Chapter 13
Individual Religious and Spiritual Practices

In the last chapter, we examined communal aspects of religious and spiritual practice. In this chapter, we will look at practices that are more individual in their orientation, although as we shall see they have communal aspects as well. In particular, we will look at the practices of prayer and meditation, as well as ascetic or lifestyle practices that support these spiritual disciplines.

13.1 Religious and Spiritual Practices: Prayer and Meditation

Prayer and meditation are perhaps the most important individual spiritual practices. They have also been the focus of an important dialogue with psychology. An understanding of both prayer and meditation is thus very important.

Prayer is a central feature of many religious traditions, an activity that gives voice to religious experience (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2003, p. 6; Putt, 2005). It is typically associated with Christianity, although many people in the devotional traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism also practice it. In the early Christian Orthodox tradition, **prayer** was variously defined as a petitioning of God for what is fitting (Basil), and ascent of the mind or spirit to God (Evagrius), or a conversation with God (Origen, 1994; Spidlik, 1986, pp. 308–311; 2005, pp. 34–36). This activity can be of two types: an effortful, **expressive prayer** involving speech and the imagination or an effortless letting go that allows God to speak as found in **contemplative prayer**. Christian and Buddhist approaches to prayer contain examples of both types (Pennington, 2001, pp. 60–61; Barry, 2001, pp. 98–99).

In the Christian tradition, prayer is ideally a transformative experience. In advanced prayer experiences as described by masters like Teresa of Avila, our previous ways of looking at the world and ourselves are called into question in a kind of **liminal** state that opens up possibilities for conversion and transformation (Welch, 1982, pp. 24–38; see Section 12.4.1). Ideally, prayer moves us away from illusion, although some have pointed out that like any spiritual practice, prayer can become magical or illusionary if practiced in the wrong way or for the wrong reasons (Nouwen, 1975; Fuller, 1988, p. 124; Johnson & Boyatzis, 2006). It also orients us toward a deep relationality, trust and recognition of dependence and away from

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a more anonymous, instrumental way of looking at the world. We become more attuned to others and our connections with them (Vergote, 1997, p. 286; Elliott, 2001). Ultimately prayer can become a kind of continual process—"prayer without ceasing" in the Christian vocabulary—so that even daily activities become transformed and are seen in a different way (Benson & Wirzba, 2005; Wirzba, 2005). It is however a practice, not a commodity, requiring hard work and proper preparation (cf. Engler, 2003).

Meditation has a different emphasis than prayer, although in practice the two overlap to some extent. While prayer usually has a conversational or discursive aspect in which thoughts and feelings are directed out of us toward someone or something (God, in theistic traditions), **meditation** involves non-discursive procedures aimed at altering attention, clearing the mind of normal thought patterns and establishing a more receptive mode of consciousness. It is often thought of as a practice of Eastern religions like Hinduism or Buddhism rather than Christianity, but activities like meditation can be found in all three traditions (Andresen, 2000). While meditation and prayer are unique in some ways, they also share many features. Meditation is known as a technique for control of attention, but many versions of prayer also emphasize this (e.g., Kadloubovsky & Palmer, 1992, pp. 152–161); prayer is known as a way of seeking transformation, but meditation is also potentially a transformative experience, opening our consciousness to new perceptions of the world.

13.2 Early Christian and Orthdox Prayer and Ascetic Practice

Christian prayer developed in the early church as part of a rich set of spiritual practices. Members of the earliest communities were a minority in a largely pagan culture and drew upon Jewish, New Testament and other sources to fashion a distinctive way of life. After Christianity became the state religion of the Roman empire, people began moving to isolated desert areas in Egypt and Palestine to maintain the distinctive character of their practice and engage in intensive religious seeking (Robinson, 1995). This Desert spirituality has been decisive in the development of Christian spiritual practices, forming models of both individual and communal spirituality (Meyendorff, 1998a, pp. 8–12; Spidlik, 1986).

The earliest influential systematizer of Desert spirituality was Evagrius of Pontus (c. 345–399). He lived in the Egyptian desert during the 4th century AD. He and his Western European popularizer John Cassian helped establish a common vocabulary and approach to Christian spiritual practice (cf. Merton, 2005b, pp. 99–102; Stewart, 1999). They saw Christianity as a way of life that involves all aspects of the human person, rather than just a set of beliefs or membership in an organization—although these are also important (Driscoll, 2005, pp. 1–6). Evagrius combined knowledge of the practical wisdom of the Desert Fathers with a Greek philosophical view of the human person.

13.2.1 Models of Development

The works of Evagrius (Sinkewicz, 2003; Harmless, 2004, pp. 345–354) and other later writers like Maximus Confessor (Maximus, 2003; Louth, 1996) offer sophisticated models of spiritual growth and experience in prayer (Chirban, 1986). Evagrius and Maximus believed that development proceeds in three stages. During the first stage of **praktike,** one engages in lifestyle changes and ascetic practices to purify the passionate part of the soul. This eliminates vices and attachments while gaining virtues, ultimately leading toward a state of purity of heart. As purification is achieved and our emotions and desires function normally, we are able to quiet our mind and move on to the second stage of **natural contemplation,** where we see the inner *logoi* or laws and meaning of things in relation to the activity of God, appreciating the world as it is rather than as something to exploit (Thunberg, 1995, pp. 75–81; Allchin, 2003; Montaldo, 2003; Merton, 2003b, 2008, pp. 121–136). The assumptions here are as follows: (1) It is impossible to truly appreciate nature unless we have achieved some purity of heart and detachment through praktike (Pennington, 2003) and (2) part of the perfection of creation is the uniqueness and diversity of things that at the same time are in an overarching harmony; the universal and the particular require each other (von Balthasar, 1995, pp. 41–50). Finally comes **theoria** or *spiritual contemplation*, the vision or seeing of God, which includes ineffable experiences of formless light, union, and participation in a divine reality that exceeds traditional rational concepts (Spidlik, 2005, pp. 152–158; Dysinger, 2005; Driscoll, 2005, pp. 77–83; Cutsinger, 2003; Meyendorff, 1998b, p. 168; cf. Theophan, 1995, p. 131; Bolshakoff, 1976, p. 122). At this stage of theoria, divine activity dominates, and the soul becomes so pure that one can see God in it as if in a clear mirror (Sherwood, 1955, pp. 87–88; Spidlik, 1986, pp. 78–79, 334–338). Later writers tended to emphasize this kind of contemplation, speaking of it as pure prayer (Palamas, 1983, pp. 35–38, 61–65) or mutual sharing (*perichoresis*) that leads to **theosis**. While Evagrius seems to have treated these stages of development as sequential, later writers like Maximus tended to argue that they were parallel processes (Thunberg, 1995, pp. 332–359, 417–422), so ascetic practices of praktike are important at any level, and one's higher prayer life could lead to greater purity at the level of praktike (Spidlik, 2005, pp. 176–179; Driver, 2002, p. 101). The path of development is thus like a helix that ascends toward God as the person moves back and forth between ethical or practical struggles and the experience of contemplation.

13.2.2 The Ascetic Life

Eastern Orthodox spirituality created a range of **ascetic** practices, which are training activities or exercises designed to help create the kind of physical and mental state necessary for attaining virtue and achieving spiritual development toward

perfection (Harmless, 2004, p. 61; Merton, 2008, p. 19). These practices have been particularly important among Orthodox and Roman Catholic groups but have also influenced Protestants like Martin Luther (Senn, 1986). Asceticism is built on the assumption that there is an essential interconnection between the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of life (e.g., Theophan, 1995, p. 38; Allen, 1997). This is an area of considerable contemporary discussion due to an increase of interest in understanding the role of the body and emotion in spirituality and religious practices (McGuire, 2007; Kearns, 2005; cf. Peters, 2002; Ryff & Singer, 1998). Ascetical practices and disciplines include simplicity of diet, fasting, vigils (long periods of prayer, typically at night), almsgiving, manual labor, participation in the sacraments, and moral or sexual restraint. They were designed to foster a particular kind of intensified subjective experience and a way of life supportive of spiritual advancement and deep experiences in prayer or meditation (Chrysostomos, 2007, pp. 90–91; Flood, 2004; Sinkewicz, 2003, pp. 5–9; Okholm, 2001). Obedience to a superior was also thought to be important in giving a person the strength to overcome destructive passions (Merton, 2005b, p. 148). These practices were based on certain assumptions about the nature of spiritual perfection, how it should be pursued, and how the ascetic should view and relate to the surrounding culture (Kaelber, 1995):

1. While psychology has often assumed that bodily desires or pleasures are natural and thus should be satisfied, ascetic writers claim that in many situations the satisfaction of material desires simply increases the desire, leading to a loss of freedom. Spiritual desires on the other hand when satisfied have a transformative effect and lead to greater freedom (e.g., Sinkewicz, 2003, pp. 73–76; Sherwood, 1955, p. 116; Palamas, 1983, p. 51). Interestingly, experimental research has shown that ascetic techniques like fasting lead to changes in drive and reward mechanisms that reduce desire and provide less stimulation of brain chemicals involved in addictions. Fasting also appears to enhance inner tranquility, positive mood, and health, as well as retard aging (Bushell, 1995).

2. Freedom is not found through eliminating desires, but through purifying them, so that we are free to use our natural abilities and respond to God's presence. Ascetic discipline allows us to control, moderate and harmoniously direct our desires. This moves us toward virtue and spiritual advancement and away from compulsive following of our passions or the pressures of the surrounding culture. We develop a state of **apatheia**, an inner peace or detachment from compulsions that bind us, leaving us free to better love others and to pursue spiritual development (Louth, 1996; Nikodimos & Makarios, 1981, p. 67; Sinkewicz, 2003, pp. 110–112; Wilken, 1995; Ware, 1995; Makrakis, 1977, p. 137; Malina, 1995; Maloney, 1992, p. 190; Merton, 2008, p. 103).

3. Early Christian writers reject the idea that mind and body can be separated. For Evagrius and especially for later writers like Maximus or Gregory Palamas, it is dualistic to suppose that mind or spirit can be purified without attending to the body or developing a lifestyle that can support sanctification and spiritual development (Dysinger, 2005, pp. 28–34; Meyendorff, 1998b, pp. 143–150). In their

holistic view, we are a composite of body and soul that are separate in nature but interpenetrate (*perichoresis*) so that they are intimately related and actively reciprocal, unable to exist apart from each other (Maximus, 2003, pp. 71, 87; Thunberg, 1995). Thus, purification of the body sanctifies the soul and vice versa (Sherwood, 1955, pp. 105–125).

4. Ascetic practices were thought to be helpful for every Christian, and while withdrawal from the anxieties of daily life was thought to be helpful, exclusively solitary and individualistic forms of spirituality were discouraged, as they were found to be harmful to most people (Rubenson, 1995; Sinkewicz, 2003, p. 5; Spidlik, 1986, p. 214; Louth, 1996, p. 35; Gould, 1993, p. 168; Spidlik, 2005, pp. 95, 115; Meyendorff, 1998a, p. 13).

5. The goal of asceticism is not just a cleansing of vices and attachments but the development of positive virtues like humility and love. For writers like Maximus, it is virtue rather than the elimination of vice that leads to happiness and supports contemplation, which in turn leads to freedom and our increasing likeness to God. Thus, ascetic practices both required love and were a prerequisite for it (Kadloubovsky & Palmer, 1992, p. 55; Louth, 1996; Sherwood, 1955, pp. 81–93). Likewise, techniques of asceticism were not ends in themselves but simply tools for developing virtues (Nicodemos, 1989, p. 185).

6. No one system of practice will work for everyone. Each individual has his or her own needs, problems and abilities, so any system of ascetic discipline and prayer must be designed for the individual and balanced, avoiding extremes (Merton, 2005b, pp. 157–158, 220–225; 2006, p. 117).

13.2.3 The Life of Prayer

In the Orthodox view, prayer depends on the support of ascetic practices and disciplines that help to cleanse the passions and allow the mind to engage in deep prayer (e.g., Palamas, 1983, pp. 41–49). Mental discipline and cultivation of qualities like gentleness are needed because of the problem of *logismoi* or evil thoughts such as anger or resentment that arise during prayer. Some of these interfering thoughts are so powerful and out of place—seemingly contrary to nature—that Evagrius spoke of them as *demonic*, a term that did not necessarily refer to a spiritual entity (Hausherr, 1990, pp. 249–255). Self-observation in these cases is particularly important so that one can know the deceptive nature of the thoughts and their source. Reading, working with the hands and **psalmody** or vocal, prayerful recitations from the psalms have a calming effect and help control the problem of distractions (Sinkewicz, 2003; Dysinger, 2005; Kadloubovsky & Palmer, 1992, p. 57). They also help develop virtues like detachment and love, which are antidotes for the anger and spiritual pride that are particularly troublesome for more advanced practitioners. Ideally these practices lead to a state of pure prayer without ceasing, an inner state of detachment and attentiveness to God (Spidlik, 1986, p. 316; 2005, p. 285; Sherwood, 1955, p. 117).

There was considerable flexibility in early prayer practices. Various postures were used included standing with hands raised, kneeling, or seated and listening. There was an emphasis on short prayers said at frequent times during the day. Free prayers were often simply short phrases like the *Kyrie Eleison* ("Lord, have mercy") or even single words expressing our need for God's help (Spidlik, 2005, pp. 76–83; Gould, 1993, pp. 167–169; Merton, 2003c, p. 456; Meyendorff, 1998a, p. 18). These were a way of filling the mind and directing it rather than trying to empty it by force. Short prayers could be repeated, which over time led to a kind of continuous unconscious repetition of the prayer. Especially in larger communities, a formal system of prayer at various hours of the day began to evolve around the 4th century to become what is known today as the *prayer of hours* or the **Daily Office** (Cassian, 1999 pp. 15–39). This schedule also includes times for meeting with a spiritual advisor, communal assembly and prayer, meals, and worship (Sinkewicz, 2003, pp. 42, 51–56).

From the time of the 5th century (John, 1979) people began using the **Jesus Prayer** ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner") as an invocation to guard the soul (McGinn, 2001, pp. 38–44; Ware, 1986b, 2002; Maloney, 1992, p. 116; Anthony, 1966, pp. 84–88; Theophan, 1995, p. 59). The prayer is short and imageless; it can be said during passing moments or repeated continuously in a regular, rhythmical manner. It produces a silent but active, vigilant state, and by forcing out unproductive trains of thought and attachments it produces spiritual freedom. Its focus on Jesus helps make him present in an effective way and the prayer for mercy emphasizes our need for God (Sherwood, 1955, pp. 26–31; Spidlik, 2005, p. 335; Ware, 2003a, 2003b).

13.2.4 Mysticism and the Guarding of the Heart

Orthodox spirituality focuses on the inner unity of the person as the natural state in which we should live. They used the Biblical term **heart** (*kardia*) as representing the ground of the soul, the inner directing center of the person, a unifying principle and symbol of wholeness that affects all aspects of us and is affected by every aspect of ourselves. It is the place where we meet God, so it has a mysterious, unconscious, and transcendent aspect (Spidlik, 1986, pp. 105–106; Maloney, 1992, p. 116; Palamas, 1983, p. 43; Spidlik, 2005, pp. 250–256; Nicodemos, 1989, pp. 153–156; Louchakova, 2007; Ware, 2003a, 2003b). The Desert Fathers, particularly those in the Syrian tradition, understood that the practice of prayer depended upon the attainment of an interior state of the heart that supported it, moving away from attachments and passions that disrupt the proper functioning of our spiritual center (Merton, 2005b, p. 87; Theophan, 1995, p. 59). They described this as a state of **hesychia** or inner calmness, attentiveness, and attention to God that is free from distraction (Gould, 1993, p. 172; Rossi, 2002; Nikodimos & Makarios, 1995, p. 125). This allows the development of a contemplative state of *pure prayer* or **prayer of the heart** that involves the whole person in a feeling of boundlessness and a sense that Divinity is within us (Bartos, 1999, pp. 29–30; Ware, 2003a, 2003c). While

involving concentration, it is also a kind of rejection of thought. In this state, the subject-object dichotomy between God and us is eliminated, and we lose awareness of self and the act of praying. It is a noetic state in that it involves contact with reality, allowing to see our mortality and the illusory nature of some of our ideas (Anthony, 1966, p. 57; Rossi, 2002). In the West, the heart became associated with emotion and this became a focus of prayer (Brock, 1999). It also is central in Islamic Sufism, which developed prayer techniques that resemble those of hesychasm (Thurston, 2005; Dieker, 2005).

Several aspects of practice were designed to foster hesychia including physical solitude, participation in ritual and psalmody, and maintenance of good relationships with others (Gould, 1993, p. 167). Especially important was the practice of *nepsis*, watchfulness or **guarding the heart** from things that could interfere with prayer. This involved vigilant attention to both outside influences or inordinate desires for pleasure, and from our inner imagination, which can dwell on things and magnify our attachments to them (Nicodemos, 1989, pp. 67–85, 107–112). These intruding thoughts could be cut off using an *antirrhesis* or **counter statement**, or using short scripture passages and prayers to help focus the mind against distractions (Spidlik, 2005, pp. 321–326; Kadloubovsky & Palmer, 1992, pp. 31–32). In some writers like Climacus (1979), hesychia was a returning within to seek a state of unity and simplicity or **spiritual poverty** that severed attachments and promoted a listening attitude, opening us to the presence of God, allowing a state of contemplation to develop (Ware, 2003b, 2003c).

In the 14th century, a **psychophysical method** of hesychastic prayer developed that involves the body as well as the mind. In this practice, the individual sits on a stool and recites the Jesus prayer, often in coordination with breathing or heartbeat. A prayer rope or *komboschini* can also be used to develop a regular prayer rhythm. The gaze and thoughts are fixed on the place of the heart to seek God. Physical sensations and feelings of light, warmth, or energy often occur. A clearing of the mind and awareness of the body help us to see more of our true internal state. This type of hesychastic prayer has been compared to yoga and some Islamic Sufi techniques; however, there are differences in content. Also, the aim is different: yoga is a physical technique which tries to bring about a certain result, while hesychasm brings quiet so we can be receptive to God's action and help. Since the psychophysical method involves altering basic bodily processes like breathing, it is recommended that it only be done under the supervision of an experienced master (Spidlik, 2005, pp. 341–346; Kadloubovsky & Palmer, 1992, pp. 74–89; Palamas, 1983, pp. 43–52; Ware, 2003a, 2003b; Bebis, 1989, p. 54; Nicodemos, 1989, pp. 159–168; Meyendorff, 1998a, 1998b; Chryssavgis, 2002).

13.2.5 Icons

An important part of Orthodox spiritual life is the **icon**, an artistic symbol of religious realities. Created in an atmosphere of reverence according to traditional rules and methods, icons serve several purposes. Famous icons like those by Andrei

Fig. 13.1 *The Hospitality of Abraham, by Andrei Rublev.* Photo courtesy of Scala/Art Resource, New York
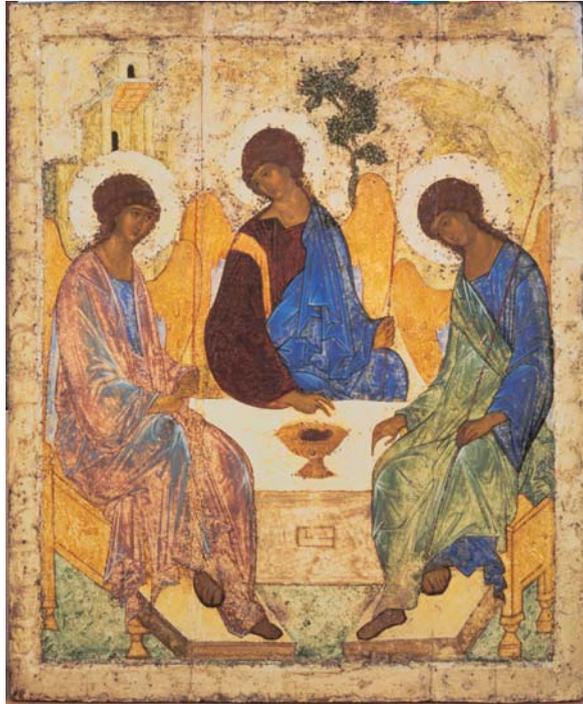
Rublev (See Fig. 13.1 and Box 13.1) convey tradition, providing a visual representation of belief and practice. They are also living, in the sense that they are designed to convey a sense of communion with a sacred presence. In this way they are spiritual objects, pointing not to themselves or the iconographer who created them but to spiritual realities. Since they generally involve pictures of people and places from Biblical and historical narratives, they are seen as witnesses to the incarnated reality of spirituality and its power to transfigure and transform. They also help the viewer to identify with the figures in the narratives. The fact that they fall short of the reality they refer to is a suggestion of the ultimate mystery that lies behind spirituality.

Icons are used to facilitate prayer in homes, as well as in churches. In the home, people often create an icon corner that is dimly lit and illuminate the icon with a vigil candle. This provides something to look at while standing before the icon, praying with eyes open in an attitude of silence. The atmosphere may be difficult to appreciate or even disturbing for the newcomer, as in contemporary society we are accustomed to noise and may find silence difficult. At the least it makes us aware of our busyness and lack of integration. Silence allows for the growth of prayer, a listening attitude and awareness of presence (Ouspensky & Lossky, 1999, pp. 21–36; Martin, 2002; Forest, 1997, 2003).

Box 13.1 A Rublev Icon

The Hospitality of Abraham by Andrei Rublev is probably the best known icon to most modern Western Christians (Williams, 2003, 2004, p. 45). A representation of the story of three angels visiting Abraham—it is seen as an image of the Trinity, three persons and one substance in loving relationship. The presence of angels or physical objects like the table shows an embodied, historical, and narrative aspect of spiritual truth. The minimal aspect of the background provides a setting without detracting from the meaning of the image and the relationship between the viewer and the figures, giving the picture a timeless quality.

The central figure in the icon is generally taken to represent the Son, with the Father to the left, and the Holy Spirit on the right. The circular positioning of the figures shows them to be distinct but of equal rank, and the inclined heads, posture, and gestures indicate peace but also a circular motion and action (Ouspensky & Lossky, 1999, pp. 200–202). The chalice in the middle contains a sacrificial animal, and its position in the center indicates the sacrificial nature of the Trinity's work.

What is important in the icon is not only what is represented but also how it is done. The symbolic values of the colors add to the meaning and impact of the icon: The blue and red clothing worn by the central figure represent heaven, the mystical life, and sacrifice. The gold background conveys sanctity, imperishability, and a sense of divine energy, the uncreated light of God (Forest, 1997, pp. 15–27). In most Western art, depth is shown by making objects in the back smaller to create the illusion of depth. In this icon, perspective is reversed; things in the back are larger which throws the figures forward. This and the open space at the table invite us to join the figures and participate with them in communion (Martin, 2002, pp. 88, 133). However, the figures do not directly face us, introducing mystery.

13.3 Prayer and the Western Contemplative Tradition

Roman Catholicism has developed its own unique forms of the prayer techniques pioneered by the Desert Fathers. In the Catholic tradition, it is common to divide the process of spiritual growth in prayer into four modes: *lectio* or prayerful reading, *meditatio* or meditation, *oratio* or prayerful response, and finally *contemplatio* or contemplation. These categories describe modes of spirituality centered on God that might operate in chronological succession but might also be simultaneous or separated. Growth involves intensification and simplification of our love for God and others, which in turn can result in transformations and a qualitative change in the nature of the prayer experience to a simpler state of absorption and presence,

a willing expression of dependence and acceptance of love (Merton, 2003b, pp. 60–65; Broderick, 1991; von Balthasar, 1986). Thus prayer and the spiritual life can be described as climbing a spiral staircase in which one repeatedly returns to the same place but at a different level (Keating, 1992, p. 106). The flow will differ between individuals and at different times in seemingly unpredictable ways (Martin, 1997, pp. 218–220; Pennington, 2001; Casey, 1995, p. 59).

Lectio divina or divine reading is an ancient practice that is currently expanding in popularity. The intent of *lectio* is to engage the whole person in an experiential listening to God. Ideally, *lectio* is part of a broad pattern of practices and daily habits that develop our attentiveness (Pennington, 1998). In this practice, scriptures such as the psalms, gospels, or other spiritual writings are read slowly and prayerfully, looking for guidance in one's spiritual life and moral applications. The period of *lectio* may begin with prayer, and ends with the person taking a word or thought with them for later meditation (Pennington, 2001, p. 198; Casey, 1995; Spidlik, 2005, pp. 130–145). In **meditatio**, the person praying uses a word, phrase, or idea they have taken from *lectio* and reflects on the meaning it has for them—a meaning that will tell the person something about themselves, about the Divine and what God has to say. When properly done, meditation is a regular practice that requires good physical and emotional health, a supportive environment and attention to posture and breathing. This can lead to **oratio**, a spontaneous, prayerful response of gratitude, love, or need that comes from the heart and establishes a dialogue based on our innermost desires. The basis of true prayer lies in these kinds of desires and our relationship with God (Casey, 1996). Many different procedures such as imaginative visualizations can facilitate *meditatio* and *oratio*, but the process also involves an attitude of openness to receiving guidance and help and a willingness to respond (Flood, 2004, p. 193; Merton, 1971, p. 34; Hall, 1988, pp. 28–43).

13.3.1 Contemplation

Contemplation in the Western tradition has many similarities to its use in Orthodox descriptions and practices, although there are differences in emphases and descriptive language. The Catholic monk Thomas Merton describes contemplation as "an obscure, experiential contact with God beyond the senses and in some way even beyond concepts" (2003b, p. 71; cf. Deikman, 1990). Because it involves a kind of intuitive knowledge and vision that is beyond the intellect or the senses, Western Christians often refer to it as a kind of darkness, a language not typically found in Orthodox writings. Catholic descriptions of contemplation also may have a more emotional quality so that experiences of communion or participation with God are often described in the language of passionate love, involving intense feelings of spiritual longing and an intimate sense of an indwelling God. As a way of life, contemplation is viewed as an abiding state of this union where we live in purity of heart (Pennington, 2001, pp. 82–92; Teresa, 1979, pp. 126–194; cf. Keating, 1992, pp. 14–17; Merton, 2006, pp. 64–67). From a phenomenological view, early stages

of prayer like *lectio*, *meditatio*, or even *oratio* are modes of intentionality that direct our attention toward God (Wright, 2005, p. 135). Contemplation, on the other hand, is a unique state of consciousness that is not intentional and dependent on the self but is a free response to the demand of God. It comes from outside our "horizon of expectation," so it can only be grasped poorly and tentatively. It is asymmetrical as the outside voice has priority, challenging our self-centeredness (Levinas, 1969; Andrews, 2005; Westphal, 2005).

While contemplation can happen at any stage in the spiritual life, it often follows a pattern of development. In the early stages of prayer, the will is active, and there is a reaching out for God. As contemplation progresses, this activity is succeeded by states of intense absorption referred to as **recollection** or the Prayer of Quiet (Welch, 1982, p. 2; Hollenback, 1996, pp. 539–540; Teresa, 1979, pp. 77–84) and then by a more passive or **infused contemplation,** where thoughts and feelings of spiritual consolation come unbidden. These types of higher prayer leave behind the laborious work of meditation and are considered a gift. They can be profoundly transformative, and there is a sense that God is intensely at work within the individual, leading to increasing love and humility (May, 2004, pp. 114–134; Turner, 1995, p. 198; Keating, 1995, pp. 91–92; von Balthasar, 1986, pp. 201–210; Welch, 1996). Painful **dark night experiences** can happen as previously satisfying modes of prayer seem unfulfilling or impossible, and new ways of experiencing God's love take their place (Hall, 1988, p. 47; Mansfield, 1991a; John of the Cross, 1973, pp. 140–142; see Section 11.3.2). Thus, while contemplation ultimately has a healing quality, intensive spiritual development involves some painful experiences. For those with serious emotional problems, or people unwilling to accept the necessary difficulties, attempts at contemplation could be damaging or degenerate into mere self-indulgence (Keating, 1992, pp. 75–77; von Balthasar, 1986, pp. 155–162; Merton, 2003b).

13.3.2 Prayer and the Discovery of Our True Self

Prayer is an interior activity that can bring us into contact with the deepest aspects of ourselves. Contemplative masters like Thomas Merton emphasize that an essential part of genuine prayer is a confrontation with our false self and a discovery of our true one. The **false self** consists of superficial or illusionary ideas about ourselves and the patterns of behavior we mistakenly believe to be essential to us. It is based upon emotional programs and unconscious motivations from early childhood that are reinforced when we identify with cultural shoulds and oughts that are contrary to our true nature. This false self is not free; it fragments us and puts us at odds with reality, others, and our self; because of this, it produces a general feeling of dread, guilt, or anxiety (Pennington, 2001, p. 124; Williams, 2003; Merton, 1973, pp. 97–102; Hall, 1988, p. 43; Keating, 1995, p. 3). We become aware of its falsity in experiences of emptiness, such as loss, impermanence, apparent meaninglessness, or helplessness (Gunn, 2000, pp. 140–154). The **true self** is the real person

Table 13.1 The false and true selves

False self	True self
Unaware of true motives and illusions about self and others	Self-aware, seeks the truth about self and others
Can be objectively described, an empirical object related to others who are also objects	Cannot be completely known, a spiritual subject related to others who are also subjects
Dualistic; sees the world and others as objects to be manipulated for pleasure	Nondualistic; we are a part of the world and should seek unity in love
Built completely around achieving egocentric desires	Built around a sense of receptivity, has no projects
A social construction; the ego	A real person who is discovered
Built around an ideal self, who we would like to be	Built around a real self, who we really are
Blames self and others when illusions are not fulfilled	Accepts self and others as they are
Is not known to God	Is known to God
Not free; tied to compulsive seeking of pleasure or approval	Free to enjoy things but is not bound by them
Fragmented	Unified
Constantly changing emotions	Stable feelings of love
Cannot tolerate mystery	Accepts and appreciates mystery

Source: Merton (2003b, pp. 15–25), Shannon (2000, pp. 120–126), and Merton (1961, p. 166)

hidden under this false exterior (see Table 13.1). Merton (1966, p. 142) describes it as a "virgin point," a deep heart in the soul that is pure and belongs to God (see Box 4.1). It cannot be completely known or objectified, nor is it possible to develop a psychology of it because it does not involve the superficial consciousness that we can reach through any psychological or even spiritual technique. Only God knows the true self in full, and so in the contemplative view the only real way to find the true self is to seek God (Ware, 2002; Shannon, 2000; Merton, 1961, pp. 1–5; Merton, 2003b; Keating, 1992, p. 2). Self-knowledge and spiritual progress thus go hand-in-hand, a view also held in Sufism (Chittick, 2005).

In the contemplative view, we must dismantle the false self although this is not an easy task. The first stage of the process is active confrontation with illusions about ourselves and expansion of awareness through prayer. This will lead us to confront problematic thinking, actions or behavior in relationships, and help us see our need for others (Casey, 1996, p. 15). However, the patterns of the false self are deeply ingrained on both conscious and unconscious levels, so a kind of resistance or **spiritual warfare** can occur as we begin to dismantle it, including feelings of anger, anxiety, or loss. Experiences of trust and support can assist in this process (Hall, 1988, pp. 2–19; Pennington, 2001, p. 104). Modern contemplatives use psychological models like object relations theory to help understand this false self and its resistance to change (Gunn, 2000, pp. 190–191; see Section 5.4.3). Contemplative prayer can provide healing by allowing access to unconscious levels (Keating, 1995; Shannon, 2000, p. 170). Contemplative thought parallels Buddhist ideas as both strive to eliminate the false self; it differs from Buddhism because it holds that there is a true self that can be discovered.

Merton and many contemplative authors argue that one of the chief obstacles to finding the true self is modern culture with its busyness and intrusions (Pennington, 2001, pp. 458–462). For Merton, the distractions of modern technological society increase rather than decrease illusions and lead to complacency and apathy or a search for more intense diversions with destructive potential. Contemporary life encourages materialism, a focus on immediate gratification, a lack of balance, and excessive competition that promotes division (Merton, 1985, p. 178; Shannon, 2000, pp. 265–268). Contemplation, on the other hand, rejects dependence on materialism and is not interested in escape; it tries to engage life and confront our fears and limitations. It manifests itself in an attitude of simplicity, humility, faithfulness, and love in small, everyday matters, and an awareness of presence and union with God in our life activities (von Balthasar, 1986, p. 137). This sense of identification and compassion can motivate activities of peacemaking and justice (Kilcourse, 2004; Merton, 1960, p. 73). Attachments such as needs for power and control—including spiritual and religious power—must be reduced as these inhibit our freedom and spiritual seeking (Hall, 1988; Merton, 2003b).

13.3.3 Centering Prayer

A number of techniques have been developed to facilitate the progression from *lectio* to contemplation. An imageless and less active method that has become popular is **centering prayer** (Pennington, 2001, 2004; Keating, 1992). It is designed to reduce obstacles to contemplation and intimacy with God by establishing interior silence, which enables us to become aware of our spiritual level of being separate from the superficial false self. The method was developed by the Cistercian monk Thomas Keating, but it draws on materials from both the Orthodox and medieval Catholic traditions.

In centering prayer the practitioner chooses a prayer word of 1–2 syllables that expresses love and desire for God and their intention to consent to God's presence. Then twice daily with eyes closed the person has a 20-minute prayer time that includes (1) an initial buffer time of several minutes for quieting down from daily events, (2) repeating the prayer word without particularly attending to it, or when possible simply remaining silent before God, and (3) a winding-down time including an active prayer like the Lord's prayer as a way of connecting the quiet time to our life. Details like place, time, or posture are important but should not be rigidly applied. Breath control can also be used, but simplicity is usually preferred. The prayer is generally combined with other kinds of individual spiritual practices like *lectio* and communal religious activities.

The beginner quickly discovers that mental silence is not easy to find, as they are plagued by various thoughts about daily affairs, self-reflections, or fantasies. Sometimes, emotionally charged thoughts and images from the unconscious appear. If not disturbing, they should be ignored and allowed to pass by without notice. After all, wandering thoughts are part of reality, and forcing thoughts from the mind, even if successful, just reinforces the false self that cannot listen but must always be in

control. Distressing thoughts should not be ignored but embraced and experienced, allowing the pain or uncomfortable feeling to become a prayer word that is lifted up to God.

13.3.4 The Spiritual Exercises

A more active, effortful, and systematic approach to prayer is the **Spiritual Exercises** of Ignatius Loyola (Fig. 13.2). The Exercises were based on his own personal experiences and practices during a critical time in his spiritual growth and formation (Meissner, 1992, p. 87), and are intended to provide a "concrete way in which Christianity can become a living religion in us" (Rahner, 1965, p. 11). They are designed for people with a solid religious faith and relative freedom from psychological problems, who desire to deepen their relationship with God and gain additional inner freedom or a sense of direction in their lives (Veale, 1991a; Mansfield, 1991a; Grogan, 1991c).

General approach. In contemporary practice, a spiritual director (see Section 14.1.1) gives the Exercises individually, either as a concentrated experience in a retreat setting, or as a more extended process while the person remains involved in their regular daily life. Most retreat directors adapt the Exercises to the needs and circumstances of the individual, so sometimes there is only vague connection between the text of the Exercises and what happens (Lonsdale, 2000, p. 18; Sheldrake, 1991; Mariani, 2002, p. 81; Ivens, 1991). The focus of the Exercises is primarily relational, about intimacy and love of God or others rather than self-actualization or achieving better problem-solving strategies (Barry, 2001, pp. 4–5). The Exercises provide a system for meditating on scriptures and Christian themes (Ignatius, 1978, p. 19) with the following goals:

- *Self-examination that leads to a greater awareness of our real desires* and inner feelings, as well as weaknesses, attachments, and conflicts that limit our freedom (Barry, 2001, pp. 27–55; Hughes, 1991)

Fig. 13.2 *Ignatius of Loyola.* Roman Catholic saint and founder of the Jesuit order, Ignatius produced a system of spiritual exercises that are still widely used within Christianity. Image courtesy of the Society of Jesus

- *Discernment and making decisions* that build the relationship with God, as well as revise our views of the Divine based on personal experience (Houdek, 1996, pp. 128–131; Broderick, 1991; Meissner, 1992, pp. 97–99; Skinnider, 1991)
- *Promoting union with God* through identification with Christ and redefining our own identity to be like that of Christ (Barry, 2001, p. 124)
- *Conversion of heart* leading to a new quality of life and way of service (Ivens, 1998, p. 1; Buckley, 1995; Broderick, 1991). The social implications of the Exercises are stressed by many contemporary writers and were important to Ignatius as well (Shea, 1991; McVerry, 1991; Hellwig, 1991; Lonsdale, 2000, p. 51). Thus, the Exercises have a strong orientation toward action, which is less emphasized in some other currents of Christian spirituality (Veale, 1991b).

Role of director. The role of the director is important in the Exercises. They pray for the individual, provide appropriate directions and help the directee reflect on their experience, trying to help the person discover their authentic desires. In order to prepare, directors need to have done the Exercises themselves. They also need appropriate experience, listening skills and knowledge, and to be in personal spiritual direction. The director must help the retreatant find an appropriate setting for prayer and meditation, set an appropriate pace, and be alert to signs that the retreatant is ready to move on to the next stage of the Exercises (Mariani, 2002; Grogan, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c; Barry, 2001, p. 70). Some will progress though the entire Exercises, while others may not progress beyond the first week; either can be good (Sheldrake, 1991).

Process and Experience. The Exercises involve general activities that are repeated throughout the process. These include the *particular examen* that monitors and works to change a specific personal defect, and the *general examen* of conscience aiming for overall personal renewal (Ignatius, 1978, pp. 31–32, 38). There are also specific meditations, where the person is asked to picture a scene and engage in a colloquy or conversation with its characters while attending to emotional reactions. Multisensory imagination is encouraged to engage both mind and body (Savage, 2001; Herrera, 2000). The intensive use of imagination is powerful and promotes a sense of immediacy and intimacy, opening the person to new possibilities (Byrne, 1991; Wickham, 1991; Barry, 2001, pp. 95–103; Mariani, 2002).

Discernment. A distinctive feature of the Exercises is a complex system for **discernment**, or identifying spiritual movements and the will of God. Discernment involves looking for what is spiritually authentic. It promotes freedom to follow God and involves attention to external circumstances and the opinions of others, as well as internal senses and an awareness of the potential for self-deception (Ivens, 1998, pp. 205–208; Lonsdale, 2000, pp. 91–92). A primary tool of the rules for discernment is learning to identify *consolations* or things that move us toward God and inner unity, as well as *desolations* or things that move us away and produce inner confusion, restlessness, or division (Ignatius, 1978, pp. 152–159; Buckley, 1991; Barry, 2001, p. 130). Ignatius thought that the emotional signs of authentic consolation depended on the person's level of development. For those beginning the

spiritual life in the purgative phase, things that promote development will be painful and perhaps trouble the conscience, while those that move away from God will be pleasurable. In the later illuminative phase, the opposite will be true. In the more advanced stages, additional rules need to be followed that deal with more subtle deceptions (Herrera, 2000; Newman, 1996; Ignatius, 1978, pp. 152–153, 160–164; Lonsdale, 1991).

Structure. The Exercises are divided into four "weekly" periods. The first week marks the purgative stage of the Exercises. The focus is on developing a realistic knowledge of ourselves and others so that we can improve our relationships and better respond to God's movement in our life (Barry, 2001, pp. 137–142; Veale, 1991a). The first week tries to promote habits of self-reflection, as well as encourage giving up attachments that limit our freedom and ability to respond to God. This is facilitated by a number of meditations, as well as confessions of how personal sins and failings have negatively affected others (Ignatius, 1978, p. 30; Meissner, 1992, p. 91; Rahner, 1965, pp. 69–74; St. Louis, 1991). The second week contains meditations on the life of Christ designed to promote experiential understanding and increase our identification with Christ. Its intent is to call the retreatant toward a decision or recommitment known as an *election* that will enable the person to further develop their relationship to God and service toward others. The third week involves meditation on the crucifixion, identifying our suffering and struggles with that of Christ (Mansfield, 1991b; Broderick, 1991). The fourth week culminates in the Contemplation to Attain Love (Ignatius, 1978, pp. 119–122), where the retreatant asks for an intimate knowledge of God's gifts. At the end, the director helps develop a plan for continuing the habits, insights, and commitments from the Exercises (Mariani, 2002, pp. 260–270).

Jung on the Exercises. While Jung never observed the Exercises, he was interested in them as a means to transformation that he thought had parallels to some Yoga and Buddhist texts (Jung, 1977, 1978). He produced a series of lectures on the Exercises that illuminate but suffer from many of the same problems as his selective use of Eastern texts; for instance, he neglected the entire last half of the Exercises. Jung criticized the Exercises as reflecting the Western attitude about prayer that focuses on outer reality. He also rejected the idea that a person like Christ would suffer for someone else, although he approved of the Ignatian idea that suffering can be formative and results from situations of conflict. He was more approving of the Ignatian emphases on identification with Christ, as Jung saw Christ as a symbol for human totality that promotes individuation. He also thoroughly approved of the awareness of the sinful potential of every individual that can be found in the Exercises. He noted that modern society has widely rejected the idea of a sinful nature and that most people think of themselves as basically good. He argued that this idea is a kind of arrogance at odds with the personal unhappiness and social catastrophes of the 20th century, which demonstrate that people are also capable of the worst vices and often deceive themselves about this fact.

13.4 Christian Protestant and Modern Views of Prayer

13.4.1 Martin Luther

Prayer in the Christian Protestant tradition is quite diverse, but many of its principles can be found in the writings of the great Reformation writer Martin Luther (1483–1546). Teachings on prayer are scattered throughout Luther's writings (2002, see especially Volumes 10–14 and 21). He himself had a strong personal prayer life and is said to have prayed the Lord's Prayer eight times a day. He also had some experiences healing others of illnesses through prayer (Berg, 2002). While he thought that basic moral discipline and other spiritual practices like fasting and doing acts of kindness could be appropriate if done for the right reasons, prayer occupied a special place in his vision of the daily life of the Christian (Wengert, 2004).

For Luther, real or earnest prayer is "the lifting up of heart or mind to God" (Luther, 1969a) and is one of the main aspects of the religious life. In particular, prayer is an activity of the heart involving the whole mind and body, including our thoughts, feelings and desires. Real spiritual prayer should be passionate, confident, and reflect our innermost yearnings and desires. He believed that this kind of prayer is essential but difficult, and ultimately it is a gift of God. Luther resisted the idea that prayer or religious practice would have any meaning or effect if used mechanically. In his view, this kind of prayer simply produces discord, pride, and misery.

Luther believed that spiritual practices like prayer played an essential role in personal discernment, learning about God and understanding the Scriptures (Peters, 2000, p. 17). Luther rejected the idea that knowledge of God could be gained by reason alone or without a clear view of our personal situation. Our experiences in prayer help us by teaching us about God and ourselves (Lohse, 1999, p. 41). Prayer also helps us understand Scripture, which Luther believed was the foundational source of our knowledge about God, and so he encouraged the practice of *meditatio* based on the prayerful reading and rereading of scriptures. This leads to *oratio*—our prayer response to reading or personal need—where we encounter the Holy Spirit who enlightens us and opens up the real meaning of the scriptures (Luther, 2002, pp. 34, 285–286; 1969a). In return, the Bible also opens and supports our prayer life. The promises and works of God discussed in the Bible strengthen our faith for prayer, and make us aware of our need and the depth of God's helping response to it (1969b). This crushes our pride and banishes confidence in the attachments of our old way of life, but we should not dwell too much on it as that leads to despair. Rather, we must seek the help and forgiveness offered by Christ, freeing our conscience so that we can confidently follow God.

Luther thought that prayer was also connected to our learning about God through what he called Anfechtung or *tentatio*. **Anfechtung** is a complex concept, rendered by different translators as distress, anxiety, testing, assault, or temptation. Anfechtung is a kind of experiential learning based on two basic attitudes: a feeling of need

and dependence or poverty of spirit, and faith or hope that God is a refuge who will accept us, respond to our need, and keep us from despair. It was an essential part of Luther's own spiritual experience (1969a; Senn, 1986). Anfechtung is both an exercise of faith and a gift of God that allows us to interpret suffering in a positive manner so that it will build us up and help us know ourselves and God. Eventually it produces consolation and hope, fighting despair, and moving us forward in sanctification (Nestingen, 2002; Scaer, 1983). Prayer was not about badgering God for things but a gift of confidence and finding hope as we receive forgiveness and comfort during trials (Berg, 2002). Severe trials can thus be an asset for prayer as they give us power and longing in prayer, driving us in our suffering to seek Christ and the help that is available.

Luther believed that genuine prayer should be matched by attitudes and actions compatible with a Christian way of life. He had little use for people who prayed to make an impression on others or who did not follow in deeds what they prayed about in words. People who believed themselves pious but whose behavior did not match were profaners of prayer and "the worst and most harmful people in Christendom" (1969a, p. 30). He also saw pride and anger as special problems. Prayer is supposed to be based upon and promote a penitent condition, but we cannot gain mercy if we do not need it. Pride leads to arrogance, while what we need is to focus on our own sins and forgive those of others (Sander, 1998; Luther, 1969a).

Luther was a popular teacher of prayer (1968b, 1969a; Russell, 2002). Along with encouraging regular prayer practices, Luther taught a relational attitude toward prayer. The center of our prayer should not be ourselves but God or the people we pray for. He also tried to present a flexible method that could be used by many different people at various stages in their prayer life. For instance, while he seems to have preferred simple mental prayer, he also encouraged people to use verbal exterior prayer as a teaching tool and to prevent stray thoughts. He thought the Lord's Prayer provided an excellent model, because it expressed a feeling of dependence and a need for deliverance, although he supplemented it with psalms and expansions of each of its specific petitions. He also encouraged *lectio* and placed a great stress on intercessory prayer, encouraging people to pray not for a single individual or situation but for everyone.

Luther's treatment of prayer hits many themes developed by Orthodox or Catholic writers: the need of prayer from the heart, participation of the whole person, and the idea that prayer is often a response to some inner condition that we express to God. On the other hand, there are also differences. For Luther, prayer is more about expression, letting ourselves and our needs be known to God. It is a kind of speech. This was especially true of some of his later writings on prayer that were more focused on saying petitionary prayers for help with physical needs (Robinson, 1999). This is not to say that Luther neglected the listening and learning aspect of prayer—just that he did not emphasize it and preferred to stress its affective quality. More recent treatments of prayer by Protestant authors have returned to a broader picture of prayer, and contemplative practices are becoming popular once again among Protestant Christians.

13.4.2 Modern Views of Prayer

Psychological treatments of prayer have generally followed Protestant views that stress the expressive aspect of prayer. This can be seen for instance in the work of the early psychologist of religion Friedrich Heiler (1932), a convert to Lutheranism from Catholicism who produced the first major psychological treatment of prayer. For Heiler, prayer is speech with another as well as oneself that involves an awareness of dependence and trust. Because of this it is social in its essence and will become difficult or impossible if God becomes depersonalized. Prayer begins as an emotional discharge or outpouring from the heart but can lose its force if it becomes fixed, formulaic, and impersonal or is performed simply as a custom. Although he acknowledged that there is a great variety and mixture of prayer types, Heiler argued that prayer falls into two general categories—*mystical* and *prophetic* (see Table 13.2). While he recognized the presence of mystical prayer in the Christian and other religious traditions, he tended to view expressive and prophetic prayer as a higher form.

Heiler's classical typology is partly confirmed in factor analytic work by Ladd and Spilka (2002), who found that prayer had three dimensions. The first was an awareness factor, which included concern for others and self-awareness. Prayers of confession were described by this factor. The second dimension was an upward reaching, which included sacramental and ritual prayer, as well as quiet restful prayer times and seeking solace. The final factor was an outward reaching, including petitionary prayer. While the third factor clearly describes expressive or prophetic prayer, the second factor, as well as aspects of the first, appears to represent more receptive or mystical types.

Later psychological treatments of prayer have also focused on its expressive aspect. For instance, the Jungian psychologist Ann Ulanov (Ulanov & Ulanov, 1982) calls prayer "primary speech," an expression of who we are that begins early in infancy with our response to emotions and desires. In this view, the enemies of prayer are anything that breaks the link between our desires and prayer: dishonesty about our true desires, fear or doubt that leads us to avoid expressing our desires, or set and frivolous prayer. Strong feelings like aggression can in the right circumstances become an enabling force for prayer. As we progress through prayer, we may discover that our true desires are greater than any specific thing; limited

Table 13.2 Characteristics of mystical and prophetic prayer (Heiler, 1932)

Mystical prayer	Prophetic prayer
Denial or dissolution of self	Desiring a self that does God's will
Denial of the world	Challenging the world, with an ethical focus on others
Passive, resigned	Active
Subjective	Objective, historical, universally binding
Individual	Social
Monistic	Dualistic
Experience of union	Experience of emotion, struggle
Morality prepares for union	Morality is valuable in itself

attachments do not satisfy. Prayer thus allows us to help sort out our desires and find what truly satisfies us.

While Ulanov emphasized the expressive aspect of prayer, she also implicitly recognizes that prayer is more than this. Since prayer is relational and directed to God, she argues that our prayer life is affected by our image of the Divine. This image is not the reality, as sometimes it reflects past experience or expectations that give us an unrealistic view of God. What we need is a willingness to see a God who may be the same or different from these images or what we have been taught. Ulanov also argues that fantasy plays a constructive role in prayer. It helps avoid daydreaming or mechanical repetition, and it opens us to new possibilities, assisting us to better understand and express ourselves. It thus can have a transfiguring quality.

13.4.3 Empirical Studies of Prayer

Empirical studies of Christian prayer date to the late 1800s, but the quality and range of the studies has generally been poor. Scholars reviewing research in the area (e.g., Masters, 2005; Brown, 1994; Krause, Chatters, Meltzer, & Morgan, 2000; Finney & Malony, 1985) have a number of complaints, including the following:

- Overly simplistic views of prayer that ignore the complexity of techniques and treat prayer as a coping mechanism asking for things rather than a multidimensional practice
- Use of models that ignore differences between individual and group prayer
- Use of measures that focus just on frequency of prayer without reference to what is happening during the prayer time
- Lack of attention to mystical or contemplative prayer practices which offer parallels with Eastern meditative techniques (Hood, Morris, & Watson, 1989)
- Methodological problems with sampling, control groups, and study design
- Lack of a coherent theoretical or theological framework.

Despite the poor quality of studies on prayer, the empirical literature does provide some useful information. We know that prayer is a frequent practice, with about 3/4 of the US population praying at least once a week (Bader et al., 2006). We also know that while prayer can be found among all groups of people, it is clearly a religious practice that does not thrive outside of that environment. For instance, among nonchurchgoing UK teenagers, only 3.3% reported daily prayer and 66.8% indicated that they never prayed, while 35.7% of churchgoers reported daily prayer and only 12.6% reported not praying outside of church (Francis & Evans, 2001a, 2001b). European research suggests that prayer is most often motivated by problems and need for help or support, and it becomes more likely in emotionally intense situations such as a life-threatening emergency (Janssen, de Hart, & den Draak, 1990; Vergote, 1997, pp. 56–57).

Empirical studies have demonstrated that while prayer of the expressive or prophetic type is common, contemplative or meditative prayer practices are also

frequent, at least in the US population. Using a large community sample, Poloma and Pendleton (1989, 1991) found four main types of prayer:

- *Meditative prayer*, including simple listening, adoration, quietly thinking about God, or experiencing a sense of presence; this type of prayer appears to be related to higher levels of subjective well-being (Maltby, Lewis, & Day, 2008)
- *Ritualist prayer*, including reciting written or memorized prayers
- *Petitionary prayer*, asking for things for self, friends, and relatives
- *Colloquial prayer*, a conversation with God seeking guidance or forgiveness, expressing thanksgiving, or talking about the relationship.

Petitionary and colloquial prayer are mostly expressive types of prayer, but meditative prayer is clearly a more mystical type and was common in their sample. Frequent occurrence of more contemplative types of prayer has also been found in other populations (cf. Ladd & Spilka, 2002). From a theological standpoint, the kind of meditative prayer of praise described here is especially significant, as it offers a way of saying something about a God who is beyond description (Gschwandtner, 2005). There is some evidence that personality characteristics influence one's preferred type of prayer (Francis & Robbins, 2008).

Expressive prayer can probably be divided into subtypes. Laird and colleagues (Laird, Snyder, Rapoff, & Green, 2004) used a multidimensional prayer inventory to distinguish between *problem-focused* prayer involving supplication or confession and *emotion-focused* prayer like adoration and thanksgiving (cf. Section 10.2.1). These types of prayer can be spontaneous or involve reading from expressive texts such as the Psalms (Driver, 2002, p. 85). Laird believes that emotion-focused prayer is more likely to be used by those with chronic problems or in situations where they have little control. It is a seeking for security, perhaps at the expense of freedom (Anthony, 1966, p. 27). Both types of prayer have moderate to strong correlations with intrinsic but not extrinsic religiosity. Authors like Hood (e.g., Hood et al., 1989) have argued, based on their studies, that intrinsics are more likely to attribute religious significance to prayer experiences and thus to have a different phenomenological—perhaps more mystical—experience of prayer.

While the effect of prayer on God is a topic outside the competence of science, empirical studies can illuminate the effects of prayer on those who engage in the practice (Menninger, 1954). Poloma and Pendleton (1989, 1991) examined the relationship between prayer practices and a variety of measures of mood, satisfaction, and well-being. They found prayer frequency negatively correlated with happiness and positively correlated with religious satisfaction. However, positive prayer experiences like sensing an answer had small positive correlations with life satisfaction, existential well-being, happiness and religious satisfaction. Interestingly, these correlations differed according to the kind of prayer. They found that meditative prayer was correlated with existential well-being and religious satisfaction, as well as feelings of closeness to God and a sense of purpose to life. Colloquial prayer was correlated with happiness. On the other hand, petitionary prayer had no correlations with well-being or mood, and ritual prayer had a small positive correlation with negative affect. They believe that unhappy people use petitionary prayer to feel better

but that they typically have few prayer experiences and thus experience little help, while those who pray frequently and use meditative forms of prayer are more likely to have positive experiences. These results parallel those of Finney and Malony (1985) who found that mental health had a mixed or negative relation with verbal prayer but a positive relation with contemplative prayer. This relationship needs to be viewed in the context of the person's overall coping styles, as European studies (e.g., Banziger, van Uden, & Janssen, 2008) have found a connection between religious types of prayer and collaborative or deferring coping styles. Overall, cross-sectional surveys report low but positive correlations (about 0.3) between prayer and life satisfaction and feelings of purpose for both churchgoers and non-church-goers. This is also found in longitudinal studies where previous prayer practices are found to predict subsequent positive effects on a variety of measures. However, Robbins, Francis, and Edwards (2008) found that personality characteristics of the people praying may account for much of this effect. A number of studies have been devoted to looking at health benefits and have found some positive results (e.g., Francis, Robbins, Lewis, & Barnes, 2008), although this is not consistent, and the methodology of these studies is very problematic (see Section 10.1.2). A number of pathways by which prayer may affect health have been hypothesized, including (1) placebo effect, (2) altering focus and attitudes toward the illness, and (3) activating natural or supernatural processes of healing (cf. Breslin & Lewis, 2008).

Some literature suggests that the helpful effects of prayer are stronger in more difficult situations. For instance, Mary Robinson and her colleagues (Robinson, Thiel, Backus, & Meyer, 2006) have studied spirituality in the parents of terminally ill children on an intensive care unit and found that prayer was reported as one of the most helpful ways of coping with the illness and impending loss.

13.4.3.1 Concepts of Prayer

Conceptions of prayer appear to change and become more sophisticated with development. In an older study that draws upon Piagetian concepts, Long, Elkind, and Spilka (1967) found that child conceptions of prayer went through three stages. In the first stage, children aged 5–7 were found to have a vague conception of prayer without a clear conception of how their needs might differ from those of God. In the second stage, children aged 7–9 had a clearer conception of what is involved in prayer, a view that it involves verbal activity and that the needs of the child are clearly differentiated from those of God. In the third stage beginning around age 10, the child develops a more abstract conception of prayer as an internal activity, a two-way communication between the child and the Divine. Through the process there was a movement toward more altruistic desires and a more meaningful involvement of feelings in prayer.

Research on prayer in adolescence, while limited, suggests that in the teenage years people begin to develop individual styles of prayer that vary in terms of intimacy and intensity. Prayer becomes a talking *with* rather than *at* God, and a sense of presence develops. In adolescence, the most common forms of prayer appear

to be petition for self and family, thanksgiving, and prayer about relationships (McKinney & McKinney, 1999; Scarlett & Perriello, 1991, pp. 65–66). Some studies have found a negative correlation between prayer frequency and identity moratorium, indicating that frequent prayer is associated with resolution of identity issues.

Data about conceptions of prayer in adulthood is rather sparse. One fairly recent study (Krause et al., 2000) explored conceptions of prayer in late-life White and African Americans using focus groups. They found

1. Ideas about how prayer operates and is answered related to the overall belief system of the individual and their view of God. Some believed prayers are never answered, but it is helpful to pray anyway. Most believed that answers to prayer depend on the attitude and actions of person doing the praying, as well as the nature of the request. They believed that you need to wait for an answer to prayer and that when it comes you will get what is most needed, not necessarily what you asked for originally.
2. Interviewees thought there were significant differences between group and individual prayers. They saw group prayers as dealing with collective rather than individual concerns and that they were beneficial in a number of unique ways, including increasing awareness about the needs of others and producing special experiences of love and unity. They thought that group prayers were likely to be answered and that they helped the people praying, as well as the object of prayer.
3. Most felt that the use of prayer during difficult times such as turning things over to God was not at all a passive response; it is an active surrender of the outcome and a move to differentiate what cannot be changed. This allows you to focus energy on what can be changed and disengage from the rest.

13.5 Meditation: Eastern Perspectives

While psychologists have largely avoided the serious study of Christian prayer, meditation has been an important focus of investigation. It is difficult to define meditation, as different religious traditions use the term in different ways. As we have seen, the Christian tradition often uses the term to refer to quiet reflection and thinking (Driskill, 1989). Eastern traditions do not always use the word **meditation**, but when they do, it typically refers to a practice designed to develop voluntary control over concentration and awareness (Hollenback, 1996, p. 94; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). The Christian concept of contemplation is probably closer to the Eastern idea of meditation as both offer access to a kind of transitional space, although there are important differences as well (Pennington, 2001, p. 20; Finn, 1992; Driskill, 1989). Research by psychologists has largely ignored Christian equivalents of meditation, and so psychological definitions are usually based on Eastern practices.

Meditation has become increasingly common in Western settings, with an estimated 10 million practitioners currently in the US (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). It is common to divide meditations into two types, **concentrative** where there is a focus

on an object such as a mantra or image, and passive, receptive, or **mindfulness** types of meditation where one simply tries to be aware of the present moment. They can be distinguished according to whether the meditator is trying to observe or modify their cognitive processes. In general, meditations related to yoga are more concentrative in focus, while most kinds of Buddhist meditation emphasize mindfulness (Murata et al., 2004; Shapiro, 1982; Engler, 2003; Waelde, 2003; Newberg & Iversen, 2003; Laughlin, McManus, d'Aquili, 1993, p. 147).

13.5.1 Classical Buddhist Meditation

Psychologists have been particularly interested in approaches to meditation based on classical **Theravada** Buddhist practices. These are found in the *Tripitaka* compilation of early Buddhist teachings, as well as the *Visuddhimagga* (Buddhaghosa, 1999) and other commentaries (e.g., Anuruddha, 2000). Classical Buddhist practice is built upon a sophisticated psychology that sees the origin of suffering in two interconnected problems: (1) cravings for material objects or conditions that lead to clinging and attachment, and (2) ignorance. In their view, undeveloped consciousness is sensual, rootless and unstable, or controlled by defilements or **klesas**, things like greed, hate, and delusion that tie people to suffering. Freedom from suffering requires purification from these cravings and removal of ignorance.

The first type of purification undertaken involves lifestyle, virtue, and character development. As in Christianity, Buddhists believe that some actions and wrong behavior (such as materialism) increase suffering, while an ethical transformation and the development of virtue are prerequisites for spiritual development and higher levels of meditation (Brown, 1986; Hayes, 2003; Putuwar, 1991; Marek, 1988). Development of virtue does not happen automatically through meditative or mystical experience (Butler, 2003, p. xlv). Rather it involves establishing a number of habits and patterns of conduct through (1) restraint from immoral acts like killing; (2) proper verbal and bodily conduct, including loving-kindness toward all living things; (3) "purification of livelihood" by avoiding certain kinds of occupations; and (4) avoiding exposure to sights and sounds that distract the mind and foster cravings. The *Visuddhimagga* counsels a middle path that avoids severe asceticism and encourages moderate practices such as simplicity in food or clothing and willingness to live a more solitary life.

The eventual goal of early Buddhist practice is to produce the purification necessary for the development of insight or **vipassana**. There are two approaches to vipassana. In **calm meditation** (*samathayana*), concentration is developed though a meditation and purification process that provides a basis for insight. In **pure insight meditation** (*suddhavipassanaayana*), the meditator contemplates the ever-changing flow of their own mental experience. The Buddha himself used the first approach, but contemporary Buddhism tends to favor the second as more uniquely Buddhist in contrast to concentrative techniques similar to yoga. However, both are part of the Buddhist tradition (King, 1980, pp. 15–48).

13.5.1.1 Calm Meditation

Calm meditation involves a set of concentrative techniques that lead to states of absorption or **samadhi**, which involves unified or one-pointed concentration (**ekaggata**) on an object. This helps to eliminate distractions, calm the mind, and help the meditator reach a state of equanimity or detachment from feelings that provides a basis for insight. Classical Buddhist calm or concentrative meditation begins with sitting in the lotus position in a quiet place while focusing on breathing and contemplating things like our mental life, and the impermanence of all things. Working under an experienced teacher, persons are also given a meditation subject that matches their temperament and problems. Those of more speculative mind should avoid thoughts and focus on the body and breathing (King, 1980, p. 72), while those fighting anger could be helped by contemplation of peaceful topics or meditations on **kasinas**, things like a clay disk or colors that can serve as objects for visualization.

As the meditator becomes more advanced in absorption concentration they experience a series of **jhanas** or modes of consciousness that help overcome hindrances to practice such as sensual desire, ill will, sloth, and restlessness. The *Visuddhimagga* uses a four-stage model. The first two stages involve the acquisition and eventual surpassing of applied thought (which directs the mind to objects) and sustained thought (which keeps thought in place). The latter stages involve the development of mindfulness, detachment, positive emotional states, and supernatural powers such as acute sensory abilities or recollection of past lives. In each jhana, the achievements of previous stages are rejected as inadequate, and a new level of development is reached allowing us to experience reality beyond our normal perception (King, 1980, p. 41).

13.5.1.2 Mindfulness Meditation

An important concept in Buddhist psychology is **mindfulness** (*sati*). Mindfulness actually refers to a number of related concepts (Flood, 2004, p. 138). First, like concentration, mindfulness is an important mental ability. It involves full awareness and attentiveness to the present and assists the spiritual seeker in many ways (Newman, 1996). Second, mindfulness refers to a steady guarding of the mind that provides a foundation for moral development. At the level of virtue, mindful awareness helps persons exercise mental restraint so that they do not attend to things that may become objects of craving, freeing them to develop the concentration and other kinds of skills necessary for advanced meditation. Third, mindfulness is a technique of meditation in which the individuals "enters directly into the mindful contemplation of the changing mental and material processes in his own experience" (Anuruddha, 2000, p. 348). It produces a mental state that stands between total concentration, on the one hand, and daydreaming, on the other. Mindfulness is accompanied by increasing control over attention and balance of mental and emotional factors, and can lead to important insights about the nature of reality. Some research suggests that these

classical descriptions of meditation fit well with the experiences of modern medita-
tors who undertake mindfulness meditation (Brown & Engler, 1986b).

Newman (1996) has suggested that there are similarities between mindfulness
and the practice of the Ignatian Exercises. In both practices, there is a direction
of attention to emotion and thought. They also agree in the belief that emotions
have a cognitive component and thus can become disordered or mistaken and
become the basis of cravings or attachments. Both attempt to transform these
disordered emotions through insight or discernment, working to break habit pat-
terns. However, there are also differences. The Exercises are more concentra-
tion and content oriented. Rather than *reducing* affect and desire, they are about
directing it toward God.

While psychologists and many Buddhists (especially Western ones) make a firm
distinction between concentrative and mindfulness meditation techniques, and asso-
ciate Buddhism with the latter, in fact the distinction is not so clear. Early Buddhist
meditation systems are in fact a combination of parts of concentrative yoga prac-
tice and metaphysics with Buddhist innovations (King, 1980). Mindfulness requires
the ability to exercise some control over attention and the will, and concentration
requires the application of mindfulness. Characterizing Buddhist meditation as
"mindful" and not "concentrative" is especially questionable with regard to Tibetan
Buddhism, which employs many tantric techniques with a concentrative focus
(Newman, 1996, p. 35; Dasgupta, 1974).

13.5.1.3 Development of Insight (Vipassana)

At the end of calming meditation, one enters the level of **supramundane
consciousness** and the paths of liberation. Consciousness at this level is developed
through applications of mindfulness and other techniques that promote insight or
vipassana, which helps eliminate attachments and develops the faculty of wisdom
"knowing things as they really are" (Anuruddha, 2000, p. 90). In this type of medi-
tation, one attends to the changeability of mind, matter, and body, leading to an intu-
itive perception of reality as impermanent and the self as nonexistent. Its effect is to
develop balance and break up aggregates of clinging and eliminate defilements or
attachments, while hopefully avoiding attachment to the experiences of tranquility
or unity that can result. While these insights are often reached after passing through
the various jhanas, some are able to bypass these stages and reach them through
sukkavipassaka or **bare insight**, although their mental and emotional experience of
insight will be different.

In Buddhist psychology and metaphysics, a key idea is that what we perceive to
be the self or enduring center of our being is "empty" and does not exist, for there is
no "knower" or "experiencer" behind our consciousness. This idea is based in part
on the Buddhist **doctrine of dependent origin**. In this view, reality consists not of
some Kantian **noumena** but is a matrix of multiple dependent origins and causal
chains; it is a **conditioned reality** (see Sections 2.2.3 and 3.2.3). All conscious states
(*cittas*) and mental factors are part of this conditioned reality. As we examine our
thoughts and actions, we can see their contextual nature, how they come and go,

lacking permanence, and how cravings or compulsions for things lead to unhappiness (Newman, 1996). If a person were able to achieve complete detachment and leave behind the entanglements of craving they would be in an immaterial and unconditioned realm arrived at through knowledge. In Buddhist thought, this unconditioned realm is **nirvana** and is the ultimate goal of human striving (see Section 3.2.1).

Insight, mindfulness, and concentration are distinct concepts in Buddhism, but they are also related. Insight depends upon basic concentration skills (Newman, 1996, p. 27), but it is different from concentrative meditation in that it aims more at detachment from the world rather than power over it. Insight also depends upon mindfulness, but it is distinct because mindfulness is a process that operates at many levels and is important in several types of Buddhist spiritual practices (King, 1980, p. 33). This has resulted in some confusion in the psychological literature that tends to either equate or separate the three concepts and stress some over others when all are vital skills (Conze, 1956, p. 19).

Insight and mindfulness approaches are of current interest to counselors and psychologists involved in mental health work (see Section 11.4.2) but there are often significant differences between these applications and real meditation as it is practiced in Buddhism. Vipassana in particular is different as it points beyond our normal reality, rather than attempting to help the person adjust to life within it. The intensity of training makes it unsuitable for everyone, especially those with serious health or psychiatric problems. It is designed to be used in conjunction with a spiritual guide or friend, not a professional fee-for-service healer (Fleischman, 2000). It is part of a set of spiritual practices that encompasses lifestyle changes and ethical commitments, not a stand alone technology that will automatically solve problems. It is also designed to function in a different cultural context, so its use in Western contexts may lead to unexpected difficulties and problems (Engler, 2003).

13.5.2 Zen Buddhist Meditation

Zen stands within the **Mahayana** tradition of Buddhism, which emphasizes the ability of all persons to reach enlightenment. The practice of true Zen does not involve intellectual understanding or even any particular kind of activity; it is not doing anything, just the process of experiencing fully (MacInnes, 2003, p. 67). In the Zen view, our normal state of consciousness does not involve full authentic experience; rather it is automatic, and we often view the world as something to be controlled or manipulated, setting up a separation between ourselves and the world. In Zen, we try to break this egocentric control so that we can begin to think beyond ourselves and see reality as it truly is rather than as we want it or think we need it to be (Sekida, 1975).

Zen offers a set of techniques designed to help achieve full experience, with different schools in Zen placing particular importance on certain practices. Common techniques would include the three pillars of Zen: the **dokusan** or private meeting with a master teacher or **roshi**, the practice of sitting meditation or **zazen**, and the **teisho**, a master's commentary or lecture often from a **koan** or teaching story

(Kapleau, 1988). Those living outside of monasteries can participate in a **sesshin** or a week-long retreat of zazen and other activities that supplements and reinforces daily meditation practice (Dumoulin, 1979, pp. 128–129). All schools of Zen do similar early training in posture and how to focus on breath to concentrate (Foulk, 1988), but they also diverge. In the majority Soto school founded by Dogen, the individual is considered to be already enlightened, and Zen practice simply helps one realize what is already present in a slow gradual process following the pattern of the *Ten Oxherding Pictures* (see Section 7.2.2). The primary method emphasized in Soto is **shikantaza** or just-sitting meditation (Foulk, 1988; Dubs, 1987), while the Rinzai school founded by Hakuin Ekaku emphasizes koan practice as part of sitting meditation (see Section 4.6.1).

13.5.2.1 Roshi: The Zen Teacher

Like many religious and spiritual traditions, Zen believes that instruction from an experienced teacher is vital to the process of spiritual advancement. Although the roshi is not considered an especially holy or powerful figure as is the case with teachers in some Hindu guru traditions (see Section 14.1.2), the relationship between Zen master and student is a close one. The roshi questions a beginning student to determine their level of understanding and realization and then gives assignments such as meditation subjects, as well as instructions related to details of practice. Advanced students are tested through questions or confrontations that try to make them demonstrate or experience a more advanced level of understanding (Kapleau, 1988). Hakuin thought that the student needed to bring three essentials to these meetings and their practice: trust in their teacher and tradition, awareness of their lack of insight (the "great ball of doubt"), and courage to continue practice despite obstacles (Soko, 1988).

13.5.2.2 Zazen and Sitting Meditation

In all forms of Zen, a key element of practice is **zazen** or sitting meditation that allows attainment of a state of absorption or **samadhi** (Sekida, 1975, p. 29). The practice has some similarities to yoga in its physical aspects of sitting, breathing and posture, and the central role of the guru-roshi or teacher. However, the idea behind zazen practice is different, as it is not a technique to bring about a particular state of consciousness but a way of preparing the mind to experience what is already present, our "Buddha nature" (Dumoulin, 1979, pp. 20, 94–95).

   Some types of samadhi occur naturally, as in flow experiences (see Section 4.1.1) when our attention becomes sharply focused on an activity to the exclusion of other things. However, Zen aims at a samadhi that involves an inward absorption or one-pointed consciousness, when the activity of the mind is stopped and automatic or reflecting thoughts disappear in an experience of oneness and altered time sense (Flood, 2004, p. 75; Chihara, 1989). This latter type of samadhi clears the mind of its

normal patterns of attachment and is especially important in Soto meditation. When coming out of samadhi the mind is clear, and the meditator may have a sudden intense, uncluttered experience of pure existence, recognition of one's purified mind and true nature. This is called a **kensho** experience, which has similarities to other types of unitive experiences (see Section 4.1.1). Over time, the kensho experience can become a more permanent state leading to **satori** or enlightenment (Sekida, 1975).

In basic zazen or *shikantaza*, clothing and environment should be comfortable and the meditation place should be quiet. The meditator then sits cross-legged on a cushion in a lotus position with erect posture, eyes open, and mouth closed; respiration is regulated through counting breaths. Early Zen figures like Bodhidharma practiced zazen while facing a wall; in modern practice people often gather in a **zendo** or meditation hall. Implicit in this practice is the idea that mental states—even basic ones like concentration—must involve the body through posture and breathing, which help generate meditative power (Sekida, 1975). Once breathing is regulated, the meditator does not attempt to concentrate but simply tries to be aware of thoughts and allow them to vanish, to "think not-thinking" (Dogen, 1985, p. 30; 1996, pp. 70–72). A key goal is to eliminate ideas of grasping, including grasping after experiences or enlightenment, or even benefits for others. Dogen considered the development of Zen practice to be a long process, "the great matter of a lifetime" (Dogen, 1985, pp. 34–36; Bielefeldt, 1988).

13.5.2.3 Koan Practice: The Teaching Story

Zen practitioners also utilize the **koan**—a teaching story or puzzle—to generate doubt and break up our typical, automatic ways of thought. Hakuin used three kinds of koans: *hosshim* which focus on universal oneness (e.g., the "mu" koan), *kikan* which look at paradoxes such as the fact that things are both one and many, and *gonshen* which look for limits and weaknesses in language (Shimano, 1988). Koans are not used for speculation or debate, as they pose problems that are not resolvable by Aristotelian rationality. Instead they are used as catalysts; the goal is to experience the koan and its solution (MacInnes, 2003). As one repeats the koan over and over slowly and carefully, it "infiltrates" the brain and interrupts habitual patterns of thought. Suddenly there may be a moment when the passage acquires a tremendous meaning, and we can have a kensho experience of original nature or self, pure existence, or consciousness (Sheng-Yen, 1988; Sekida, 1975, pp. 99–100). Although Dogen accepted koan practice, he preferred other methods (Dumoulin, 1979, pp. 94–95; Bielefeldt, 1988, p. 185), while in the Rinzai school they are emphasized as a tool leading to sudden enlightenment and conversion.

13.5.2.4 Comparison with Contemplation

Christian and Zen authors (e.g., Johnson, 1997) have remarked on a number of points of contact between Christian and Zen meditation and their divergence from

what Abe (1985) calls the *anti-religions* like **scientism**, **nihilism,** and some forms of **humanistic philosophy**. Merton certainly believed that contemplative-like experiences occurred outside of Christianity, especially in Zen, but was undecided about whether states like satori were really identical with Christian ones. Some points of contact are:

- Descriptions of seemingly similar experiences that include disruption of subject-object dualities
- The idea that one must look beyond appearance to a reality that is beyond concepts and that interfering illusions and attachments must be left behind
- That essential knowledge about reality can only be gained through experience and the development of relationships (MacInnes, 2003, pp. 32, 50–51).

However, Christianity and Zen Buddhism also have differences (Abe, 1985; Dumoulin, 1979, p. 11; MacInnes, 2003, p. 118; Flood, 2004, p. 125). Christianity in general has a stronger emphasis on transcendence, ethics, and relationality. Altered states of consciousness are a by-product rather than a goal of meditation (Moltmann, 1980, p. 62; Savage, 2001). In addition:

- Buddhism stresses the eradication of desire and volition, while Christianity is more about the transformation of desire and fulfillment of meaning, although the two are closer in practice than in theory (Shannon, 2000, pp. 216–226)
- Christians believe that there is an enduring true self under the false one and that pursuit of the true self leads toward God; Merton (2003a, pp. 8–11) believed that satori was a natural experience of the true self (von Balthasar, 1986, pp. 54–55)
- In Eastern thought, it is the method that produces the effect, and so adherence to a particular method is important, while in Christianity it is God at work within us and details of technique are less essential (Pennington, 1998, p. xii; 2001, p. 67).

13.5.2.5 Critique

Zen practice provides some powerful techniques for attacking what Christian contemplatives call the false self. However, like any human tradition there are potential problems that have been raised by critics. These include the following:

1. *Maintenance of practice.* In Western contexts, meditation practice is often plagued by high dropout rates, especially in early stages and among younger subjects. Feeling emotionally overwhelmed by the experience, a lifestyle that did not allow sufficient time or energy, or just a sense of no need are common reasons for dropout (Dubs, 1987).
2. *Problems with community support.* Zen communities boomed during the late 1960s and early 1970s, but in the years following had many of the problems that sometimes plague Christian communities, like internal divisions, leadership struggles, and unethical sexual or financial conduct on the part of leadership (Kraft, 1988; Collcutt, 1988).

3. *Appropriateness of integration with psychological techniques.* Some writers have argued that Zen techniques are similar or complementary to those used in psychotherapy. For instance, Magid (2003) argues that shikantaza is like psychoanalysis in its ability to work though emotional issues. However, some Zen experts argue that while Zen techniques may offer positive benefits as part of psychotherapy, it is no longer true Zen as the uprooting from Buddhist foundations makes fundamental changes in emphasis that are alien to it (Dumoulin, 1979, pp. 8–11).

4. *Unrepresentative focus.* The focus on Zen and mindfulness meditation is not representative of Buddhism as generally practiced in China and other parts of Asia. Other Buddhist groups like the Pure Land Buddhism of Shinran think that practice is not enough; we must rely on the power of a vow to the Buddha and eventual rebirth in a Pure land (Abe, 1992a). In Shin Buddhism, the Nembutu prayer to the Amida Buddha is thought to have a special power when repeated constantly like the Jesus prayer in Orthodox practice (Suzuki, 2002).

5. *Potential negative effects.* Meditation experiences can have powerful physical and emotional aspects that may be threatening, if they have no explanatory framework and can be mistaken for a psychotic episode (Clarke, 2001b).

13.5.3 Transcendental Meditation

Transcendental Meditation (TM) was developed by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and brought to the West in the 1950s. Based on the Hindu tradition, TM is supposedly neither a contemplative nor concentrative exercise but a developmental technology, and advocates claim that it requires no change in lifestyle or belief system. It simply involves an effortless 15–20 minute practice of meditation during the day with eyes closed while reciting a sound or mantra. This procedure acts to accelerate the development of consciousness (Orme-Johnson, Zimmerman, & Hawkins, 1997; Alexander, Druker, & Langer, 1990). The training occurs in groups, but each individual also meets with a teacher and receives a mantra that is especially suited to him or her. It is believed that the sound of the mantra has vibratory effects in the nervous system that are beneficial. The regular TM training can be followed by the TM-Sidhi program, which focuses on application of the pure consciousness state in daily life and may include more overt religious activities such as recitation of sutras and development of paranormal abilities. TM can also be combined with the purification and herbal medicine techniques of ayurveda to help prevent disease and promote health (Sharma & Clark, 1998, pp. 7–20, 142–146; Schneider et al., 2002; Sands, 1994; see Section 10.3.2).

TM is based upon a seven-stage model of consciousness and organization drawn from the Hindu Vedic tradition (Dillbeck & Alexander, 1989). The first three stages are everyday temporary ones: waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep. Above these ordinary stages are higher levels of transcendental or purse consciousness, which allow contact with the true Self and are the immediate goal of TM practice. These

stages are marked by an enduring state of pure consciousness during daily activities, refinement of personality or emotional qualities, and increasing unity between subject and object. In their view, the ultimate purpose of life is to participate in this evolution of consciousness (Nidich, Nidich, & Alexander, 2000; Orme-Johnson, 1988). The Maharishi's descriptions of transcendental consciousness are similar to the pure unity consciousness of Stace: an unbounded consciousness or awareness with no content, absence of time or body sense and peaceful feelings (see Section 4.3.4). He claims this can be developed within a couple of months with TM practice and is related to a variety of positive effects (Gelderloos & Beto, 1989; Travis & Pearson, 2000). This relaxed, blissful, and wakeful state also is congruent with the goals of some types of Buddhist and Hindu meditation (Jevning, Wallace, & Beidebach, 1992).

Early research on TM (e.g., Wallace & Benson, 1972) found that TM produced many physiological changes, including decreased EEG frequency, oxygen consumption, heart rate, blood pressure, and increased skin resistance. Subsequent articles (e.g., Jevning et al., 1992; Walton et al., 2002) have reported a variety of physiological benefits including the following:

1. Changes in brain wave activity including increased intensity/amplitude of slow alpha, bursts of high voltage theta, and higher EEG coherence/synchrony in frontal areas, most frequently in regular practitioners; along with this, increased blood flow in frontal areas suggesting alertness (Orme-Johnson et al., 1997; Travis & Wallace 1999; Hebert & Tan, 2004; Alexander, Cranson, Boyer, & Orme-Johnson, 1986; Jevning, Anand, Biedebach, & Fernando, 1996; Travis, Olson, Egenes, & Gupta, 2001; Travis, Tecce, Arenander, & Wallace, 2002).
2. Physiological changes similar to a relaxed state of decreased autonomic activity and metabolism such as decreased blood pressure and oxygen consumption. In addition, possible changes in body chemistry include reduction in cholesterol and lipid levels or lowered adrenocortical activity, suggesting decreased levels of stress.

Other benefits proposed by TM advocates include the following:

1. Increased coherence in surrounding consciousness, affecting crime rates and other social phenomenon; this is referred to as the *Maharishi effect* (Orme-Johnson et al., 1997; Orme-Johnson 1994).
2. Increased self-actualization, positive emotions, cognitive performance, and psychological health, in part through reduction of anxiety, depression, anger, impulsivity, aggressiveness, and substance abuse (Alexander, Rainforth, & Gelderloos, 1991; Cranson et al., 1991; Alexander, Robinson, & Rainforth, 1994; Gelderloos, Hermans, Ahlscrom, & Jacoby, 2001; Israel & Beiman, 1977; Eppley, Abrams, & Shear, 1989).

The TM literature has provoked an intense debate. A number of criticisms of TM research have been advanced (Parks, 2004) including:

- Problems with research design, including extensive use of correlational studies
- Unrepresentative samples or control groups

- Questionable measurement reliability and validity
- Use of unusual or obsolete statistical techniques
- Most research is published in non-refereed journals and is done by researchers who are ardent TM practitioners with financial connections to TM organizations.

In the early 1990s, TM research was a target of investigations by the National Research Council, a US group that studies research accused of being "pseudoscientific." They issued reports arguing that TM is a religion not a technology and that research on it is flawed. Other researchers suggested that TM is really no different than any other kind of relaxation procedure in its effects or even inferior (Travis, Kondo, & Knott, 1976; Cauthen & Prymak, 1977; Israel & Beiman, 1977; Puente & Beiman, 1980: Zuroff & Schwarz, 1980; Carlson, Bacaseta, & Simanton, 1988; Jevning et al., 1992), or that it could even lead to problems such as depersonalization or anxiety (Castillo, 1990). TM researchers responded to these findings with a flurry of studies and meta-analyses demonstrating that TM was better than resting on some physiological variables like plasma lactate (Dillbeck & Orme-Johnson, 1987), and that it was better than relaxation procedures on other biological measures like respiration or blood pressure. It also appeared to be superior on some psychological variables like anxiety and self-actualization, as well as some health outcome measures of risk factors, morbidity, and mortality (Alexander et al., 1994). However, the ideological and financial ties of most TM researchers with the TM community have made it difficult for other investigators to accept these findings (Parks, 2004).

13.6 Meditation: Psychophysiological Perspectives

While some research on meditation has focused on psychological variables, most studies have focused on its medical uses and its physiological effects (Shapiro & Walsh, 2003). Interest in the topic was first prompted by the studies like those of Bagchi and Wenger (1957, 1958) on yoga. These initial field studies were often done in remote areas of India with portable recording equipment and yielded significant but conflicting results, suggesting that meditation produced important changes in brain wave and autonomic activity. Some results were startling, as in the experiment conducted at the Menninger clinic with the Hindu yogi Swami Rama who was able to voluntarily stop and start his heartbeat (Green & Green, 1977; Taylor, 1999, p. 276). Later studies (e.g., Anand, Chhina, & Singh, 1961a, 1961b; Elson, Hauri, & Cunis, 1977) differed as to the significance and direction of changes in measures such as heart rate and skin resistance. Decreases in oxygen consumption caused speculation that some of the effects of meditation were produced by an anoxic state (Woolfolk, 1975; Watanabe, Shapiro, & Schwartz, 1972). Some research looked at shifts in the frequency spectrum of brain waves measured by an **electroencephalogram** (**EEG**), with meditators displaying fewer **beta waves** (13–29 cps) and more **theta waves** (4–7 cps) or **alpha waves** (8–12 cps). However, these patterns were also not always consistent.

Zen meditation techniques are more uniform than those of Hinduism, and research studies into the effects of zazen have produced more consistent results (Woolfolk, 1975). Early studies showed a slowing in brain wave frequency and in other physiological functions such as respiration and heart rate (Kasamatsu & Hirai, 1969; Goyeche, Chihara, & Shimizu, 1972). Studies of Zen masters (e.g., Hirai, Izawa, & Koga, 1959) found large amplitude theta waves, as well as alpha patterns typical of relaxation. In general, the research on Zen meditation indicates that zazen brings about a physiological slowing in the meditator similar to some of the effects observed in yoga. Theta wave activity in this context is thought to reflect internalized attention and mindfulness (Jevning et al., 1992; Takahashi et al., 2005; Fromm, 1992).

13.6.1 Relaxation or More?

Early researchers such as Herbert Benson (e.g., Kutz, Borysenko, & Benson, 1985) argued that meditation is simply an effective technology that can and should be separated from its religious content and placed in the ideological surround of psychotherapy and the medical model. In this way, religious practices could be used to construct and maintain a secular self and intensify the therapy process (Charry, 2001). They were particularly interested in Buddhist methods, which they viewed as more ideologically neutral. Benson argued that various meditation techniques all produced a relaxation response, and a number of studies have supported this, although other types of relaxation techniques and prayer also produce this effect (Shapiro, 1982; cf. Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996; Collings, 1989; Francis & Evans, 2001a, 2001b). More recent studies have suggested that meditation has both an initial relaxation effect and a later excitation effect, with greater alertness found in more advanced meditators (Laughlin et al., 1993, p. 147). The idea that meditation could be a technology for altering physiology has led to studies that have connected it with a wide range of physical and mental health benefits (Monk-Turner, 2003; see Section 11.4.2). However, critics contend that evidence for the therapeutic effectiveness of meditation is weak and confined to problems that are clearly stress related (Canter, 2003). It is also true that some of the health benefits claimed for meditation can come from relaxation practice as well (e.g., Leserman, Stuart, Mamish, & Benson, 1989).

Experts from religious traditions, as well as some psychological researchers have objected to the reductionist view that meditation is a technology that just produces relaxation, or that all types of meditation produce the same effects. They argue that such a view obscures the richness of underlying religious psychologies and does not account for the data. It also lifts the techniques out of their ethical and cultural context, with potentially negative effects (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006; Andresen, 2000; Engler, 1986). At the least, studies suggest that different kinds of meditation produce specific changes in addition to some type of general relaxation effect (Davidson, Goleman, & Schwartz, 1976). For instance, researchers have found that concentrative and mindfulness meditations produce different physiological changes

that go beyond simple relaxation (Dubs, 1987). Cahn and Polich (2006) found that open mediation (e.g., vipassana) vs. concentrative meditation (e.g., kundalini yoga) both altered functioning in the dorsal cingulate gyrus but activated different cortical areas such as posterior structures during imagery, prefrontal areas during effortful focus, and the dorsolateral cortex when focusing on the self or internal process and during psalmody. Religious practices that require less attentional control such as *glossolalia*, or speaking in tongues, have been associated with decreased frontal activity, while experienced Zen meditators have increases (Newberg, Wintering, Morgan, & Waldman, 2006; Ritskes, Ritskes-Hoitinga, Stodkilde-Jorgensen, Baerentsen, & Hartman, 2003). These and other studies suggest that relaxation is a relatively minor factor in terms of distinguishing between techniques, and that modes of engagement or disengagement and awareness were more important (e.g., Smith, Amutio, Anderson, & Aria, 1996). The relative importance of relaxation vs. other kinds of effects might also be related to individual differences. For instance, in a study with inexperienced Zen meditators, Murata et al. (2004) found that those with lower trait anxiety more readily induced meditation with a predominance of internalized attention, while individuals with higher trait anxiety more readily had states with a relaxation focus. This is not surprising, for relaxation procedures that employ both psychological and physical means of relaxation have different effects, including greater relaxation and positive psychological effects like mental quiet (Ghoncheh & Smith, 2004). It also suggests that control over anxiety facilitates more advanced states of attention.

In religious traditions with a devotional element such as Christianity, parts of Hinduism, or Pure Land Buddhism, meditation has a relational component and is usually viewed as more than a way of seeking personal enlightenment or fulfillment. Kulik and Szewczyk (2002) found that a relational orientation does not result in a more positive evaluation of the practice or a better ability to provide a sense of meaning, but they did find that relational practitioners had more positive views toward sickness or suffering and less need to escape from a difficult situation. A large Australian study using the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, (Kaldor, Francis, & Fisher, 2002) found that prayer was associated with lower **psychoticism** scores, and Eastern meditation with higher scores. This suggests that nonrelational meditation is more often associated with a cold, impersonal, unsympathetic, and distrusting outlook, while prayer is associated with warmth, empathy, and altruism.

As research has challenged overly simplistic views of meditation, researchers have begun studying a larger variety of types of meditation, including mindfulness, vipassana and Vajrayana Buddhist techniques (Andresen, 2000). Mindfulness meditation is clearly more than simple relaxation. For instance, in a study of short-term and long-term retreat participants, Kornfield (1979) found that 80% of meditators reported unusual experiences including somatic sensations like energy flow or pain, visual or auditory intensification or hallucination, strong mental emotions like anger fear or depression, and changes in time awareness or out of body experiences. Sometimes these effects can become detrimental. Several authors (e.g., Sethi & Bhargava, 2003; Yorston, 2001) have documented cases of psychosis or manic episodes triggered by yoga, Zen, and other standard meditation techniques. These appear to be

related to two kinds of situations. First are cases of vulnerable individuals who do not have sufficient ego strength to engage in meditation. The odds of problems in these individuals seem to increase, if the meditation is accompanied by ascetic techniques like sleep deprivation or fasting. Second are situations where advanced levels of development and practice lead to psychiatric complications such as changes in mood or reality testing abilities. These are a reaction to the intense experiences that can come with deeper meditation practice (Epstein & Lieff, 1986). These kinds of problems are one reason that religious traditions emphasize the need for a guide or teacher who can evaluate whether or not a practice is having unwanted effects. It has led some to argue that meditation should not be undertaken by individuals with serious psychological problems who are looking for a curative technique. In this view, meditation is more appropriate for those with a solid psychological foundation, who want to move on to higher stages of development (Helminiak, 1981; Wilber, 1986c).

13.6.2 Modern Neuroimaging and Neurophysiology Studies

Advancing technology has enhanced our ability to study brain activity during meditative states. Research suggests that meditators typically pass through different stages of meditation that are associated with various physiological effects and relative amounts of various brain wave frequency patterns. Gellhorn and Kiely (1972) note that in early stages, meditators show trophotropic relaxation, with alpha waves of increasing amplitude (Andresen, 2000; Cahn & Polich, 2006). Later stages are quite different and include the appearance of large amplitude theta waves in midline frontal areas as meditation deepens. This is particularly characteristic of yoga meditation but is also found in Zen and TM. Thus, meditation may produce two different effects—relaxation and shift of consciousness—with two entirely different sets of physiological changes (Walsh, Goleman, Kornfield, Pensa, & Shapiro, 1978).

The role of theta activity is poorly understood, but may be related to the move from relaxation to states of focused attention and absorption with accompanying changes in consciousness (Laughlin et al., 1993; Don, 1977–1978). During meditation, theta activity begins in bursts and then develops into rhythmic patterns that become synchronized between anterior and posterior parts of the brain. They are particularly dominant in anterior regions of the brain, while alpha is more concentrated in posterior areas (Andresen, 2000). This theta coherence is especially found in more experienced meditators and those doing mindfulness rather than concentrative meditation, although the presence of coherence in mindfulness states has been challenged (Cahn & Polich, 2006; Travis & Arenander, 2004). This theta activity may be generated in limbic structures linked to memory functions and emotional processing, as well as increased anterior cingulate and dorsolateral prefrontal cortical activity, as many meditation procedures like yoga produce changes in the functioning of subcortical structures (Lou et al., 1999; Kakigi et al., 2005; Kjaer et al., 2002). In yoga, this is accompanied by a major initial increase in prefrontal blood flow early in meditation with later decreases (Austin, 2006, pp. 216–218).

In experienced yoga meditators, theta power has a moderate positive correlation with positive emotional experience and a negative correlation with mental activity. Austin (2006, pp. 166–167) argues that changes in frontal lobe activity account for a number of aspects of the kensho experience in Zen, such as the pleasurable feelings and losses of sense of self and distinctions, reduction in directive activity, and loss of time sense. Coherence between prefrontal and posterior cortex may be connected with intensification of information processing, increases in positive, blissful experience, and decreases in negative emotion (Aftanas & Golosheykin, 2003, 2005).

Recent research has started to explore changes in the high frequency **gamma wave** spectrum (30–70 cps). In a study with long term Tibetan Buddhist meditators, Lutz, Greischar, Rawlings, Ricard, and Davidson (2004) found that experienced meditators had higher initial gamma amplitude in the medial frontal area and stronger increases in gamma patterns and power while meditating. The experienced meditators also showed increases in long-distance gamma synchrony between the frontal and parietal lobes (cf. Davidson, 2005). While not well understood, it is thought that this gamma synchronization may be related to the binding of diverse brain locations into neural networks (Austin, 2006, p. 46). Increased gamma power in the superior frontal gyrus may be related to the sense of dissolution of self, while posterior gamma changes are found in meditations of a more visual nature (Cahn & Polich, 2006). Increased anterior-posterior coherence in other frequencies has also been found in TM and yoga meditators, perhaps related to the activity of multifunctional networks, more efficient cortical functioning, greater attentional control, and deeper mental silence in the meditative state (Aftanas & Golosheykin, 2003, 2005; Travis, Arenander, & DuBois, 2004; Harrison, Manocha, & Rubia, 2004).

Although there is relatively little research involving visualization meditations in either the Eastern (e.g., Tibetan) or Western (e.g., Ignatian) traditions, it is apparent that during visualizing or verbalizing meditations, the corresponding visual premotor and language areas of the brain are active (Laughlin et al., 1993; Austin, 2006, p. 208; Lou et al., 1999). Interestingly, psalmody not only produces changes in dorsolateral prefrontal and dorsomedial frontal activity but also in parietal zones connected to visual memory (Azari et al., 2001).

13.6.3 Critique

Even after many years of research, most studies on the neural mechanisms of meditation provide more speculations than established findings. Literature reviews constantly report that more studies are needed to make sense of the often conflicting data. Specific problems in the research include the following:

1. *Failure to adequately specify important variables* such as the exact type of meditation, length of time needed for mastery, qualification and level of practice of teachers or trainers, as well as details about the meditative environment, level of effort and the specific meditative state of the individual (Austin, 1998; Caspi & Burleson, 2005).

2. *Failure to study individual differences* in response to a technique, which are often greater than differences between various approaches to meditation (Herzog et al., 1990; Beauchamp-Turner & Levinson, 1992).

3. *Failure to study long-term effects of meditation*, which are very important (Austin, 2006, p. 224; Smith et al., 1996). Studies find that long-term meditators have stronger physiological responses during their practice and more positive psychological indicators, suggesting there is a cumulative effect to long-term practice (Dubs, 1987; Corby, Roth, Zarcone, & Kopell, 1978; Aftanas & Golosheykin, 2003; Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, Johnstone, & Davidson, 2008). Inexperienced meditators may not be performing the meditation adequately, making it unclear what is really being tested when they are used as subjects (Brown & Engler, 1986a). However, studies of long-term meditators suffer from dropout rates of 50% or more, limiting the quality and applicability of findings (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006).

4. *Poor research designs*, vague research questions, and small sample sizes. Experimental and control groups tend to differ on multiple variables, making it difficult to compare studies or isolate effects (Andresen, 2000; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006; Cahn & Polich, 2006; West, 1979; Caspi & Burleson, 2005). Some research takes place under distracting laboratory conditions that are different from where the meditation is normally done. Statistical analyses assume linear relationships when there is evidence that nonlinear relationships hold for both physiological and psychological variables (Aftanas & Golosheykin, 2003; Compton, 1991). It is also not clear to what extent findings can be generalized, as individuals willing to volunteer for meditation studies may not be typical of the general population (cf. Watts & Williams, 1988, p. 87).

5. *Failure to study subjective experience* during meditation, making it impossible to relate this to physiological data (Austin, 2006, pp. 214–215). It also means that different states are equated with each other, even though their subjective experience and worldview are quite different (van der Lans, 1987). More use of qualitative methods would be helpful (Andresen, 2000; Caspi & Burleson, 2005).

6. *Problems with measurement instruments and procedures.* Available techniques such as EEG and even modern imaging instruments provide only a gross measure of brain function (Andresen, 2000), and experienced mediators have questioned the use of forced-choice questions in research instruments that do not allow for adequate descriptions of experience (Compton, 1991). Some have suggested that this is because investigators lack personal experience with the mental states they are studying (Walsh, 1980).

13.7 Conclusion

Key issue: *Individual religious practices are best understood as part of a way of life that unfolds within the context of particular religious communities and traditions.*

Individual practices represent a rich area for the psychology and religion dialogue. Much good work has been done in this area but much remains, particularly with regard to Christian approaches to practice that are relatively unstudied compared to those from Eastern traditions. Another area for conversation will be the relationship between these practices and community life. While prayer and meditation are often thought of as "individual" practices, they have been developed in religious traditions, and religious communities remain the primary means of supporting practices, which can be hard to maintain without this support and motivation (Taylor, 2007, p. 486). The increasing appreciation for the public role of religion that can be seen in both the psychological and theological literature will help open up this important topic.

Another issue that remains to be addressed is how practices work together in a way of life. Practices are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. and they are directed to the whole person, not just a part (Merton, 2005b, pp. 17–19). Sensible writers like Merton argue that balance in religious practices is a key thing and that the particular balance that is appropriate for each person will probably differ because of their individual history and problems. This means that the study of religious practices as mechanical procedures detached from context may miss some important aspects of how they can have a positive or negative role in the life of the individual. Finding this balance in practice may best be done with assistance from an experienced helper—our next topic.