CONGRUENT SPIRITUAL PATHS:  
CHRISTIAN CARMELITE AND  
THERAVADAN BUDDHIST VIPASSANA

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This paper compares the Christian Carmelite spirituality of St. John of the Cross with the practice of Theravadan Buddhist Vipassana meditation, with an emphasis on striking congruences between the two schools. Not only is the underlying developmental course similar, but these two spiritualities show striking topographical similarities as well; that is, the actual experienced practice is amazingly alike for two traditions with such apparently different underlying views of the nature of reality and different cultural backgrounds in which the practice unfolds.

GENERAL COMMON FEATURES

This paper follows a developmental framework, considering six major areas of similarity between the two schools. First is that both are developmental spiritualities, emphasizing stages of practice marked by critical periods. The stages of interior life described by John of the Cross closely match the unfolding of the dharma (Truth) as outlined in Buddhaghosa’s fifth-century work, the Visuddhi Magga (Path of Purification), which describes in detail the course of Vipassana practice. A second key point is that both schools claim that practice produces radical changes in the individual. Christian John of the Cross describes changes in one’s capacity for knowledge (true vision) and love that correspond to the Buddhist paramitas (perfec-
tions) that blossom in one who has overcome delusion and developed compassion, the two wings of Buddhism. Both schools also expect other highly similar virtues to appear.

Third, both traditions are also marked by a strong emphasis on interiority. Spirituality begins interiorly—though founded on establishment of basic moral purity—and interiority remains important. They emphasize increasing awareness of the nature of self, existent (or conditioned) reality, and God (or the Unconditioned). Fourth, however, both also share a mark of social implications. They insist upon one's very real connection to other people and to the whole created (or conditioned) order. Both expect highly similar and very real effects of practice on one's relationships, work, social concern, and other involvements in the social order.

Another similarity of both schools is the emphasis on discipline. This leaves them relatively invulnerable to any criticism that they might be concerned only with comfort. There is an apparent "starkness" that may seem very foreboding to the neophyte. Many similarities exist between the methods in Vipassana practice for overcoming the initial hindrances to spiritual practice and the suggestions of John of the Cross for mortification of inordinate appetites and letting go of attachments and aversions. Finally, in both traditions, not only is ascetic effort on the part of the practitioner important, but even more important are the purgative experiences that come to one in the course of practice. These "passive" purifications move one from merely accepting to actively embracing them as the chief means of spiritual growth. Many direct correspondences exist between the two schools in purgative effects experienced in the body, sensory processes, emotions, memory, and intellectual functioning.

PURITY OF CONDUCT: THE STAGE OF BEGINNERS

Preparatory Practice

Morality. Both traditions take as a given that the practitioner has purified his or her life of gross moral disorder. For the Christian, this means keeping the Ten Commandments. Buddhist morality (sīla) defines five basic precepts expected of all Buddhists: refraining from harming other beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and using substances that dull the

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1 The terms, "Buddhism" or "Buddhist," as used in this paper are to be understood as referring to the Theravada Vipassana path as distinguished from Vajrayana, Mahayana and other schools or methods of Buddhist practice.
mind and *lor* impair judgment. Those in monastic settings in both traditions undertake further rule or precepts designed to produce a greater depth of purity of conduct and move one toward lesser concern with oneself.

**Virtue.** The practice of initial virtues is also important. The key virtue is similar in both traditions. For the Christian, it is love—which would most often manifest as concern with the needs and feelings of others combined with active attempts to serve others in appropriate ways. *Dana,* or generosity, is the similar Buddhist practice. Buddhist practitioners agree with another Christian saint who said that "it is in giving that we receive" (Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi). For the Buddhist *siło* or morality and *dana* or generosity are the two key preliminary practices that ready one for the interior journey. For both traditions, such practices are, of course, not only preliminary, but continue throughout the spiritual life.

**Spiritual Practice**

*Asceticism.* Both traditions encourage a rather intense asceticism. This includes external practices, such as fasting regarding food and sleep, and avoiding certain sensual pleasures. Most important, however, is *altitudinal* asceticism. To that end, avoiding involvement in anything that might stir up sense desires is encouraged, as is reflecting on such topics as death and the problems associated with being trapped in desire. John of the Cross (Ascent I, 6ff.) describes how appetites torment, darken and blind, defile, and weaken one. In emphasizing the need to rid oneself of them, he warns: "All of [one's] attachments to creatures are pure darkness in God's sight. Clothed in these affections, a person will be incapable of the enlightenment and dominating fullness of God's pure and simple light.... The light of divine union cannot be established in the soul until these affections are eradicated" (Ascent I, 4: 1-2; pp, 77-78).

The starkness of John's asceticism is outlined in this familiar passage: "Endeavor to be inclined always: not to the easiest, but to the most difficult; not to the most delightful, but to the harshest; . . . not to what means rest for you, but to hard work; . . . not to the consoling, but to the unconsoling; . . . not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing" (Ascent I, 13: 6; pp 101-2). Vipassana practice similarly encourages the voiding of all greeds and aversions.

**Attention-focusing exercises.** A Christian who wants to develop the interior life often engages in *lectio divino,* in which Scripture is read or listened to, and then thought about. This
form of meditation is discursive, an active reflecting upon and pondering the gospel. Buddhist practitioners similarly begin to develop concentration. Common objects of their practice are such subjects as the loathsomeness of food and of the body, death and decay of the body, etc. Some reflections also are upon virtues, the development of wholesome states of mind, and heavenly beings. More "pure" (non-discursive) concentration exercises are also used by Buddhists.

State of Beginners

Of beginners, John says: "Since their motivation in their spiritual works and exercises is the consolation and satisfaction they experience in them, and since they have not been conditioned by the arduous struggle of practicing virtue, they possess many faults and imperfections in the discharge of their activities" (Night T, I: 3; p. 298). John describes the faults of these individuals in some detail under the rubric of each of the seven capital sins seen as manifesting in subtle "spiritualized" fashion: pride, avarice, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth (Night I, 2-7; pp. 299T).

Theravadin Buddhists think in terms of five hindrances which hamper the aspirant's progress: greed, aversion, sloth! torpor, restlessness! anxiety, and doubt. Greed encompasses lust, avarice, and gluttony from John's list. Aversion covers envy and anger. Sloth/torpor corresponds to John's sloth. Doubt involves concern about both the value of the practice in which one is engaged and one's ability to persevere. Restlessness! anxiety also reflects concern about self-approval and the opinions of others.

Functionally, the lists are quite similar. The primary problem is a habitual preoccupation with oneself, one's gratifications or dissatisfactions, and what both oneself and others think of one. John (Ascent III, 16T) elaborates greatly on the various kinds of such goods in which one can take satisfaction and the harm in so doing. Even delight in spiritual and moral goods carries risks. Buddhist practitioners find similar discussions of the hindrances and how to work with them in such writings as the Abhidhamma-Pitaka and the Visuddhi Magga. Overcoming them leads to the concentration, or Purity of Mind, necessary for practice to deepen.

EARLY INSIGHT: THE DARK NIGHT OF SENSE

The aspirant's earliest purgative experiences initially appear
rather different in Christian and Buddhist contexts. However, similarities between the two become apparent on examination. Buddhist terms describe two sub-stages of Vipassana practice here; the teachings of John of the Cross are related to them.

Purification of View

After establishing sufficient Purity of Mind (the Second Purity, after Purity of Conduct), the Vipassana meditator moves into the early stages of insight. "The Third Purity [Purity of Understanding or View] is attained by way of a thorough analysis of mind and body, and by the subsequent insight that these mental and material phenomena are void of an Ego" (Nyanatiloka, p. 164). According to Mahasi Sayadaw, "[One] knows and sees for [onejself] by noticing this: There is here only that pair: a material process as object, and a mental process of knowing it; and it is to that pair alone that the terms of conventional usage 'being', 'person' or 'soul' ... refer. But apart from that dual process there is no separate person or being. . . . This is called' Purification of View'" (Sobhana III, I; P 8). One thus sees phenomena just in themselves and realizes how quickly we leap to inferences (sanna, perception)-s-such as the existence of permanent essences-s-based on such experience.

This Buddhist experience corresponds well to one of the signs of John of the Cross that the aspirant is moving into the Dark Night of Sense. He said that one cannot meditate in the ordinary fashion to which one had become accustomed, using imagination or other mentation. This breakdown of ordinary mental processs, or discursive thinking, parallels the Buddhist meditator's experience of attention to processes only, not then drawing conclusions or a sense of identity from them.

A second sign of John's-i-concern that one is not serving God well-also seems related to the Buddhist disappearance of the active "I" doing the work of practice. While for John, the meditator is concerned over loss of a conscious sense of personal investment in the practice and love of God, the overall effects seem similar: the self is no longer in charge as it has been previously.

Purification By Escape From Doubt

John's final sign "is that as these souls do not get satisfaction or consolation from the things of God, they do not get any out of creatures either" (Night I, 9: 2; p. 313). "All is suffering in this
dark and dry purgation of the appetite, and the soul being relieved of numerous imperfections" (Night 1, II; p. 319).

At that time, the [Buddhist] meditator will generally experience many and various painful feelings arising in [the] body. Now, while one of these feelings is being noticed. . . another feeling will arise elsewhere; and while that is being noticed. again another will appear elsewhere.... Though [one] is engaged in noticing these feelings as they arise, [one] will only perceive their initial phase of 'arising' and not their final phase of 'dissolution' .... When that knowledge has come to maturity, the meditator will perceive only body-and-mind processes occurring in strict accordance with their particular and appropriate conditions and ... comes to the conclusion: Here is only a conditioning body-and-mind process and a conditioned body-and-mind process. . . . This is called .Purification (of Insight) by Overcoming Doubt' (Sobhana IV, 2; pp.9-10).

Like Christian ones, Vipassana meditators have experienced suffering in the deepening of practice.

As the Christian meditator no longer finds delight anywhere, the Vipassana meditator has now experienced the Buddhist three characteristics of conditioned reality: its momentariness (anicca), essencelessness (anatta), and unsatisfactoriness dukkha). "Having thus seen the three characteristics once or several times, by direct experience, the meditator, by inference from the direct experience of those objects noticed, comprehends all bodily and mental processes of past, present and future and the whole world by coming to the conclusion: 'They, too, are in the same way, impermanent, painful and without a self'" (Sobhana IV, 2; p. II). They now see experiences arising in rapid and discrete succession.

'Purity of Escape from Doubt' is that knowledge which comes about through comprehending the conditions for the arising of the Mental and Physical phenomena (namarupat. . . . The understanding of the Dependent Origination and of Karma and Rebirth are therefore also included here.... The wise [one] ... sees in reality only mental and corporeal phenomena kept going through the concatenation of karmic causes and results (Nyanatiloka, pp. 168, 170).

Effects of This Stage

According to John, "The first and chief benefit that this dry and dark night of contemplation causes is the knowledge of self and of one's own misery ... of which it was formerly ignorant. . . . It considers itself to be nothing and finds no satisfac-
don in self because it is aware that of itself it neither does nor can do anything" (Night I, 12: 2; p. 321). Buddhist self-knowledge also leaves one recognizing "self" as void, impotent, and unsatisfactory. One also becomes aware of karmic causes and effects based on past unwholesome volitions.

Mahasi Sayadaw notes that "there will also arise in [one] strong mindfulness pertaining to Insight. As a result, all the successive arisings of bodily and mental processes will present themselves to the consciousness engaged in noticing, as if coming to it of themselves; and mindfulness, too, seems as if alighting on the processes of itself" (Sobhana IV, 4: p. 12). The Christian analogue is the beginning of infused contemplation, in which the practitioner is passive before the ongoing prayer process. "As often as distinct ideas, forms, and images occur to [one], [one] should immediately, without resting in them, turn to God with loving affection, in emptiness of everything rememberable" (Ascent III, 15: I; p. 236). Thus, in both traditions, meditation becomes automatic without effort on the part of the practitioner.

Finally, for both, faith is greatly strengthened, lucidity breaks in, energy for one's practice is heightened, intensely positive experiences may occur, and happiness is high. "A person obtains in this night these four benefits: the delight of peace; a habitual remembrance of God, and solicitude concerning [God]; cleanliness and purity of soul; and the practice of virtue" (Night I, 13: 6; p. 325).

KNOWLEDGE OF PATH: THE STAGE OF PROFICIENTS

Delights and Benefits

Both practices then have a period of ease of practice-called the Illuminative Way or Stage of Proficients in the Christian tradition, and the Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away, culminating in Knowledge of Path and Not-Path, in Theravadan Buddhism. "The soul readily finds in its spirit, without the work of meditation, a very serene, loving contemplation and spiritual delight" (Night II, 1: I; p. 330). Virtues will have ripened in the Christian practitioner, and the joy of the fruits of the Holy Spirit will be manifest.

Vipassana meditation similarly is effortless. Concentration and mindfulness seem ever-present; insight knowledge is very lucid, keen, and strong. Deep faith pertaining to insight develops. A great tranquility and sublime happiness occur, along with great
enthusiasm and energy for practice. Such perfections (*paramitas*) as the "factors of enlightenment" begin to strengthen.

In both traditions one may have intense experiences that can be both painful and pleasurable, sequentially or at the same time. Speaking of the soul, John said, "[God] carried her out of herself in rapture and ecstasy. At the beginning this is accompanied by great pain and fear in the sensory part. ... The torment experienced in these rapturous visits is such that there is no other which so disjoins the bones and endangers the sensory part" (Canticle 13: 2, 4; pp. 458-9). Buddhist rapture produces similar effects. Its mildest form may be simply goose flesh, but it can also produce intensely painful, shattering experiences as well as sublime exhilaration. John attributes such effects to human weakness: "The sensory part of the soul is weak and incapable of vigorous spiritual communications [so] these proficients, because of such communications experienced in the sensitive part, suffer many infirmities, injuries, and weaknesses of stomach, and as a result fatigue of spirit" (Night II, 1: 2; p. 330).

**Dangers: The State of Proficients**

Both traditions warn of the danger of attachment to delights at this time, including possible feeling that one has already reached the summit of spiritual practice. "Illusions and deceptions so multiply in some, and they become so inveterate in them, that it is very doubtful whether they will return to the pure road of virtue and authentic spirituality" (Night II, 2: 3; p. 332). Mahasi Sayadaw says: "There arises further a subtle *attachment* of a calm nature. ... The meditator ... is not able to discern it as a corruption but believes it to be just the very bliss of meditation .... The meditator now believes: 'Surely I must have attained to the Supramundane Path and Fruition'" (Sobhana IV, 4; p. 15).

Both traditions speak of remaining subtle faults or defilements that need an even more rigorous purgation. "[There] are the imperfect affections and habits still remaining like roots in the spirit, for the sensory purgation could not reach the spirit. ... These proficients also have the so-called *hebetude mentis*, the natural dullness everyone contracts through sin" (Night II, 2: 2; p. 331). Buddhists speak of the ten defilements, subtle karmic-based imperfections, that require the four successive enlightenment to completely uproot. These include greed, hatred, and various manifestations of ignorance and ignorance-rooted egotism.
Eventually, the Buddhist meditator "comes to this decision: 'The Brilliant Light and the other things experienced by me, are not the Path. Delight in them is merely a corruption of Insight. ... I must go on with just the work of noticing'" (Sobhana V; p. 16). Similarly, for the Christian, "until the spiritual purification is completed, the tranquil communication is seldom so abundant as to conceal the roots which still remain. The soul does not cease to feel that something is lacking or remaining to be done" (Night II, 7: 6; p. 343). One realizes that "union with God ... will be measured by (one's] annihilation for God in the sensory and spiritual parts of[the] soul. ... The journey ... does not consist in recreations, experiences, and spiritual feelings, but in the living, sensory and spiritual, exterior and interior death of the cross" (Ascent II, 7: II; p. 125). "The entire matter of reaching union with God consists in purging the will of its appetites and feelings, so that from a human and lowly will it may be changed into the divine will, made identical with the will of God" (Ascent III, 16: 3; p. 238).

THE COURSE OF PRACTICE: THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

John of the Cross says that, in the first Dark Night, only the sensual part of one's nature is purged, but in the Dark Night of the Soul both are purged. "God divests the faculties, affections, and senses, both spiritual and sensory, interior and exterior. [God] leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessing" (Night II, 3: 3; p. 333). This is because "the soul must ... be set in emptiness and poverty of spirit and purged of every natural support, consolation, and apprehension ... Thus empty, it is ... thereby able to live that new and blessed life which is ... union with God" (Night II, 9: 4; p. 347).

This general strippedness of everything in terrifying purgative experiences corresponds to the Vipassana meditator's experiences in the final states of insight, called Purification by Knowledge and Vision of the Course of Practice. The sub-stages of this-s-which do not necessarily occur in order and may be cycled through many times-have highly colorful descriptive names: dissolution or annihilation, fearfulness or terror, misery, disgust or aversion, and desire for deliverance. "Because the one knowledge has understood all formations as terror, therefore the name' Awareness of Terror' has come into use. Because it has made known the misery of all those..."
formations, therefore the name 'Contemplation of Misery' is used. And because it has arisen through the turning away from all those formations, therefore it is called the 'Turning Away'
(Nyanatiloka, p. 179).

These experiences culminate in an ever-increasing equanimity, which is matched by a similar state in John's Christian experience. One then tolerates even more as the practice recycles through these experiences. John's statement that "a person's sufferings at this time cannot be exaggerated" (Flame I, 21; p. 587) holds true for both practices.

Dissolution

John explains the Christian experience. "Because the light and wisdom of this contemplation is very bright and pure, and the soul in which it shines is dark and impure, a person will be deeply afflicted in receiving it within [one]self . . . . When this pure light strikes in order to expel all impurity, a person feels so unclean and wretched that it seems God is against [one] and [one] is against God" (Night II, 5; p. 336). "Purgative contemplation . . . so disentangles and dissolves the spiritual substance-s-absorbing it in a profound darkness-i-that the soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away and being undone by a cruel spiritual death" (Night II, 6; I; p. 337).

For the Buddhist meditator in the dissolution phase, only the passingness of all phenomena seems noticed. It feels as if one can no longer meditate properly because all experiences are gone before one has really grasped their presence. Sometimes there is no perception at all of a form; parts of one's body, other objects, or even oneself seem void and are not even experienced. As the Christian feels cut off from God, the Buddhist feels as if insight—the path to deliverance—is gone. As the Christian feels dissolved, so also is the Buddhist aware only of dissolution. One Buddhist meditator composed this short haiku poem:

A froth of foam
Upon the sea.
--That's all.

Terror or Fear

"The meditator also understands by inference that in the past, too, every conditioned thing (formation) has broken up in the
same way, that so it will break up also in the future and that at present it breaks up, too. . . . These formations will appear to [one] in their aspect of fearfulness” (Sobhana VI, 5: p. 19). Terror sets in as one becomes vividly aware of having absolutely nothing that can be clung to—that there is no security anywhere. Another haiku poem captures the flavor of this experience:

Windswept snow—
Nowhere a hearth
To warm by.

Note that throughout such experience, the meditation practice proceeds with both great poise and intensity.

The Christian practitioner "feels terrible annihilation in its very substance and extreme poverty as though it were approaching its end. This experience is expressed in David's cry: 'The waters have come in even unto my soul; I am stuck in the mire of the deep, and there is nowhere to stand” (Night II, 6: 6; p. 339). One feels there is nowhere to turn and no solution. "These afflictions pierce the soul when it. . . remembers the evils in which it sees itself immersed, and it becomes uncertain of any remedy” (Night II, 7; I; p. 340).

Misery

"At this stage a person suffers from sharp trials [of] intellect, severe dryness and distress [of] will, and from the burdensome knowledge of [one's] own miseries in ... memory, for [the] spiritual eye gives. . . a very clear picture of [one]self. In the substance of [the] soul, [one] suffers abandonment, supreme poverty, dryness, cold, and sometimes heat. [One] finds relief in nothing, nor is there a thought that consoles. . . nor can [one] even raise [one's] heart to God, so oppressed ... by this flame” (Flame 1, 20; p. 587).

For the Vipassana meditator a great misery also sets in. "All formations everywhere—whether amongst the objects noticed, or among the states of consciousness engaged in noticing, or in any kind of life or existence that is brought to mind—will appear insipid, without a vitalizing factor, and unsatisfying. So [one] sees, at the time, only suffering, only unsatisfactoriness, only misery” (Sobhana VI, 7: p. 20). All of this suffering, however, is to be experienced as a mind-state, without the meditator's getting "lost" in the experience.
Disgust or Aversion

"While the disciple devoted to the practice turns away from all formations of existence and finds no longer delight in them, [the] mind no longer clings to any formation of existence and . . . is filled with the one desire: to be freed from all forms of existence" (Nyanatiloka, p. 180). Nothing has any value worth striving for, often even one's own practice! Frequently it is all one can do to continue with the practice, and often one would happily lie down and die. "Even if [one] directs . . . thought to the happiest sort of life and existence, or to the most pleasant and desirable objects, [the] mind will not take delight in them, will find no satisfaction in them. On the contrary, [the] mind will incline and lean and tend only towards Nibbana" (Sobhana VI, 8: p. 20).

The Christian meditator has similar experiences. "Both the sense and the spirit, as though under the immense and dark load, undergo such agony and pain that the soul would consider death a relief" (Night II, 5: 6; p. 337). One has come fully to realize, in a sense that mirrors the core Buddhist teaching of dukkha (suffering), that "all the delights and satisfactions of the will in the things of the world in contrast to all the delight that is God are intense suffering, torment, and bitterness. . . . All the wealth and glory of creation compared with the wealth that is God is utter poverty and misery" (Ascent I, 4: 7; p, 80).

Desire for Deliverance

Now an intense desire for the culmination of the spiritual voyage arises. The Christian feels "an impatient desire and longing for God. . . . The desire of the lover to apprehend and be united with the Beloved is so ardent that any delay, no matter how slight, is long, annoying, and tiresome" (Night II, 19: 5; p. 375). Indeed, "the suffering and the pain arising from God's absence is usually so intense in those who are nearing the state of perfection, at the time of these divine wounds, that if the Lord did not provide, they would die" (Canticle 2; p. 424).

In Buddhist practice, "when through this knowledge (now acquired) [one] feels disgust with regard to every formation noticed, there will arise in [one] a desire to forsake these formations or to become delivered from them ... At that time, usually various painful feelings arise in [the] body" (Sobhana VI, 9; p, 20). Both the yearning and the physical pain may be more intense than any ever before experienced by the meditator. A great restlessness may also set in, and one can
continue to sit in meditation only by observing the greatest mindfulness.

Equanimity

Finally, "after [one] has thus understood all the formations of existence, [one] no longer clings to anything and is filled with perfect equanimity regarding all formations" (Nyanatiloka, p. 81). "[One] cherishes no desire nor hate with regard to any object, desirable or undesirable, that comes into the range of [the] sense doors, but taking them as just the same in [the] act of noticing, [one] understands them (that is to say, it is a pure act of understanding) .... It is said in the 'Path of Purification' tVtsuddhi Magga), 'Having discarded fear and delight, [one] is impartial towards all formations'" (Sobhana VI, 11; p. 23).

In the greatest afflictions of all kinds, filled with yearning for the goal, the Christian, too, comes to perfect equanimity. "Not finding satisfaction in anything, nor understanding anything in particular, and remaining in emptiness and darkness [one] embraces all things with equal preparedness" (Night II, 8; p. 345). "True love receives all things that come from the Beloved-prosperity, adversity, even chastisement-with the same evenness of soul, since they are [God's] will"(Canticle 11, 10; p. 451).

UNION: NIBBANA

Fruition

In both traditions, bridge experiences occur that reflect the theistic and non-theistic natures of the respective belief systems behind the practice. For Christian mystics like John, there are often betrothal-like experiences. The Buddhist meditator may have times of complete loss of experience of any kind-a cessation of the experience of phenomena. "A type of knowledge manifests itself that, as it were, falls for the first time into 'Nibbana,' which is void of formations (conditioned phenomena) since it is the cessation of them" (Sobhana VI, 14; p. 26).

What can be said of the culminating experience? For the Buddhist it is Nibbana, that extinction of all craving that chains one to conditioned existence. "During the Fruition Attainment, the mind will abide only in the cessation of formations, and will not be aware of anything else" (Sobhana VII, 18; p. 29). A quote from John of the Cross captures the same flavor: "Inasmuch as one has nothing in [one's] heart, [one] possesses
The first experience is not the complete process, as St. Paul states, with great liberty." This contrasts with the starting position of the practitioner in both traditions: "Insofar as [one] possesses [things] with attachment, [that one] neither has nor possesses anything, rather [the] heart is held by them and [one] suffers as a captive" (Ascent III, 10:3; p. 247). It is such captivity from which meditators in both traditions break free.

For John, the culmination is the clear seeing of God that causes the soul's complete likeness to God. "The soul...has reached this enkindled degree, and is so inwardly transformed in the fire of love and has received such quality from it that is not merely united to this fire but produces within it a living flame" (Flame Prologue, 4; p. 568). John's poem "Dark Night" describes the soul's bliss:

I abandoned and forgot myself,
Laying my face on my Beloved;
All things ceased; I went out from myself,
Leaving my cares
Forgotten among the lilies.

Night Prologue, p. 296

The Full Path

Both John and the Visuddhi Magga, Buddhaghosa's comprehensive fifth-century treatise on the course of Vipassana practice, note that the first experience of God or Nibbana is not the complete process. The Buddhists say that four different enlightenments are necessary, each eliminating some of the defilements. One goes back to the "arising and passing away" stage of Vipassana practice after an enlightenment experience, from there to again experience the intense purifying effect of the advanced states of insight. As one has more equanimity and can accept more, successive passages through this stage are typically more intense.

John says, "The state of perfection, which consists in perfect love of God and contempt of self, cannot exist without knowledge of God and of self...It is now given the one, in which it finds satisfaction and exaltation, and now it is made to experience the other and is humbled until the ascent and descent cease through the acquisition of perfect habits" (Night II, 18:4; p. 373). "When a person feels safest, and least expects it, the purgation returns to engulf [one] in another degree more severe, dark, and piteous than the former and which lasts, perhaps longer than the first" (Night II, 7:6; p. 342-3).
Tire Fruits

There are fruits for this life. In the Christian, one finds the virtues perfected, especially love of God and others. Similarly, in the Buddhist, the two wings of Buddhism—wisdom and compassion—are both highly developed. For both, this will mean a vision of life that encompasses the whole of existence in place of concern with oneself. The fruits will manifest quite differently in different people, but in all one is likely to find a broad social concern.

For both, this earthly life is the only thin veil remaining. After the full path, the Buddhist will enter his or her parinirvana upon death. For the Christian, "The last step of this secret ladder of love assimilates the soul to God completely because of the clear vision of God which a person possesses as soon as he (or she) reaches it. After reaching the ninth step in this life, the soul departs from the body.... This vision is the cause of the soul's complete likeness to God" (Night II, 20: 5; p. 377).

EPILOGUE

To reach satisfaction in all, desire its possession in nothing. To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing. To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing. To come to the knowledge of all, desire the knowledge of nothing ....

When you turn toward something, you cease to cast yourself upon the all. For to go from all to the all, you must deny yourself of all in all. And when you come to the possession of the all, you must possess it without wanting anything. . . . In this nakedness the spirit finds its quietude and rest. For in coveting nothing, nothing raises it up and nothing weighs it down.

John, Ascent I, 13: 11; pp. 103-4

NOTE

John of the Cross: Works of John of the Cross are indicated thus: Ascent (Ascent of Mount Carmel), Night (The Dark Night), Canticle (The Spiritual Canulei), Flame (The Living Flame of Love). All are identified by chapter, section, verse, or line so that they can be located in any edition. Page numbers given are those from the reference given below.

Mahasi Sayadaw: His work is the Sobhana reference below. Citations
are identified by section (indicating which purity is being considered) and sub-section.

REFERENCES


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