Existentialism and Christian Zen
By A. William McVey

“Some years ago,” William Johnston suggests that “Arnold Toynbee declared that when the historian of a thousand years from now comes to write the history of our time, he will be preoccupied not with the Viet Nam war, not with the struggle between capitalism and communism, not with racial strife, but with what happened when, for the first time, Christianity and Buddhism began to penetrate one another deeply.” (Johnston 1979, 1). This was written by William Johnston in the late nineteen seventies; since then, the interest in Buddhism on the part of Western theologians has grown. Johnston describes his dialogue with Buddhism from a limited perspective. “I have called this little book Christian Zen, but the contents are less ambitious than the pretentious title might suggest. Rather than treating of the confluence of two vast traditions of East and West, I simply try to say something about how Zen and Christianity have met in me, setting down some practical conclusions that this meeting has evoked.” (Johnston 1979, 1).

I am not interested in examining in any theological depth the meeting of the western and eastern mind. I approach the issue of eastern spiritual techniques strictly as a pragmatic pastor in a postmodern culture. Furthermore, I am concerned with the finding of the calm mind in these days of anxiety. Most often western Christians view mysticism and meditation as a type of esoteric practice that seems strange to the ordinary person. As a pastor, it is my calling to dispel this serious misconception.

The Practice of Self Realization

Philip Kapleau in the preface to the Pillars of Zen clearly holds, “Briefly stated, Zen is a religion with a unique method of body-mind training whose aim is Self Realization…At the
profundest level Zen, like every other great religion, transcends its own teachings and practices, yet at the same time there is no Zen apart from these practices. Attempts in the West to isolate Zen in a vacuum of the intellect, cut off from the very disciplines which are its raison d’etre, have nourished in places a pseudo-Zen that is little more than a mind tickling diversion. I believe that the Japanese school of Zen Buddhism has perhaps for thousands of years remained the most faithful to the original mindfulness practice of the Buddha that leads to enlightenment (satori).” (Kapleau 1980, 69). Kapleau’s book is about the closest a Westerner might get to a sense of the teachings of Zen Buddhism. Even people, who have practiced a combination of various forms of eastern and western meditation, find it difficult to read. It serves to give a genuine insight into Zen, while simultaneously portraying how difficult it is for a western left brain person to comprehend.

Kapleau’s explanation of Zen, I have found, fits well with my heart, mind and most of all my existential wondering soul. In terms of existential philosophy and therapy, we wander and worry about the lack of meaning in postmodern society. Without meaning in our life, we are driven by our anxiety-based nature and all of its manifestations in the ego. In existentialism, the solution to our anxiety-driven wandering is found by reaching into the deepest elements of humanity. When we explore our being, the existentialist always returns to the core person that recognizes a call to live courageously, “A chief characteristic of this courage is that it requires centeredness within our own being, without which we would feel ourselves to be a vacuum. The emptiness within corresponds to an apathy without, and apathy adds up., in the long run, to cowardice. This is why we must always base our commitment in the center of our own being, or else no commitment will be ultimately authentic…Courage is not a virtue or value among other personal values like love or fidelity. It is the foundation that underlies and gives reality to all other virtues and personal values. Without courage our fidelity becomes conformism.” (May 1975, 13). In an existential analysis, our higher power is the discovery of mind.

Kapleau explains Zen as a religious practice. He does not say religious beliefs or institutions; rather it is a religious practice. It is a religious practice because in Zen there is a
belief in the dharma, i.e. the proven way of Zen. Furthermore, Zen has a faith in the power of satori (enlightenment); in other words, it has a belief in the higher mind. In Zen, like existentialism, there is no unconscious mind; there is only the mind. If you ask a true Zen master where the mind is, then he will tell you “the mind is where you focus.” In Zen, there is a salvific belief in the discovery of the “Original Mind.” It is where we go to find our true nature, and it is by means of our Original Mind that we find the solution to pain, suffering and anxiety, “If you would free yourself of the sufferings of samsara (the law of causation), you must learn the direct way to become a Buddha. This way is no other than the realization of your own mind. Now what is this mind? It is the true nature of all sentient beings that which existed before our parents were born. This mind is intrinsically pure. When we are born, it is not newly created, and when we die, it does not perish. It has no distinction of male or female, nor has it any coloration of good or bad. It cannot be compared with anything, so it is called Buddha nature. Yet countless thoughts issue from this self-nature as waves arise in the ocean or as images are reflected in the mirror.

To realize your own mind you must first of all look into the source from which thoughts flow. Sleeping and working, standing and sitting, profoundly ask yourself, “What is my own mind?” with an intense yearning to resolve this question. This is called “training” or “practice” or “desire for truth” or “thirst for realization.” (Kapleau 1980, 193).

The Existential Center

What we have here from the perspective of an existential analysis is the courageous pursuit of meaning that awaits us at the center of our existence. Perhaps this existential core that is discovered in contemplation, art, music and poetry is somewhat similar to this Zen Mind. It takes a courageous effort of time and practice to come to enlightenment and belief in the Dharma of the “Original Mind.” It takes a courageous belief in the teachings of the Zen masters to trust them and enter on the journey to the Original Mind. In Zen, the true self is like the moon that cannot be seen because it is covered by the clouds. The Zen clouds are the three delusions of anger, creed and ignorance.
Anxiety is a combination of thoughts and feelings that comes from the ego driven by need for self esteem, affluence and the lack of courage to look for our true self. The three delusions clearly address the issue of anxiety and removing the anxiety clouds that keep us from the Original Mind. It has been my experience over the years as a pastor that anxiety and anger always go together. Why are people who have so much affluence in their life so angry? Why do Western Christians become increasingly angry at non believers and the world? Why is anger and intolerance increasing? Anxiety is the driving emotion of the angry ego, and we fight in vain against anger with left brain practices of rational insight and preaching. The overcoming of anger in Zen is achieved with the practice of Zazen.

In the gospels, we meet a gut Jesus who fearlessly confronts the inner demonic voices of anxiety Christians are often afraid of getting to the gut where it is messy because we look for a nice Jesus. When we read the gospels most often Jesus presents us with ambiguities and paradoxes. Johnston writes, “Zen is meant to drive conviction down into the guts. Here it is in contrast with Western prayer, which for the past couple of centuries has tended to be very cerebral and has not rooted itself deeply in the personality, with the result that many Christians, even nuns and priests, can jettison long held convictions in moments of emotional crisis. Probably they would not be able to do this if their convictions were lodged at the gut level through Zen.” (Johnston 1979, 34).

The practice of Zazen is to bring a follower a life of mindfulness. Being present is the meaning of mindfulness, and being present for the Zen is living in the state of awareness. The key of Zen Buddhism is that the seeds of enlightenment are sown in mindful living.”It will be fair to say that “presence” is the cornerstone of all true spirituality, regardless of ethnic or cultural origin. Presence is something that Jesus empathized over and over again. The Gospels are filled with statements of Jesus that begin with words like “Beware” (be aware), “Look,” “Hear and understand…. In this sense, the teaching of Jesus is very close to that of the Buddha. After all, Buddhism is a culture of awareness. The word “Buddha,” for example, means the “Awakened One.” Similarly Jesus is called "The Light of the World" in the Gospel of John. In
the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus alerted his disciple to the importance of awareness, “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If the light in you is darkness how great is the darkness! (Matt. 6:22-23).” (Leong 1995, 48). From the teaching of Jesus and the Buddha, we learn that “Being Present in a state of Awareness” is the foundation of the spiritual life both in Buddhism and Christianity.

No-thing

As an existential Christian, I am particularly drawn to the practice of Zen and the method of Zazen by the concept of Mu, “A monk came to Joshu, a renowned Zen master in China hundreds of years ago, and asked: ‘has a dog a Buddha nature or not?’ Joshu retorted, ‘Mu!’” Literally the expression means ‘no’ or ‘nothing,’ but the significance of Joshu’s answer does not lie in the word. Mu is the expression of the living, functioning, dynamic Buddha-nature. What you must do is discover the spirit or essence of this Mu, not through intellectual analysis but search into your innermost being. Then you must demonstrate before me, concretely and vividly, that you understand Mu as living truth, without recourse to conceptions, theories, or abstract explanations. Remember, you can’t understand Mu through ordinary cognition; you must grasp it directly with your whole being.” (Kapleau 1980, 152).

Here in the Zen teaching of Mu that the master explains to the student we face a similar issue in existential philosophy and therapy, and it is the issue of being and non being. Irrational Man by William Barrett, A Study in Existential Philosophy was published in 1958. Like many the existential writings of the fifties and sixties, it is most applicable to the current state of Western culture and the American dream that has plunged into a deeply experienced age of anxiety. Barrett in this work gives a rather brilliant and concise analysis of the existential movement and its major philosophers, and the major themes of the Western existential movement namely the phenomenon of nothingness (or as the Zen master explains it no-thing), “This philosophy embodies the self-questioning of the time, seeking to reorient itself to its own destiny. Indeed, the whole problematic of Existentialism unfolds from the historical fragility and
contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths if existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before the threat.” (Barrett 1958, 36).

Existentialism argues that it is no longer possible in an age of anxiety by means of Western dogmatic and fundamental biblical language to enter into the divine. Also, an understanding of truth, the future of the universe and global ethics is no longer achievable by means of the principles and methods of the traditional Cartesian method of science. This view of science finds no place for the subjective and emotive approach to truth; rather it leads to a world that is mechanical and grasped only through the propositions of left brain mathematical and empirical observation. Gradually, without an existential perspective view of man and the universe, humanity is doomed to run feverishly from its increasing sense of anxiety. “In Heidegger Nothingness is a presence within our own Being, always there, in the inner quaking that goes on beneath the calm surface of our preoccupation with things. Anxiety before Nothingness has many modalities and guises: now trembling and creative, now panicky and destructive; but always it is as inseparable from ourselves as our own breathing because anxiety is our existence itself in its radical insecurity. In anxiety, we both are and are not, at one and the same time, and this is our dread. Our finitude is such that positive and negative interpenetrate our whole existence.” (Barrett 1958, 226).

Zen Buddhism is fully aware of the existential situation of anxiety being as close as our very own breath, but it is here Zen finds the solution in its approach to the pain and suffering of our anxiety-based existence. It is in the contemplative focus on the no-thing, and this focus must occur in the practice of meditative silence. It is here that we find another link with Heidegger who breaks away from the traditional western view of truth and organizes all his thoughts under the categories similar to Buddhist psychology of 1) moods and feelings, 2) understanding 3) speech. That is, we know life not by the Aristotelian and analytical logical qualitative and quantitative categories. We know life and the meaning of truth by our moods and feelings, how we understand these moods and feelings and how we express them in speech. “Language, for
Heidegger, is not primarily a system of sounds or of marks on paper symbolizing those sounds. Sounds and marks upon paper can become language only because man, in so far as he exists, stands within language.” (Barrett 1958, 221). William Barrett describes Heidegger in terms most acceptable to a student of Zen Buddhism, “This looks very paradoxical; but, as with the rest of Heidegger, to understand what he means we have to cast off our usual habits of thought and let ourselves see what the thing is--i.e., let the thing itself be seen rather than riding roughshod over it with readymade conceptions.” Is this not similar to the Zen master who teaches that the pursuit of Mu (no-thing) leads us to grasp reality with the whole mind in itself without conceptions, theories and abstract explanations?

There is also in Heidegger another element essential to the pursuit or meaning by a humanity torn between Being and Non Being, i.e. the basic ontological nature; it is the language of silence. Barrett explains, “Two people are talking together. They understand each other, and they fall silent-a long silence. This silence is language; it may speak more eloquently than any words. In their mode, they are attuned to each other; they may even reach down into that understanding which, as we have seen above, lies below articulation. This significant, speaking silence shows that sounds or marks do not constitute the essence of language. Nor is this silence merely a gap in our chatter; it is, rather, the primordial attunement of one existent to another, out of which language-as sounds, marks, and counters- comes. It is only because man is capable of such silence that he is capable of authentic speech. If he ceases to be rooted in that silence all this talk becomes chatter.”(Barrett 1958, 223).

Zen Buddhism and existentialism are in a very real sense a nihilist view of life. It is an explanation of life in the book of Ecclesiastes 1:2, “Meaningless, Meaningless!’ says the teacher. Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” The word for meaningless can also be translated as breath or vapor, but it is basically a nihilist spiritual view. However, similar to the Zen “Mu” and Heidegger’s language of silence it is a constructive nihilism. Again, it is William Barrett who eloquently explains the nature of this constructive mystical nothingness, “As a matter of fact, human moods and reactions to the encounter with Nothingness vary considerably
from person to person and from culture to culture. The Chinese Taoists found the Great Void tranquilizing, peaceful, and even joyful. For the Buddhists in India, the idea of No-thing evoked a mood of universal compassion for all creatures caught in the toils of an existence that is ultimately groundless. In the traditional culture of Japan the idea of Nothingness pervades the exquisite modes of aesthetic feeling displayed in painting, architecture, and even the ceremonial rituals of daily life. But Western man, up to his neck in things, objects, and the business of mastering them, recoils with anxiety from any possible encounter with Nothingness and labels talk of it as “negative” - which is to say, morally reprehensible. Clearly, then, the moods with which men react to this Nothing very according to time, place, and cultural conditioning; but what is at issue here is not the mood with which one ought to confront such a presence, but the reality of the presence itself.” (Barrett 1958, 285).

Christian Mysticism

This mystical nihilistic knowledge is also discovered in the history of Christian mysticism. It is boldly articulated by a Syrian monk who lived at the end of fifth century. The identity of Dionysius the Areopagite, or as he is often called, the Pseudo-Dionysius, is unknown. This monk ascribed his works to Dionysius the Areopagite who was a friend of Saint Paul, and addressed them to Paul’s fellow worker, Timothy. He is thought to have been a contemporary of the Apostle Paul and his writing, at the time, were given the same authority as those writers of the New Testament, “Supernal Triad, Deity above all essence, knowledge and goodness; Guide of Christians of Divine Wisdom; direct our path to the ultimate summit of Thy mystical Lore, most incomprehensible, most luminous, and most exalted, where the pure, absolute, and immutable mysteries of theology are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their Darkness, and surcharging our blinded intellects with the utterly impalpable and invisible fairness of glories surpassing all beauty.

Let this be my prayer; but do thou, dear Timothy, in the diligent exercise of the mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible
and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and non-being, that thou mayest arise, by
unknowing, towards the union, as far as attainable, with Him Who transcends all being and all
knowledge. For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and of all things, thou
mayest be borne on high through pure and entire self abnegation, into the superessential

Here we have an expression of the earliest mysticism of the Christian church that follows
a similar path of nothingness as that of the existential quest and the Zen teaching of Mu. It is a
nihilistic spirituality that leads in Zen to the enlightenment of the Original Mind, in Christian
mysticism to the love and radiance of the Divine Darkness and in existential philosophy-
psychology the freedom from anxiety by the acceptance of state of being and non- being as a call
to the self, or as the metaphysical poet Eliot calls it, the Third Name (our true identity).

I hope that I have not been overly intellectual because the purpose of this work is to
explore methods of calmness in an age of anxiety. I am, however, a Christian pastor, and I
believe that Christian practice must have metaphysical, mystical heft. We are able to discover a
mystical theology in an experimental wisdom stretching out to God expressed by the restless
desire of the soul for divine love. Goethe really described this heft in terms of a mystical
theology as the scholastic of the heart, the dialectic of the feelings. Mystical metaphysical heft
sometimes is called by scholars like Henri Bergson an intellectual intuition, an intellectual
sympathy or formless speculation. Following the teachers of mystical metaphysical heft, I have
outlined the path of Zen Mu and the existential quest for overcoming anxiety by the discovery of
the courageous self.

These paths of mystical metaphysics require an acceptance of spiritual nihilism. One of
the finest expressions of the nihilist road to God and the calmness of self discovery in our life is
found in the teaching of the Spanish mystics of the 12th century. Their teaching and practice is
presented in the work by Gerald G. May, M.D. The Awakened Heart where he discusses the
mysticism of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. “Our sense seeks beauty, the sweetness, and
the good feelings of God. Our mind seeks the truth and wisdom of God. Our will seeks to live
out the goodness, the righteousness of God. In other words, we yearn for the attributes of God with every part of ourselves. Human beings are two legged, walking, talking desires for God.

Ultimately, it is only God’s very self that can truly satisfy our deepest desires; our capacities are limited in what they can apprehend, and God’s true nature is always beyond them. The best they can do is reflect some image or concept of God, some brief glimpse seen ‘through a glass darkly’ (1 Cor.13-12). God is at once too immanently at one with us and too transcendentally beyond us to be fully felt or appreciated in any normal way… God’s true attributes are too perfect, too pure, and too delicate for any of our faculties to grasp.

To put it another way, all our capacities are geared toward appreciating objects of attention, sense perceptions, images, ideas, memories, emotions, fantasies, and so on. But God is too intimate to be an object, too ultimate to be a thing. Our faculties can only comprehend the things of God, like the beauty of creation, the goodness of the attraction we feel for others, or the glimpses of truth we experience in religious images and concept. All these things may reflect or represent God to us, but they miss the essence of God. To our normal human capacities God is nada, no-thing.” (May 1991, 174).

Thomas Merton, the well known Trappist and mystical author, once wrote to William Johnston about the use of Zen and the pursuit of satori, meaning enlightenment. In order to appreciate his response, it is important to realize that Merton in his later life had begun to pursue the practices of eastern meditation and particularly Zen. He did, however, continually return to his own Catholic mysticism with a sense of having discovered anew its deep value and similarity with the Zen tradition. In a sense, he seems to see the value of Zen as allowing us to develop a more down to earth type of mystical awareness in this information age. He writes, “Probably the best thing to do is to use Zen for purposes of inner purification and liberation from system and conceptual thinking without bothering about whether or not we get satori.” (Johnston 1979, 22)

William Johnston in Christian Zen, A Way of Meditation, writes “The Judeo-Christian tradition, as is well known, is extremely theocentric. Everything hinges on God. This stems in large measure from the Bible, where all is attributed to the guiding hand of Yahweh. If the rain
falls, this is the work of Yahweh. If someone goes astray, Yahweh hardens his heart. If he dies, Yahweh strikes him down. And so on. This all the more stressed in the communication of God to man: the great experience of Abraham, Moses, and Paul had nothing whatever to do with their own efforts, their own asceticism, their own prayer. All was the gifts of Yahweh…As opposed to this view, Zen is extremely man-centered and existential. You are simply to sit and get on with the job. Then instructions are concerned with your spine and your eyes and your abdomen; in a very practical way you are led to Samadhi (intense yet effortless concentration) without too much theory. What you are asked to believe is that you possess the Buddha nature and that enlightenment is possible. Here is something for Christianity. Terminology about acquired on infused contemplation, about ordinary and extraordinary prayer, about gratia gratis and gratia faciens-all these complications can quietly and conveniently be dropped. They aren’t really necessary, because the experience itself is frightfully simple and uncomplicated and put in its place ‘Christian samadhi.’ This would have the good effect of bringing us into line with other spiritual traditions which use the word. Besides, contemplation is a Latin word, translation of the Greek theoria. Must Christians forever stick to the Hellenistic vocabulary?” (Johnston 1979, p.46).

At the heart of any form of Christian existentialism is the emphasis placed on the volitional nature of man. God has created us free human beings who have the ever present option of saying yes or no to our inner Christ nature. When we enter into Christian mindfulness, we say yes to Christ, and we participate in the energy of the Spirit. It is entering into this “Yes” that we exercise the fundamental act of our spiritual being thereby affirming our Godly sense of being. This is called man’s fundamental option as whether a person wishes to accept spiritual meaning into their life. For Christians it means a willingness to discover our Christ nature. When I teach classes on Christian Zen I teach the three beliefs of Buddhism, i.e. I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma (the way). I take refuge in the Sangha (my spiritual companions). I then explain that we will change three beliefs to “I take refuge in the Christ nature. I take refuge in the way of Christ. I take refuge in my spiritual community.”
In order to explain more deeply and at a level of comfort for Christian practitioner of Zen that Zazen is compatible with the Christian faith, I find it is necessary to give attention to the tradition and teachings of the Orthodox Christian church. Eastern Orthodox thinking is more compatible with the practices of Zen than Roman Catholicism or the Reformed Church. It is grounded on the mystical base of its prominent mystical theologians. In Orthodox theology, Aristotelian thought, as it influenced Thomas Aquinas and Roman Catholicism, is absent. It is particularly in the Orthodox theology of the Trinity and grace where the mystical is discovered. Orthodox theology is equated with mystical experiences. Consequently, in the Eastern Orthodox Church, union with God is seen as a spiritual state attainable by far more than the contemplative saint. In Orthodox teaching, it should be the objective of all Christians to live the Christian life in its mystical fullness.

Via Negativa

Theology of the Orthodox Church is essentially an apophatic (negative) theology. It is grounded on the incomprehensibility of God. The nature of God conceived as the Ultimate Reality is completely unapproachable and unknowable, beyond all that exists and all that can be thought. The question arises, therefore, how can we hope to know God? An answer is given in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius when he wrote of a ‘higher faculty’ of the soul through which it is possible for humanity to be united to Him who is wholly unknowable; thus by knowing nothing we come to know that which is beyond all knowledge.

Eastern theology is a theology and a spirituality that accepts our knowledge and experience of God is always a matter of a polarity and is expressed in a language of polarity. Eastern theology holds that the Divine Essence is the uncreated energies of God and the created being of man. God is made known to us created beings through the Trinity in Unity; not, however, through the essence of the Trinity which is one with the unknowable God, equally God, and therefore Itself inaccessible and unknowable, but through the uncreated energies within It. The Trinity is more than Its Essence; within the Essence, and inseparable from it, there are the
uncreated Energies, in and through which it goes forth from Itself and manifests, communicates and gives itself to us.

The uncreated Energies are the exterior of God, outpouring of Itself, while still remaining Itself unchanged, into the realm of created being. The knowledge of the unknowable One by created being is said to fall within the sphere of the divine economy. This is a difficult teaching to understand. St. Gregory of Thessalonica wrote, “The divine nature must be said to be at the same time both exclusive of and, in some sense open to participation. We attain to participation in the divine nature, and yet at the same time it remains totally inaccessible. We need to affirm both at the same time and to preserve the antinomy as a criterion of right devotion.” Happold 1963 219).

In the first lesson of the Book of Tao, we read a very similar concept of the divine mystery, as we find in Orthodox teachings. “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name. Free from desire, you realize the mystery. Caught in desire, you see only manifestations. Yet mystery and manifestations arise from the same source. This source is called darkness within darkness, and it is the gateway to all understanding.” (Mitchell 1988, 1). The Mystery and the Mysteries are inaccessible to thought (concepts and images) and only to be known by means of participation in the divine life.

The Jesus Prayer Exercise and the Inner Christ

The Eastern doctrine of deification teaches that by means of participatory grace, we advance towards union with God. As we advance, we grow to a higher level of consciousness. We reach a point where consciousness becomes an enlightened consciousness, and we are no longer bound to the senses. Man should be able to attain union with God by means of grace, but man must also play his part and work towards enlightenment and transformation. A widely recognized practice in Orthodox mysticism is through the Prayer of Jesus.
The words of the prayer are simple, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It is more than a petitioner prayer; it is really almost a scientific attempt to change the one who prays. Spiritual directors give precise directions on how the prayer should be used and prayed.

1) It is said aloud a specific number of times each day in quiet solitude.
2) It is repeated silently throughout the day and at night.
3) Eventually the aspirant begins to breathe the prayer in the heart and becomes more and more aware of the divine breathing.

The Jesus prayer is a mantra which is a single evocative word or a sacred sentence or some form of a creative sound. The sound of a mantra awakens the dormant forces in the soul.

Theophanes, known as the Recluse

“The object of our search is the fire of grace which enters into the heart…When the spark of God Himself-grace-appears in the heart, it is the prayer of Jesus which quickens it and fans it into flame. But it does not create the spark-it gives only the possibility that it may be received, by recollecting the thoughts and making ready the soul before the face of the Lord. The essential thing is to hold oneself ready before the Lord, calling out to Him from the depths of one’s heart…God is concerned with the heart.” (Happold 1963, 225).

Brianchaninov: On the Prayer of Jesus

“Experience will show that in using this method (i.e. the Jesus Prayer), the words should be pronounced with extreme unhurriedness, so that the mind may be able to enter into the words as into forms…One must train oneself as if one were reading the syllables- with the same unhurriedness.(Happold 1963, 225).

A Christian Zen Exercise
St. Isac the Syrian writes, “He who desires to see the Lord within himself endeavors to purify his heart by the unceasing remembrance of God. The spiritual land of a man in soul is within him. The sun which shines in it is the light of the Holy Trinity. The air which its inhabitant breathes is the All-Holy Spirit. The life, joy and gladness of that country is Christ, the Light of the Light—the Father. That is the Jerusalem or Kingdom of God hidden within us, according to the word of the Lord. Try to enter the cell within you, and you will see the heavenly cell. They are one and the same. By one entry you enter both. The ladder to the Heavenly Kingdom is within you. It is mysteriously in your soul.” (Happold 1963, 224). Here we discover the mystic base of the Orthodox fathers that is a monistic nature. With developing a discipline of Christian Zen-like mindfulness, it becomes possible to experience God as the inner Christ, thereby ceasing to treat God as an object outside of ourselves.

Western Christianity has become an awareness of God in terms of dualism. In traditional western Catholic and Reformation spirituality, God is the totally other who comes to us as a person totally broken and separated from God. Consequently, God is always coming to us from the outside meaning that we come to God as an object separate from our existence. The problem is that if God is always coming to us from the totally other perspective, it is not possible to have a true existential relationship with God. It is the ever present problem in western theology and spirituality of the “one and the many” that we have inherited since the time of Aristotle and Aquinas.

We can look at the universe and our participation in the universe either in terms of there is one thing or the many things. Common sense everyday life tells us that there are many things, but science steadily begins to look for the famous drive of physics and is a total explanation of everything in terms of the basic energy structure of the universe. Zen, like science, has always taught that there is only one thing. This one thing of Zen is silent, imageless, and without subject and object. It is the Tao. As we see from the early mystical Father, we participate as part of our very existence in God’s oneness. We are separate yet one in God because unto each human being
has given the Christ cell, the center within us. It is the Christ cell that comes forth when enter into Christ centered, Zen-like meditation.

Mindfulness, I suggest, is similar to the existential quest for being present in the world in a full state of awareness. In mystical existentialism and states of Christ mindfulness the issue of being and non-being vanishes because we become one and the same with the divine energy of the trinity. Jesus has come to open to us the energy of the trinity; yet at the same time teaching us that the Godhead is separate. Eckhart taught, “The soul must step beyond or jump past creatures if it is to know God…I do not think the least of creatures absorb your attention, you will see nothing of God, however little that creature may be. Thus, in Book of Love, the soul says: ‘I have run around looking for him my soul loves and found him not.’ She found angels and many other things but not him that her soul loved, but she goes on to say: ‘After that, I went a little further and found him my soul loves.’ It was as if she said: ‘It was when I stepped beyond creatures that I found my soul’s lover.’ The soul must step beyond or jump past creatures if it is to know God.” (Happold 1963, 274). When we enter into deep states of mindful silence, we realize the Christ cell begins to move throughout our mind and body. In Christian states of Zen likeness, the movement is felt and known, and it leads to an excitation of the Spirit. It is what Christians know as the Pentecostal moment similar to when the Spirit comes to Jesus in the gospel scene with John the Baptist. Perhaps the teachings and practice of Christian Zen offers us a new way of understanding the meaning of the Pentecostal experience.

End Notes