceptual level the problem presents itself in the ontological devaluation of what is called the second person of the Trinity in Christian tradition. In the actual spiritual life the problem is that the experience of wholeness is not being integrated into the daily life which requires *action for unity* in all spheres of reality. In Hinduism this is expressed by the unity of *jnāna*-and *karma-yoga*. In Mahayana-Buddhism it is the basic teaching of the unity of *prāñña* (contemplative wisdom) and *karuna* (active-compassion). And in Zen-Buddhism they speak about the "personalization of *satori*" or the "return to the market-place" on the basis of a transformed consciousness. Hence, it is not only the Christians who emphasize the integration of the concrete reality into the advaitic experience. But for Christians it is a central task in view of the nature of the Christ event.

9. Albrecht, *op. cit.*, 140ff.

Even the notion of the Whole depends on the opposite, the individual. *Both* moments are being integrated into the dynamism of reality on a higher (or deeper) level which cannot be pointed out in conclusive terminology since it has pure subjectivity. Hence, the personal character of prayer is integrated into davaitic awareness. Then consciousness rests in itself, but it is active. This is the experience that it is actually the Spirit who prays in us (Rom 8, 26) or that Christ is the authentic subject of our life (Ga, 2, 20). Therefore, the advaitic experience is not the contradiction but the fulfilment of personal prayer.

Only on the contemplative level of prayer it is possible that the spiritual attitude penetrates the *whole* life. Petition, Praise of God and even Personal Prayer remain *one* activity of consciousness among others, even if they influence the other activities of man in proportion to the intensity of concentration. Yet, contemplative non-dualistic awareness has no temporal limitation at all. Depending on the intensity of exercise in meditation it is "carried over" into the whole day and even into dream and sleep. This awareness underlies all other activities, transforms all motivations as well as all contents of consciousness. This is the "Personalization of *satori*" in Buddhism or the spontaneous practice of *samādhi* in daily life by the Indian masters. The best example for the same experience in Christianity is the all-pervading *Jesus prayer*, as it has been practised and is still being practised by the Eastern Church. It is the effective sanctification of the life of the Christian, the gradual growth into the union with God.