

SCOTT GRISWOLD

## Comparison of Biblical and Buddhist Meditation with Reflections on Mission

Meditation has been practiced in various forms in different religions for thousands of years. In the last few decades many in the West have experimented with forms new to them. Even many professing Christians are now using different types of eastern meditation. Often people are confused as to the similarities or differences between the meditation spoken of in the Bible and that practiced in eastern religions such as Buddhism. This article will briefly examine meditation as described in the Bible and as practiced by Theravada Buddhism. Comparisons will be made between the two. Finally, some practical conclusions will be drawn concerning Christian ministry among Buddhists.

### Biblical Meditation

Presently, even among Christians, there are many diverse ideas regarding meditation. A definition simply cannot be given that would satisfy everyone. For the purpose of the present discussion, I will examine significant Bible passages that use words that are translated as “meditation in English to help arrive at a description of what I will call biblical meditation.

In Ps 1 the word “meditate” (*hagah*) is used in verse 2: “In His law he meditates day and night.” The focus of the meditation is clearly on God’s law (*torah*). Whether God’s law refers to the Ten Commandments, the entire writings of Moses, or more likely any declaration from God, this meditation is definitely focused on logical and understandable content (Gaebelien 1991:54). Biblical meditation engages the mind. In Ps 1:2 the attitude of the one meditating is also revealed: “His delight is in the law of the Lord.” There is an eager desiring for truth. Biblical meditation engages the heart. The same Psalm also shows specific preparation necessary for meditation. The person meditating neither “walks in the counsel of the

ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful" (Ps 1:1). This type of meditation shows that to focus on God's Word requires a turning from ungodly thoughts, actions, and words. Biblical meditation engages the life. The type of meditation described in Ps 1 is challenging. It calls for the devotion of the mind, heart, and life. Is it worth it? God descriptively gave encouragement to engage in such meditation by inspiring the writer of that Psalm to write down some of the benefits of meditation. The person who meditates will be spiritually strong, prosperous, and enduring.

Another biblical passage gives a similar emphasis regarding meditation. Joshua was told by the angel of the Lord, "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success" (Josh 1:8). The focus of meditation is on the law of God, involving the mind. The purpose of meditation is "that you may observe to do" everything that is written in the law. In other words, the whole of life is involved in obedient action. The benefits of meditation are prosperity and success. The passage in Joshua gives further insight into the "day and night" of Ps 1. It is fascinating to note that meditation can be continuous, even for a busy soldier. Biblical meditation is not merely something that can be done in quiet and solitude. "It is the reflection on the Word of God in the course of daily activities (Josh 1:8). Regardless of the time of day or the context, the godly respond to life in accordance with God's word" (Gaebelin 1991:55).

The Psalmist, David, found something else on which to meditate besides the law of God. "When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches" (Ps 63:6). The focus of biblical meditation in this passage is God himself. Ps 63 explains how to enjoy such meditation. Verse 1 speaks of a deep longing for God, inferring that God is like water, the one thing needful and satisfying to a person's soul. The people meditating can focus on how God meets their needs, such as being their protector: "In the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice" (Ps 63:7). Verse 2 says that David looked for God in the sanctuary in order to see his power and his glory. This implies that before meditating, a person should study to understand God's Word. In the context of Ps 63:7, the person may need to study the biblical sanctuary to understand its meaning and purpose. Then it would be a place for fruitful meditation. Verses 3 to 5 describe David's joy that overflowed into singing. Most people think of meditation as something done very quietly. Both Hebrew words that are translated as "meditation" can be used to describe verbal activity, including muttering, speaking, or praying (Strong 1990:32, 115). There seems to be a parallelism between

the phrases “words of my mouth” and “meditation of my heart” in places like Ps 5:1; 19:14; and 49:3. The type of biblical meditation described in Ps 63 can therefore be connected to singing reflectively on the characteristics of God. In verses 7 and 8 David pictured himself in the shadow of God’s wings, knowing how God had helped him in the past. He saw himself following closely behind God, going where God led. He also envisioned God’s right hand underneath him, holding him up. Those are wonderful pictures of a mighty and loving God and show valid use of imagination in biblical meditation.

Another Psalm writer, Asaph, spoke of meditation as something he did when he was discouraged (Ps 77:3-6). The word for meditate is actually translated as “complaint” in verse 3 and in several other places in the Old Testament. Asaph asked questions (Ps 77:7-9). He then moved his focus to God’s actions: “I will also meditate on all Your work, and talk of Your deeds” (v. 12). This shows the direction that biblical meditation takes—from the human condition to the reality of God. An essential part of biblical meditation is remembering God’s mighty actions in behalf of Israel. “I remember the days of old; I meditate on all Your works; I muse on the work of Your hands. I spread out my hands to You” (Ps 143:5). People can do the same thing today both by meditating on biblical stories and by reflecting on what God has done for them personally.

Ps 119 speaks frequently of meditation. The Psalmist gives the same emphasis focusing on God’s law and God’s acts (Ps 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148). However, it places this meditation in close connection to a very specific purpose. “How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word,” and “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You (vv. 9-11).” Biblical meditation is intended to cleanse the mind, heart, and life.

In contrast to the Old Testament, the New Testament gives very little emphasis on the word meditation (*meletao*). Of the three texts that have a form of this word, 1 Tim 4:15 is especially helpful (the others are Mark 13:11 and Acts 4:25). The focus is similar to the Old Testament, with Paul encouraging Timothy to meditate on what Paul has taught him in order to help himself and those he teaches. He says, “Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all” (1 Tim 4:15). Once again this biblical meditation combines mind, heart, and life.

From these passages we can conclude that biblical meditation is primarily thinking about something deeply or reflectively. There are other places where the Bible talks about such things without using the word meditation. Jesus called people to “consider” the birds and the lilies of the field to learn lessons about trusting God. Solomon counseled people

to consider the ant to learn lessons from it (Prov 6:6). The book of Ecclesiastes is a fascinating example of meditating on the passing vanities of the world, in the context of belief in God. Paul captures the importance of using the mind to focus on things of excellence: "I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse" (Phil 4:8 *The Message*).

Even though Christians may define meditation in various ways, those who examine the biblical evidence typically recognize the elements described above. McAlpine says, "Meditation is the devotional practice of pondering the words of a verse or verses of Scripture with a receptive heart. Through mediating, we allow the Holy Spirit to take the written Word and apply it as the living Word into our inner being. As divine truth is imparted to us, it inevitably brings forth a response to God" (2004:30).

McAlpine summarizes the areas of focus for biblical meditation: the Word of God, God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, the work of God, and the creation (2004:57-60). "Since the Bible, in part or as a whole, was generally not available to God's people, they memorized and 'pondered' the word (Ps. 119:11), the perfections of the Lord (Ps. 63:6), and his mighty acts (Ps. 77:12; 143:5). The one who meditates *continually* reflects God's word in life. . . . Study and practice blend into one: 'The zealous study of the law . . . results in being filled with the will of Yahweh and the doing of his commandments'" (Gaebelein 1991:55).

In summary, biblical meditation is a thoughtful focus on God's Word and his law, God's character and his actions, and nature, in a way that leads to a positive impact on a person's thoughts, feelings, and actions. On a practical level it may be helpful to contrast biblical meditation with other spiritual disciplines spoken of in the Bible. Meditation is not reading the Bible, though reading the Bible is an excellent beginning for meditation. Meditation is not Bible study, though Bible study will improve the quality of one's meditation. Meditation is not memorizing scripture, but scripture memorization will empower a person to meditate anywhere. Meditation is not prayer, but meditation done well will inspire heartfelt prayer. Since the very word meditation can be translated as speaking or singing, can we really make such strong distinctions? Perhaps not. However, it is important to do so simply to remind ourselves to not read, study, memorize, or pray without reflective thinking that leads to positive change. Biblical meditation can aid the other disciplines so that God's Word penetrates the mind, heart, and life.

## Buddhist Meditation

There are many kinds of meditation in various religions and there is also a wide diversity of meditation within Buddhism. Typically people picture someone sitting cross-legged, focusing on breathing, a visual object, a phrase, or a word. Such meditation may be described as follows: "Tranquil Meditation is concerned with the concentration of one's mind on a suitable meditation object for a reasonable length of time so as not to cause the mind to wander or to roam about. This will bring about subtle peacefulness and pleasantness or happiness, which is far superior to that which can be experienced from watching movies, or seeking other worldly sensual pleasures" (Ussivakulp 1996:6).

Usually people think of meditation as something that brings them peace. "A common Buddhist image of the *mind* is of a monkey swinging from branch to branch, from a smell to a sight, from mental remorse to emotional rehearsal, etc. . . . Basic meditation, then, is the opposite of all that: stopping and being still" (Gach 2002:174). Buddhist meditation incorporates these ideas, but goes beyond them to what Buddhists consider a deeper level. "Insight Meditation is considered to be the unique characteristic of Buddhist Advanced Science" (Ussivakul 1996:73). "Insight Meditation subtly and wisely eliminates mental suffering by Direct Awareness of physical and mental phenomena as they really are at the present moment without relying on thoughts and imagination. As a result, full awareness and realization of the reality of life is achieved" (74).

This article cannot provide an adequate summary of the many meditation forms considered Buddhist. Instead it will briefly look at the main Theravada Buddhist approaches to meditation. This will be done by examining meditation's role in the Eightfold Path to enlightenment. The Eightfold Path is the fourth of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths. Buddha taught that the Path is the way to reach enlightenment and be free from suffering. Meditation is a major part of the Path.

The Eightfold Path can be divided as follows: (1) Right Understanding, (2) Right Thought, (3) Right Speech, (4) Right Action, (5) Right Livelihood, (6) Right Effort, (7) Right Mindfulness, and (8) Right Concentration (Piyadassi 1964:78). Right Effort, the sixth part of the Path, is the use of a kind of meditation with determined effort to control unhealthy thoughts and to choose wholesome thoughts. It is "persevering endeavour (a) to prevent the arising of evil and unwholesome thoughts that have not yet arisen in a man's mind, (b) to discard such evil thoughts already arisen, (c) to produce and develop wholesome thoughts not yet arisen, and (d) to promote and maintain the good thoughts already present" (84).

Right Mindfulness, the seventh part, is meditation that focuses

awareness on four areas described as “activities of the body, feelings or sensations, activities of the mind, and mental objects” (84). Much can be learned about these four areas in the discourse attributed to the Buddha called “The Foundations of Mindfulness” (Nyanaponika 1962:117-132). If a person is doing a contemplation of the body, he may focus on his breathing or his present posture. He might meditate on the four primary elements of earth, water, fire, and air or even on a corpse (there are nine specific cemetery contemplations). He may practice mindfulness by focusing very carefully on whatever task he is doing whether sweeping or chewing his food. He is learning to be aware. To be “awake” is what “Buddha” means. In the contemplation of feeling, the one meditating attempts to simply note various feelings of pain, pleasantness, or neutrality, etc. He observes how these feelings come and go. In the contemplation of the mind, a person looks at anything the mind is doing, such as thoughts of hate, distraction, or concentration. There is a careful noting of how thoughts come and go.

There is also the contemplation of mind-objects. This is rather complicated as there are many such things to meditate on. Negative mind-objects are wrong ways of thinking or acting that prevent enlightenment. Positive mind-objects are right concepts regarding the path to enlightenment. Mind objects include the five hindrances, which are sense-desire, anger, sloth and torpor, agitation and worry, and doubt. There are also the five aggregates of clinging, which are ways of thinking about “reality” in a way that keeps a person from being enlightened. These are material form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Next there are the six internal and six external sense-bases, namely, sight, sounds, smells, flavors, tactual objects, and mind-objects. All of these have “fetters” or temptations attached to them that help keep a person tied to the suffering in this world. Finally, mind-objects include the seven factors of Enlightenment and the Four Noble Truths (Nyanaponika 1962:123-125). These areas of mindfulness are extremely important to Buddhism.

All the implications of the Buddha’s healing message as well as the core of his mind-doctrine are included in the admonition ‘Be mindful!’ Mindfulness, then, is the unfailing master key for *knowing* the mind, and is thus the starting point; the perfect tool for *shaping* the mind, and is thus the focal point; the lofty manifestation of the achieved *freedom* of the mind, and is thus the culminating point. Therefore the ‘Foundations of Mindfulness’ (*Satipaththana*) have rightly been declared by the Buddha as the ‘Only Way.’ (Nyanaponika 1962:23, 24)

“Meditation is the life-blood of Buddhism, as heedlessness is of death” (Piyadassi 1964:181). “Mindfulness has to be applied to all—the world within and without—always, everywhere during our waking life” (186).



In all of this the one meditating is seeking to simply be mindful of what is happening, simply observing. "Independent he dwells, clinging to nothing in the world" (Nyanaponika 1962:119). Buddha's discourse states that the purpose of right mindfulness is "for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentations, for the destroying of pain and grief, for reaching the right path, for the realization of Nibbana" (117).

Finally, the eighth factor in the Eight-fold Noble Path, namely, Right Concentration "is the intensified steadiness of the mind comparable to the unflickering flame of a lamp in a windless place. It is concentration that fixes the mind right and causes it to be unmoved and undisturbed" (Piyadassi 1964:84).

The meditation involved in Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration is intended to lead to Right Thought and Right Understanding. Right Thought is focused on moral qualities, especially compassion and renunciation. Right Understanding is the enlightened thinking that recognizes ultimate reality. Obviously Buddhist meditation goes far beyond breathing exercises, relaxation techniques, or the contemplation of morality. Meditation is intended to move a person to the Buddhist beliefs that everything is impermanent and that there is no real "self." These concepts must be grasped in order to reach enlightenment.

Stimulation automatically generates feelings, either of attraction or repulsion. Depending on the intensity of the stimuli, some degree of desire or craving then arises, a desire to move towards the object for greater or repeated stimulation or to move away from it to reduce distress or pain. The commands are coded into the system: 'if pleasurable, prolong it, if unpleasant, make it go away.'

Either way, moment by moment, people are inextricably tied to plans to change the way things are and thus, moment by moment, generating a new sense of self through these acts. Never satisfied with the way things are, one lives out life with a sense of incompleteness, a lack of peace, all arising out of this perceived sense of 'I.' It is a simple, meaningless and futile process. Like waves in the ocean, the mind moves towards or away from stimuli.

Realizing the futility of this process, the Buddhist who meditates chooses to cultivate a healthy desire to get off this merry-go-round brought on by relishing and clinging to desire. When a moment of arising desire is coolly noted by the detached, meditating mind, there comes a special moment of opportunity. The meditator cultivates the skill of learning to focus on letting go or releasing the accurately seen sense of wanting as soon as it appears in consciousness. Thus, instead of moving towards the desire, the mediator chooses to remain stable, not attaching to the new input. The desire, seen for what it is, fades and the mind quickly returns to a state of equanimity—and through cultivation—bliss.

As arising desires are not picked up and indulged, not actualized into new 'selves,' the whole world of subject and object slowly dissipates. Buddhism teaches that what remains after cultivation of this unattached knowing is true reality, the bare knowing of the sensory input of the body. This peaceful, unconditioned sense of being brings strength and stability to the mind. Eventually, the meditator loses all sense of self, and one day crosses a final barrier into a state of unbroken peace and bliss, into Nirvana or Nibbana, the final, full death of the self. (VanLeit n.d.:47)

Much more could be said regarding Zen Buddhism, tantric practices in Tibetan Buddhism, and other forms. There are forms of meditation that seek to empty the mind of all thoughts (Smithson 2006). Some actually seek to visualize demons or move to become companions of spirits (Gross and Muck 2003:24, 25).

### **Contrast of Biblical and Buddhist Meditation**

Similarities between biblical and Buddhist meditation primarily exist in the area of morality and compassion. Both include forms of meditation to focus thinking away from what is impure to what is right and good. However, even in areas of morality, Buddhist and biblical meditation are different. Buddhist morality is focused on interaction with humans and personal purity of thought, not on a connection with a personal God. Buddhism in the Theravada tradition has no room for an ultimate God in its meditation. The focus is on one's own efforts alone. Biblical meditation, on the other hand, moves people towards God, with the focus of meditation often being directed on God's character and actions.

Even the biblical emphasis of meditation on the law is closely tied to a relationship with God, since the first four of the Ten Commandments are concerned with how to worship and honor God. Throughout the Bible morality is concerned with one's relationship with God as well as with people and personal holiness. Theravada Buddhist teaching may encourage people to meditate on the Buddha statue in various positions for the purpose of helping people to follow Buddha's example. Christians do the same with Jesus' life or characteristics of God. However, typical Buddhist teaching does not encourage praying to the Buddha, whereas biblical meditation often leads to prayerful dependence on God for mercy and transformation.

For example, Ps 39 begins with insights similar to Buddhist thinking. Verse 3 speaks of the Psalmist meditating, followed by vv. 4-6 speaking of the impermanence of life with every person at his or her best state being but vapor. However, the meditation ends with a different conclusion than



Buddhism. "My hope is in You [God]. Deliver me from all my transgressions" (Ps 39:8).

Because Buddhism and Christianity have a different view of reality, the focus of meditation is also often different. Buddhism teaches that there is no self, no real, lasting person, just aggregates coming together for a short time. Christianity teaches that God made humans from the dust and gave them life. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, humans can have an eternal soul. When a Buddhist meditates on his body, the purpose is merely to become aware of his breathing, discomfort, or pleasure. He notes the coming and passing of those feelings and experiences, primarily observing that nothing lasts. Biblical meditation would not stop with such observations of the natural world, but would look beyond them to the spiritual realities revealed by God in his Word. A person might observe the body and move to thankfulness to God for the special design and abilities God has created. He might observe impermanence and be thankful to God for the promise of eternal life.

Buddhists and Christians may both meditate on the hurtfulness of desires and the impermanence of the world; however, the conclusion will be different. Buddhist meditation is used to detach from everything in the world and all desires, both "good" and "bad." It is to break free from the illusions or delusions of life. Biblical meditation leads to a turning from selfishness and the hurtful things in the world to pure and joyful relationships in the present along with spiritual and concrete pleasures of an eternal heaven. Some Buddhist meditation focuses on non-duality, the idea that good and evil are all part of the same reality and should be accepted. The Bible teaches a clear distinction between good and evil and the future hope of the entire elimination of evil. Biblical meditation therefore emphasizes turning from evil towards good.

Beyond differences in morality and reality, the ultimate goals of meditation in Buddhism and biblical Christianity are entirely different. Buddhism teaches that through meditation one can gain enlightenment and thus be able to escape the cycle of suffering and enter *nirvana* (emptiness or a different state of unexplainable bliss). The Bible teaches that the end of suffering and eternal life are gifts from God, received by faith. Biblical meditation is not to be used to reach those goals. Biblical meditation is intended to help a person grow further in moral holiness, compassionate relationships, and intimacy with God. Christians see meditation as a spiritual exercise that can aid them in receiving what God has already given them in Christ. They do not meditate in order to be saved, but as a faith-filled step to further receive God's blessings.

From this it can be concluded that Buddhist meditation in its full form is clearly the offer of a different way to be saved from suffering than what

the Bible teaches. The Bible clearly says that salvation is possible only through Jesus. Buddhist meditation at its core disagrees.

Further exploration of the teachings of Zen Buddhism and tantric practices in Tibetan Buddhism need to be examined in light of Jesus' cautions regarding the emptying of the mind (Luke 11:24-26) and empty repetition (Matt 6:7, 8).

### **Beyond Meditation**

Some who compare these two kinds of meditation may assume that Buddhist meditation has much more to offer than biblical meditation does. Truly Buddhist meditation is much more complex and varied than biblical meditation; however, there is a very specific reason for this. Buddhism offers escape from all suffering through a path that is highly focused on meditation. The Bible offers escape from all suffering and an eternity with God through a very different means, namely, the death, resurrection, and intercession of Jesus Christ.

The Buddhist path is based on self-effort. The biblical path is based on God's power and mercy received through faith. Biblical meditation focuses on morality and God, leading to faith and prayer. It is not expected to be a method for reaching salvation. Buddhists meditate on morality with the belief that self-effort is sufficient and because of that necessity there must be a much more intense focus on their forms of meditation. Christians meditate on morality and on the ability of God to change their hearts and actions. Christians move to prayer as more effective for change than meditation. Buddhists meditate on the impermanence of life as a method to break free from suffering. Christians recognize their impermanence, their nothingness apart from God, but meditate on God's immutability, his immortality, and his gift of eternal life through Jesus. This leads to faith and salvation.

### **Implications for Ministry**

An understanding of the differences between biblical and Buddhist meditation has significant implications for Christian ministry among Buddhists. First, biblical meditation, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, can powerfully impact the characters of Christian witnesses, transforming their ways of interacting. Buddhists will be more attracted to the Christian whose life reflects the morality of the law and the purity of God's character. Truth spoken will be much more credible coming from a life that exemplifies the life of Christ.

Second, biblical meditation is an excellent activity through which Christians can make contact with Buddhists. Because of Buddhists'

interest in meditation, they can be invited to various experiences of biblical meditation. Through these experiences they can know about the areas of commonality in morality and personal purity, leading them to more deeply respect biblical Christianity. They will also see the limits of biblical meditation and have an opportunity to learn what the biblical path of salvation offers, namely, the reality of God, his grace through Jesus, and how it is received through faith. The appendix suggests specific ways that biblical meditation can facilitate these first two points.

Third, an understanding of the differences in the goals and concepts behind biblical and Buddhist meditation will lead a Christian to recognize God's clear call for Christians to share the gospel with Buddhists. Buddhism teaches salvation through self-effort, which the Bible declares as futile and impossible. Love compels the Christian to share salvation by grace through faith with those who are practicing meditation in order to escape suffering and death.

## Conclusion

Biblical meditation is primarily concerned with reflecting on God and his laws for the purpose of doing what is right and moving into a deeper faith relationship with God. Buddhist meditation covers many areas, including growth in morality and purity, but it is ultimately most interested in breaking through to enlightened insights that are intended to free a person from the cycle of suffering with the end result of entering *nirvana*.

Buddhist and biblical meditation, while similar in some basic respects of morality, are connected to completely different goals and concepts regarding reality and salvation. Buddhism sees meditation as an essential part of the path for escaping suffering, while biblical teaching turns to God's gracious act through Christ for salvation.

Christians may use biblical meditation to help them in their mission among Buddhists by experiencing greater personal transformation through it. They may also find it useful to invite Buddhists to participate in various forms of biblical meditation that will lead them closer to an experience of faith in the Savior God. An understanding of the differences in meditation can also motivate Christians to share the gospel with Buddhists.

## Appendix

### Benefits of Biblical Meditation

Biblical meditation has much to offer the Christian for personal growth. In turn, it is a useful means of ministry among Buddhists. Notice some of

the specific applications in the areas of family, church, workplace, and recreation.

First, biblical meditation can enhance the Christian family. God's Word has counsel for every aspect of family relationships. By meditating on biblical stories or texts and applying them to their lives, family members will grow in their ability to love one another. For example, a father may lead his family in worship, telling the story of Jesus and the leper. He vividly describes the difficulties and ugliness of the leper's situation. He pictures Jesus showing tender compassion, reaching out to touch the hurting man. Then the father asks his family to think about times when they were disgusted by some action of a family member, perhaps a brother who was selfish or a child who was naughty. He asks them to picture how Jesus would treat that person and then asks how they should also treat people who are disgusting. They discuss what has been meaningful to them in the meditation. He leads them in prayer, asking God to make their hearts more loving like Jesus.

Once a Christian family is growing through such biblical meditation, they can use something similar to help Buddhist families they know, whether one-to-one or in small groups. The Christian father may learn that his Buddhist friend is struggling in his marriage. He gives him a paper with the words, "Husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it" (Eph 5:28, 29a). He can tell how meditating on this scripture helped him think about his wife's feelings. He would never hit himself, so why would he hit her? Instead he learned to speak to his wife in the tone he wishes she would speak to him. The Christian then invites his Buddhist friend to carry this scripture with him, meditating on its meaning and applying it to his life. Later he tells him how he prays and asks God to fill him with patience and kindness. The whole Christian family might invite their Buddhist friends to a one-time experience of "Biblical Meditation for Family Wholeness," with the hope that it will become a weekly event. The first meditation could focus on moral stories like the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, while later introducing concepts about prayer and God's power. Such experiences need to be field-tested to see the level of impact this approach would have compared to traditional Bible studies.

Second, biblical meditation can improve the Church and its outreach. Many times programs in churches are so filled with activity that there is no time to think, meditate, or process the information that is shared. Much helpful counsel is lost because of this. Church leaders can use biblical meditation to help members retain and use what they hear. After any sermon or Bible study class, the leader should give a moment of silence

for the students to think about what has been taught. A preacher might say, "The Bible teaches us to 'speak the truth in love' (Eph 4:15). What would 'speaking the truth in love' look like with a church member that you don't get along with?" A children's teacher might ask her students to think about how they can practice the commandment to "Honor your father and your mother" in the following week. Questions with time for reflection can become a powerful moment of meditation.

Before the congregation sings a song, the leader might direct them in a short biblical meditation with a comment like, "Think about the difficulties you experienced this week and how Jesus can be like a mighty rock and a shade in a weary land for you today." This kind of biblical meditation helps church members apply God's Word to their lives and moves the church to be a place of compassion and spiritual depth that will attract thoughtful Buddhists. The Buddhist temple is often a quiet place with space and time for reflection. Christian worship may attract more Buddhists if the members took time to "be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

A specific example of biblical meditation that is worth further study is the prayer retreat center that is operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Korea. It is mostly Christians who come and spend a week there. Much of the time is spent meditating on the life of Jesus, especially his last days and death. The results are usually a time of intense conviction of sin and sincere repentance. It is difficult to know the actual impact this makes on their future witness to Buddhists, but it is interesting to know that quite a number of Buddhists have also attended and some have given their lives to God through the experience of biblical meditation.

Third, biblical meditation also has the ability to dramatically impact the Christian in his or her workplace through the application of biblical principles. Christians can meditate on such biblical stories as Daniel working for Nebuchadnezzar and Joseph serving in Egypt. They can ponder such texts as "Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men" (Col 3:23). Meditating first on the scripture, and then meditating on how to apply that scripture to their work, will give God the opportunity to bring greater honesty, generosity, purity, justice, and helpfulness into the work arena where Buddhists can see it.

Christians will also be able to share an effective method of life-transformation for the Buddhists with whom they work. For example, stress is a serious problem for many people. They need peace in dealing with high expectations, financial difficulties, and interpersonal problems. Whether one-to-one or in a small group, Christians can lead a meditation that focuses on scriptures and on God that will bring peace in the midst of stress. Interpersonal skills can also be improved through biblical meditation on

the Beatitudes, Proverbs, and other pertinent scriptures that deal with inter-personal relationships. Cultural qualities such as materialism and harmful entertainment can be challenged and replaced through careful reflection on Jesus' parables.

Fourth, biblical meditation even has potential to help Christians and Buddhists in the area of recreation. The Christian can be refreshed through meditation in nature. Research regarding time spent outside in natural beauty has shown significant benefits both for physical health and emotional wellbeing. It also can impact one's relationship with God. Creation is filled with evidence of God's existence and his loving care, which upon reflection bring hope, purpose, and joy. In our experience in Thailand, we discovered that Buddhists often find it easier to first learn about Christian principles and God in the familiar setting of nature rather than in church. Many Buddhist young people have opened their hearts in prayer for the first time on a retreat to the beach or the mountains. Meditation in nature initially feels more comfortable than Bible study. In time, both complement each other.

Here is another example similar to what we have tried. A Christian invites his Buddhist colleague to take a break from his hectic schedule to enjoy a "day of peace." On a Saturday, the two men bring their families to a quiet place in nature. The Christian leads the group in discovering interesting things in the woods. They examine trees, leaves, flowers, and signs of animals. After discussing how green leaves take in carbon dioxide and given back oxygen, he asks, "What does this teach us about how we should respond when a person says something unkind to us?" As they look at a stagnant pond he asks, "What's the difference between this water and a clean, flowing stream? What can we learn about selfishness and generosity from this?" Together the families enjoy discovering that nature is amazingly full of lessons. They take time to be quiet, just observing nature or thinking about what needs to be improved in their own lives. At the right time the Christian leads them to ponder the concept that such intricate design in nature must have a Designer and that there surely must be a Teacher behind all the lessons. He shares with them his belief in the Creator God and the help this reality brings to his life. When he feels they are ready, he shows them what the Bible says about these various topics.

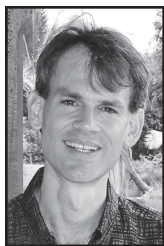
In summary, biblical meditation impacts Christians to make them a more Christ-like witness and appears to be an effective form of outreach to Buddhists. Much more field-testing and research needs to be attempted in the use of biblical meditation to impact Christians and their outreach to Buddhists and others. More DVD and audio resources should also be developed. This could be done in a style that includes meditation, Bible stories, modern testimonies, or scenes of nature combined with scriptures



and songs. The important part is asking thoughtful questions, followed by moments of quiet in which truth leads the one meditating to experience God's principles, his presence, and his peace.

### Works Cited

- Gach, Gary. 2002. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Buddhism*. Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books.
- Gross, Rita M., and Terry C. Muck. 2003. *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation, Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.
- McAlpine, Campbell. 2004. *Biblical Meditation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books.
- Nyanaponika, Thera. 1962. *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Piyadassi, Thera. 1964. *The Buddha's Ancient Path*. London: Rider & Company.
- Smithson, David G. 2006. *Prayer or Mantra? A Contrast between Christian Prayer and Eastern Meditation*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Seventy-Three Publications.
- Strong, James. 1990. *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Ussivakul, Vinai. 1996. *An Introduction to Buddhist Meditation for Results*. Bangkok, Thailand: Tippayawisuit.
- VanGemeren, Willem A. 1991. *Psalms. The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Vol. 5. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- VanLeit, Mark. n.d. *The Way to Emmaus—A Spiritual Odyssey*. Unpublished document.
- Yandell, Keith, and Harold Netland. 2009. *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Yungen, Ray. 2006. *A Time of Departing*. 2nd ed. Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing.



Scott Griswold is the associate director for ASAP Ministries. He previously worked as the director for Global Mission's Buddhist Study Center in Thailand and as a church planter in Cambodia with Adventist Frontier Missions.