

A Question About “Purity of the Teaching”

Christian Meditation, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s Mantras and the Universality of Effortless Transcending

Without much public notice outside the Christian contemplative world, and certainly below the radar of those who grew up immersed in TM movement culture, the teaching of transcendence as taught by Swami Brahmananda Saraswati (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s guru) has spread around the world on a truly impressive scale through other channels completely independent of any involvement of Maharishi or his movement.

This transmission of teaching how to transcend has gone directly from Maharishi’s Guru Dev, Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math from 1940 to 1953, through one of Guru Dev’s disciples at Jyotir Math (details below), and spread throughout the Christian world with no involvement of Maharishi whatever. It has grown into a worldwide movement completely without the TM movement’s noticing.

That disciple of Guru Dev, Swami Satyananda, was himself an ordained Swami (which Maharishi was not eligible to become) and was considered qualified to convey mantras for meditation, which according to orthodox doctrine Maharishi was not. It will be interesting to note the striking difference in the way Maharishi taught mantras compared with the way the Swami who studied with Guru Dev taught them. This distinction is important at this moment in the re-examination of Maharishi’s legacy.

Here is the story of how effortless transcending meditation as taught by Maharishi’s Guru Dev came to be practiced throughout the Christian world under the name “Christian Meditation.” (Christian Meditation is supported by the World Community for Christian Meditation www.wccm.org, which has more than 3000 groups in over 120 countries.) From a 2014 article by Dr. Stefan Reynolds:

Before he became a Benedictine monk, while serving in the British Colonial Service in Malaya from 1955-56, John Main (then Douglas Main) met a Hindu monk, Swami Satyananda, who taught him how to pray with a mantra. ... Sent on an apparently routine assignment to deliver a good-will message and a photograph to a Hindu monk John Main was deeply impressed by the holiness of Swami Satyananda. Main asked the swami to discuss the spiritual base of the many good works carried out at the orphanage and school Swami Satyananda had set up in Jalan Puchong near Kuala Lumpur. Many years later John Main reminisced in the talks he gave at Gethsemane monastery in Kentucky, USA:

‘I was deeply impressed by his peacefulness and calm wisdom. He asked me if I meditated. I told him I tried to and, at his bidding, described briefly what we have come to know as the Ignatian method of meditation. He was silent for a short time and then gently remarked that his own tradition of meditation was quite different. For the Swami, the aim of meditation was the coming to awareness of the Spirit of the Universe who dwells in our hearts in silence.’

The Swami not only ran an orphanage but also taught meditation FROM THE LINEAGE OF THE SHANKARACHARYA OF NORTH INDIA [emphasis added]. John Main asked the Swami whether as a Christian he could practice prayer using a mantra as the Swami taught. The swami agreed, ‘Yes, it will make you a better Christian,’ and invited John Main to come to a meditation centre once a week. ...

[In personal correspondence in 2024, Dr. Reynolds stated that Maureen Allan of The Study Society told him Swami Satyananda was a disciple of Guru Dev. The Study Society, which was founded in the early 1960s by Dr. Francis Roles, taught and still teaches transcendental meditation (not a trademark in the UK) under the authority of Guru Dev's successor, Shankaracharya Shantanand Saraswati, independently from any connection with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The record shows that Maureen Allan (who is now deceased) participated in 64 audiences with Shankaracharya Shantanand between October of 1967 and January 1993. It is clear she was a longtime friend of Shantanand and would have been in a position to hear from Shantanand about Guru Dev's connection with Swami Satyananda.]

This was at a time before Transcendental Meditation and the Beatles had made meditation well known in the west. The swami pointed out that since the young western visitor was a Christian, he must meditate as a Christian and HE GAVE HIM A CHRISTIAN MANTRA [emphasis added]. He also insisted it was necessary to meditate twice a day, morning and evening. For eighteen months Main meditated with the swami and it was this encounter that led him to the pilgrimage of meditation and eventually to discover the mantra tradition as taught by [the early Christian mystic] John Cassian, [c. AD 360 – c. 435]. ...

When John Main taught meditation, he recommended the Aramaic prayer word 'Maranatha.' Where Cassian proposed a longer prayer phrase or 'formula,' Main, influenced by his Hindu teacher and books like the fourteenth-century The Cloud of Unknowing, saw the benefits of a single word.

The influence of John Main's teacher comes not only in his teaching on the mantra but also in his advaitic or non-dual understanding of prayer. Swami Satyananda was originally a monk of the Ramakrishna Order and followed the Advaita Vedanta of Swami Vivekananda and its related mantra practice. Later he left the Order and studied the teachings of Sri Gurudeva, Shankaracharya of Jyotirmath from 1940-1953, a teaching closely linked to the advaitic tradition of Adi Shankara (788-820).

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The type of meditation Swami Satyananda taught John Main would have been the same as Guru Dev himself taught Maharishi:

My life truly began 16 years ago at the feet of my master [Swami Brahmananda Saraswati] when I learned the secret of swift and deep meditation, a secret I now impart to the world.

~ Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Los Angeles press conference, 29th April 1959

Dana Sawyer, Emeritus Professor of religious studies and world religions, has travelled extensively in India over many years. He speaks fluent Hindi and is friends with literally hundreds of Dandi Swamis of the same ordained order of monks as Maharishi's Guru Dev, Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, himself a Dandi Swami.

Professor Sawyer wrote:

Bhavatit Dhyana is only one of dozens of descriptive names for the traditional mantra japa [repetition] technique taught in the Shankara sampradaya [lineage]. It's also called mantra sati, Shankara mantra japa, jhana dhyana, etc.

As a test of sorts, I would get initiated into meditation by Dandis over and over again. [The mantras varied but] the procedure was always the same easy practice, with the same steps of initiation.

Between 1988 and 2005, I spent more than two years in the maths [monasteries] of Dandi swamis, including those of five Shankaracharyas, and the technique I practiced with them was no different from what I learned on TM TTC [teacher training course]. No concentration on the mantra and the same steps of initiation.

[In 2016 or 2017], I was initiated by Swami Swarupananda, present Shankaracarya of both Dwarka and Jyotirmath [at the time this was written; he is since deceased], and again it was the same thing, and since Brahmananda was his direct guru, I could even sing the identical puja [ceremony of reverence to the teachers] with him.

In short, TM is old wine in a newish bottle. I can't say that all Shankaracaryas use the same mantras (I've met the current three acaryas, and the one at Kanchi, but have not received their meditation instructions) but I can say that every Dandi swami that I've met, which is nearly half of all of them (there are about 500 in all) meditate exactly in the TM way, with no concentration. They too 'favor' the mantra easily. Furthermore, they all claim this is the traditional method.

In his doctoral thesis, *Sources and Issues in Contemporary Christian Contemplative Prayer: Thomas Keating's Centering Prayer and John Main's Christian Meditation*, (University of St. Michael's College, 2018) Jae Gil Lee noted:

... the overall attitude of gentleness and effortlessness, the acceptance of invasive thoughts as necessary elements, the downplaying of affection and emotion, the importance of the sound and rhythm, and the insignificance of the meaning of a prayer-word (or mantra), and the notion of consciousness.

These are precisely the characteristics that distinguish Shankara mantra Japa effortless transcending meditation as taught by the Dandi Swamis, including Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, from other forms of meditation.

Thomas Keating's Centering Prayer worldwide organization, named Contemplative Outreach, has over 120 official chapters in 39 countries, supports over 800 prayer groups and teaches Centering Prayer to more than 15,000 new people every year.

https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/93389/5/Lee_Jae%20Gil_201811_PhD_thesis.pdf

Christian Centering Prayer, Advanced Yoga Practices' deep meditation, Ascension Meditation, Natural Stress Release meditation, ACEM meditation and Dr. Herbert Benson's Relaxation Response technique have all been informed by the experience of effortless transcending as it was promoted by Maharishi.

Rather than deviating from the purity of teaching, these practices have RESTORED an important part of the teaching by enabling the use of secular mantras or mantras from other spiritual streams beyond Hinduism.

It may be that the ways of coaching meditators how to transcend might be refined or clarified in some of those variations, but they are nonetheless widely practiced with obvious success. Maharishi himself often said that it is the nature of the mind to transcend effortlessly, and he said repeatedly that this knowledge is nothing new.

By arbitrarily assigning Hindu deity mantras to everyone, Maharishi deviated from the traditional and orthodox practice of selecting mantras for meditation based on a person's ishtadevata (most favored object of devotion or aspiration, whether Hindu, Christian, secular, etc.). This has in fact created serious resistance to TM among people of faith and caused many large TM teaching projects to be shut down.

Christian Meditation, as it was transmitted by John Main who received it from Swami Satyananda who was himself a student of Swami Brahmananda Saraswati (who ALWAYS chose mantras based on ishtadevata), does not deviate from the purity of teaching in this regard.

Other effortless transcending meditation techniques go by such names as Vedic meditation, effortless deep meditation, Quiet Path Meditation, Self Recognition Meditation or Sahaja Samadhi meditation.

Even though Maharishi prescribed strict rules for the selection of mantras according to set algorithms, he himself deviated from them, as reported by highly credible sources.

In two reports from TM teachers working closely with Maharishi, he told the teacher, "Don't give the mantra based on the regular choice. Give him '_____' mantra. He'll enjoy that."

In another instance, again from a highly credible source, Maharishi told the TM teacher to "mix up the mantras" so the students wouldn't compare them and find out they all got the same mantra. This was an instance when the group all fit the same selection criteria. In fact, Maharishi gave that instruction too late, the students all got the same mantra, compared and figured out they had in fact all gotten the same mantra.

Maharishi's and his successors' top-down control of every detail of the process is only one possible way to assure the effectiveness of the teaching. Another way will be to make it open source and collaborative (as is the case with the Christian variations of effortless transcending meditation) and allow people to freely discuss experiences, compare notes, experiment and carry out a continual process of deepening attunement to the subtleties of the process. That is happening now in literally thousands of well-networked local support groups where such open "peer to peer" communication is encouraged and facilitated. It also bears mention that in most such groups, instruction is free.

It appears that Maharishi devised his system of mantra selection, deviating from the traditional method his Guru Dev practiced, to avoid having to discuss ishtadevata with non-Hindus – even while teaching Hindu mantras to adherents of other faith traditions. Clearly, as this article demonstrates, there are more universally acceptable options that can facilitate the worldwide dissemination of effortless transcending. Considering the ever-deepening existential crisis humanity faces today, it is urgent that effortless transcending meditation become available to literally every person on the planet.