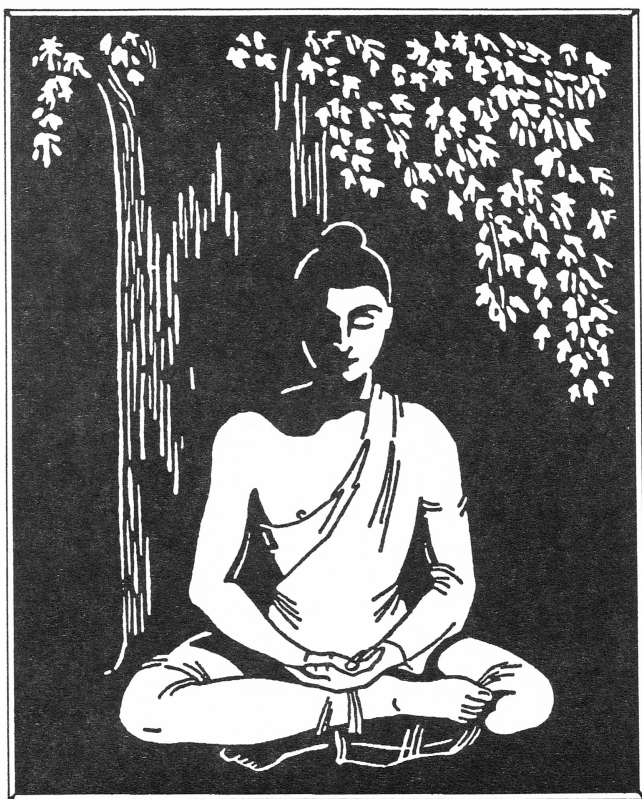


# The Roots of Christian Hesychasm in Indian Religions



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## Introduction

Hesychasm has long been an important factor of Byzantine spirituality, especially in monastic life and practices. Etymologically, hesychasm is derived from Greek *hesychia* = silence, rest, quietude, quietness, from which derivatives are *hesychastai*, *hesychazontes* = hesychasts.

Hesychasm can be described as an aesthetico-mystical teaching together with psychosomatic ascetical practices, which entail many elements akin to Yoga: for example, control of the senses (especially of gaze fixed on one point); exercises leading to control of physiological processes of the body (rhythmic breathing, control of the heart-beat), the lotus position (= *āsana*); constant repetition of Jesus prayer (= *mantra*); moral qualities; illumination and purification of senses, spirit and thoughts; control of consciousness and meditation leading to total immersion into reality (= *samāhdi*) etc.

In hesychasm the silent and peaceful interior prayer brings the mystic into the presence of God Himself through the participation in the Uncreated Divine Energies. These energies are the dynamic means of contact between God and human beings that originate in the transcendent Trinity and are made immanent in the history of salvation for the divinization and transfiguration of human beings and of all extra-divine reality. Thus, human beings participate in the Divine Nature and Life, receiving graces from God as icons of God. The unity of the human person with God is not essential or substantial, but manifestly inter-personal and "energetic" or "synergetic." No creature can act in any way in isolation from the Uncreated Divine Energies.

The second main feature of hesychasm is contemplation of the Uncreated Divine Light, emanating from the Uncreated Divine Energies. This Light was manifested during the Transfiguration of the Lord on Mount Tabor. Hence, hesychasts have also been called "Taborites" for they strove to have an intense participation in this Light.

The whole human person—in body, soul and spirit—is involved in psychosomatic hesychastic practices, especially in a coordinated prayer. The heart and the breath, the body and mind all are absorbed in God in the rhythm of the perpetual Jesus Prayer (*mantra*), usually: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

If we take into account that "Buddha" means literally "the Enlightened One," and that Buddhism is primarily a religion of a state of perfect

enlightenment and peace in the *Nirvana*,<sup>1</sup> then the similarity with hesychasm becomes even clearer. Thus not only the external forms and techniques but the very contents and goals of both Buddhism and hesychasm become similar in many respects.

### Early Contacts

Contacts between India and the western regions had already taken place as early as Sumerian times, and continued down to the age of the expansions of Alexander the Great. A very serious and systematic type of contact of Western thought with Buddhist religion and its practices goes back to the reign of Aśoka, Emperor of India (c. 270–230 B.C.), the third monarch of the Mauryan dynasty. He converted to Buddhism and was responsible for its development, expansion and missionary effort inside and outside his empire.

Aśoka's inscriptions on rocks and pillars (known as Minor Rock and Pillar Edicts in Sanskrit, Greek and Aramaic) inform his subjects of his Buddhist reforming legislation and exhort them to follow *dhamma*, (Sanskrit: *dharma*) which is a very difficult and virtually untranslatable term. It can connote anything from "goodness" and "morality," through "righteousness" and "piety," to "religion" or "religiosity." In the Greek edict of Aśoka in Kandahar in Afghanistan *dhamma* is translated as *eusebeia* or "piety."

Furthermore, in his long Thirteenth Rock Edict, Aśoka states that since the Kalinga campaign he had given up wars of conquest and that he was still gaining victories through *dhamma* far beyond his own empire, in the lands of the South as far as Tambapamni (probably Ceylon or Sri Lanka) and even in the realm of Antiochus of Greece and among the peoples of Ptolemy, Antigonus, Magas and Alexander, that is, Syria, Egypt, Macedonia, Epirus and Cyrene (c. 300–239 B.C.).

The Emperor, Aśoka instituted a highly organized new class of high-ranking officials who were called *dhamma-mahamatta*, or "officers of righteousness," who were sent out to ensure that the imperial policy of *dhamma* would be fully implemented, especially along the major trade-routes and in the Buddhist communities outside India. Then when, some 270 years later, Christianity started to spread along the ancient trade-routes, it encountered Buddhist missions and communities with their traditional forms of prayer, meditation and psychosomatic practices.

Today, there can be no doubt that Egypt was the principal area of contact and spiritual exchange of ideas on culture between Christians, Brahmins, Hindus, Buddhists of different orientation (especially Mahayana) and Gnostics. Alexandria was ideally, geographically and geopolitically, situated between East and West, North and South, and was in a position to become a centre of syncretism of both material and spiritual cultures.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting that the essential structures of Gnosticism, Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism are very similar: they all have a conviction that the right

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1. Thomas P. Kasulis, "Nirvana," in *ER* 10: 448–56.

2. J. Edgar Bruns, *The Art and Thought of John*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).