

# Buddhist Generation and Ignatian Contemplation: Skillful Use of the Imagination in Interreligious Contemplative Dialogue

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## I. Introduction

I begin with a true story from a Buddhist Christian dialogue on the contemplative life. While moderating a panel discussion on this topic at my seminary, I began by asking each participant to speak briefly about what is most distinctive about prayer and meditation in their tradition. The Christian said that what really distinguishes these activities as Christian is that they are about relating with an Other, namely, God in Christ, through the Spirit. The Buddhist replied that for her, too, meditation and prayer are about relationships. This elicited audible surprise from many of those gathered (an entirely Christian audience). Unfortunately, we were unable at the time to inquire further into this supposed similarity. I later asked the Buddhist speaker what she had meant, and she referred to much Buddhist practice wherein one engages in meditation upon one's guru or other personages of the lineage, and upon the meditation deity (yid.dam.). In brief, she had responded by pointing to that aspect of Buddhist practice called generation, development, or creation stage, in Tibetan, kyerim (bsked.rim.) and often referred to as visualization practice.<sup>1</sup>

The general surprise of those gathered seemed based on an assumption that Buddhist practice is comprised entirely of formless or imageless practices, whereby one strives only to enter into a state undisturbed by relationships with others and with the outside world. While scholars in the dialogue and many others certainly know better, this caricature is apparently still popular enough. But there may too be a link here to the history and practice of the Buddhist-Christian contemplative dialogue as well. For, until fairly recently, that dialogue has paid greater attention to more so-called formless or imageless prayer and meditation.

How truly void of forms or images the meditating, praying mind and heart can be is debatable. A collection of articles edited by Rita Gross and Terry Muck<sup>2</sup> demonstrates a

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<sup>1</sup> As an important aspect of interreligious dialogue is allowing participants to define themselves (see Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue," *Horizons* 10:2 [Fall 1983] 348-51), it is important first to accept this attestation to her own religious experience as relational. But we must also reflect critically upon what differences are important to each tradition about a relationship with a yidam and a relationship with Christ.

<sup>2</sup> *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation. Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer* (New York, London: Continuum, 2003).

certain asymmetry in the contemplative dialogue. The Christian authors fulfill the editors' request to relate their experiences with Buddhist meditation; but the Buddhist practices to which committed Christians have access are predominantly of the *relatively* imageless sort (e.g., Adeney's entering silence and Frohlich's encounter with "don't know" mind). The Buddhist authors, naturally more experienced in the wider array of their own practices, suggest many Buddhist practices employing forms and images and having parallels to Christian prayer, from vows and sutra services (Aitken) to tantric sādhanas (Gross). Consequently, Christians are not often aware that many Buddhists also employ images, the imagination, and relational prayer in generation stage practice. It may also be the case that most practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism are unaware that there is an intriguing analogue to their generation stage practice in the Christian tradition of discursive or mental prayer. This paper, then, intends to advance Buddhist-Christian contemplative dialogue by comparing practices in each tradition that focus on the use of the imagination and by offering an initial catalogue of some very intriguing similarities in this area.<sup>3</sup>

Rita Gross's essay, "Meditation and Prayer: A Comparative Inquiry" in the collection referred to above,<sup>4</sup> is very relevant to the issue of the differences and similarities between Buddhist meditation and Christian prayer. From this same collection of articles, perhaps the one most analogous methodologically to mine insofar as it considers two specific practices side-by-side, is Taitetsu Unno, "Jesus Prayer and the Nembutsu."<sup>5</sup> Though Thomas Cattoi recently noted the connection between visualization and Ignatius,<sup>6</sup> I am not aware of any previous detailed analysis of the connection.

Roger Corless was the first to bring Buddhist and Christian practices with form together, and in a most intriguing way. He did this, moreover, quite aware of the workings and importance of imagination and kyerim practice. In his *I am Food: The Mass in Planetary Perspective*,<sup>7</sup> Corless used aspects of Tibetan Buddhist practice both to interpret the Mass itself and as a framework to help certain Christians regain entry to the profundity

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<sup>3</sup> Contributions to the dialogue on Buddhist and Christian practice in general include Robert Aitken and David Steindl-Rast, *The Ground We Share: Everyday Practice, Buddhist and Christian* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1996); Mitchell, Donald W. and James A. Wiseman, O.S.B., eds. *The Gethsemane Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* (New York: Continuum, 1998) esp. 34-67; and Patrick Henry, ed., *Benedict's Dharma: Buddhists Reflect on the Rule of Saint Benedict* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> *Christians Talk*, pp. 88-100.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 109-17.

<sup>6</sup> Ponyik, Mary Jane and Kent Lasnoski, eds., *CTSA Proceedings*, Vol. 69 (2014) 116 (at <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ctsa/article/view/5544/5007> ).

<sup>7</sup> (New York: Crossroad, 1981)

of the Mass. He also suggested many parallels between aspects of the Mass and Tantra: most basically, Mass and mandala, including specifics such as the offertory rite and the offering of a mandala plate (36, 69) and more generally Teresa's interior castle and the palace mandalas of Buddhist deities (39-40); visualization practice as a way to enter what into Corless called the 'visions' of the Mass, like the Gloria (45); the communion rite and pride of the deity (31); etc.

In what follows, I too will liken parts of Buddhist and Christian practices to each other; but my intention is different from Corless's who used tantric Buddhist practice as an interpretive lens through which to see a Christian practice. I do not attempt to illumine one practice with light from the other; rather, I suggest and try to show that it is the light generated by both traditions that make possible our mutual recognitions of each other as spiritual kin.

Dialogue about Buddhist and Christian spiritual practice has now come to include the experience of so-called dual belongers like Paul Knitter, Roger Corless (d. 2007), Ruben Habito, Sallie King, *et al.* Two works that provide excellent analysis of the possibilities and limitations of syncretizing, blending, or otherwise joining both Buddhist and Christian practices in one subject are *Buddhist and Christian? An exploration of dual belonging* by Drew Rose<sup>8</sup> and, *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging: Affirmations, Objections, Explorations* by Gavin D'Costa and Ross Thompson.<sup>9</sup> It will be clear that this paper is not an instance of that enterprise. It will show that, in this regard at least, both traditions share much insight and great skill in using images and the power of imagination to cultivate spiritual progress.

The reader must not misunderstand this claim of significant shared insights. The convergences I will detail here relate to skillfulness at the level of spiritual strategy or practices; I make no claim for convergences at the level of the theological or religious content of these two quite distinct traditions. Convergences at the level of form and technique, while not strictly theological, are certainly still religiously significant, for they issue from the depths of each tradition and have their respective devotees training their hearts and minds in very particular and, as we shall see, quite similar ways. As Michael Barnes writes, "To accept very different concepts of true personhood, ideals of what makes for human destiny or fulfillment, does not mean that there is not a roughly similar strategy of achieving true human personhood at work."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), especially 164-205 on 'Practice'.

<sup>9</sup> (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2016)

<sup>10</sup> Michael Barnes, SJ, *Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 161.

Finally, relevant to the intersection of Buddhist kyerim and Catholic prayer and meditation, and offering a critique and alternative to dual belonging, is Robert Magliola's *Facing Up to Real Doctrinal Difference: How Some Thought Motifs from Derrida Can Nourish Catholic-Buddhist Encounter*.<sup>11</sup> Magliola recommends "more work in the use of Vajrayana Buddhist form" and suggests that "many Catholics take readily to visualizations (e.g., Ignatian 'mental images of place' and 'seeing the personages' in the *Spiritual Exercises*)" (170). What differentiates my article from Magliola's work in this area is that I wish simply to offer 'a close reading' of two similar-yet-different Buddhist and Christian practices. Magliola, on the basis of his deep, dual religious experience, is able to intend much more, namely, to lay the ground for the Church's development of an authentic, Asian-inculturated form of orthodox Catholicism.

## II. Buddhist and Christian Practices of Imagination

In the comparative theology group at the 2014 Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Thomas Cattoi included visualization practice in his outline of the notable convergences between Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.<sup>12</sup> This paper intends to build upon this similarity by considering a pair of texts from each tradition that offer more striking parallels: a contemplation from Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* and a Buddhist sādhana.

### A. Buddhist Generation Practice

Generation stage practice is the first of two stages of meditation comprising a sādhana (sgrub.thabs., literally, 'means of accomplishment').<sup>13</sup> The other is the completion stage, in Tibetan, *dzogrim* (rdzogs.rim.). Jamgön Kongtrul distinguishes the stages by saying, "Creation stage is mainly for undermining the deluded appearance of ordinary reality, and completion stage for undermining attachment to the reality of that creation stage

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<sup>11</sup> (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2014) especially 169-75.

<sup>12</sup> Ponyik, Mary Jane and Kent Lasnoski, eds., CTSA *Proceedings*, Vol. 69 (2014) 116 (at <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ctsa/article/view/5544/5007>). Other instances of recent interest in the *Spiritual Exercises* among those engaged in this dialogue include Ruben L. F. Habito, *Zen and the Spiritual Exercises* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2013) and Len Tischler and Andre Delbecq, "Using The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola as a Basis for a Buddhist-Christian Retreat," in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 35 (2015) 213-17.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Cozort, "Sādhana (sGrub thabs): Means of Achievement for Deity Yoga," in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*. Edited by José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson, 331–343 (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1996) 333.

itself.”<sup>14</sup> The creation stage, then, is a tool or skillful means employed to accustom the practitioner’s mind to the purity, emptiness, and luminosity of reality as-it-is. Part of its skillfulness is its succession by the completion stage, whereby the visualization itself is dissolved back into emptiness and thus ‘undermined’, meaning liberated from mistaken views of existence. Thus the relationship between generation and completion is one of profound unity and mutual interdependence.

Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche is representative of all teachers on the relationship of the two stages when he says, “The creation stage is never practiced alone or in isolation. It always has to be combined with, and succeeded by, the practice of the completion stage.”<sup>15</sup> However, the unity of the two stages is not merely sequential or extrinsic. Rather their unity reflects a unity in the very nature of mind that they intend to help the practitioner realize. Tulku Urygen Rinpoche explains, “Development stage and completion stage . . . are essentially two aspects of mind essence: emptiness and cognizance.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, each of the stages corresponds to one of the two basic aspects of mind. “To attain stability in the manifest, cognizant aspect we need the development stage. To attain stability in the empty aspect we need the completion stage.”<sup>17</sup>

There are many hundreds of sādhanas in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, very few of which have been translated into Western languages. For use here, I have chosen a simple one called *All-Pervading Benefit of Beings: The Meditation and Recitation of the Great Compassionate One*, written by Thangtong Gyalpo (ca. 1361-1485).<sup>18</sup> I will also employ the annotation upon this practice by the Fifteenth Karmapa, Khakhyab Dorje,<sup>19</sup> whose outline of the general structure of the sādhana may be simplified as follows:

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<sup>14</sup> Jamgön Kongtrul, *Creation and Completion: Essential Points of Tantric Meditation*. Translated and introduced by Sarah Harding (Wisdom: Boston, 2002) 41.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>16</sup> Tulku Urygen Rinpoche, *Rainbow Painting: A Collection of Miscellaneous Aspects of Development and Completion*. Trans. Erik Pema Kunsang (Boudhanath, Hong Kong & Aarhus: Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1995) 158.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Thangtong Gyalpo, et al. *Trainings in Compassion: Manuals on the Meditation of Avalokiteshvara*. Translated by Tyler Dewar under the guidance of The Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2004) 9. The sādhana itself is in this volume, 29-45. Janet Gyatso provides a brief commentary and translation of this same practice, but using a shorter, single-page block print version, in “An Avalokiteshvara Sādhana,” in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*. Edited by Donald S. Lopez, Jr., (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997) 266-70.

<sup>19</sup> Entitled *The Continuous Rain of Benefit to Beings*, this is also in Gyalpo, et al., *Trainings in Compassion*, 63-75.

1. The Preparation of Refuge and Bodhicitta
2. Meditating on (or Generating) the Deity
3. Invoking the Enlightened Heart through Supplication
4. Practicing the Deity Yoga of the Three Gates through Emanating and Gathering
5. Implementing the Practice in Daily Life
6. Dedicating the Roots of Virtue and Making Aspirations<sup>20</sup>

### 1. The Preparation of Refuge and Bodhicitta

While preparations are sometimes more involved, for this sādhana it consists only of the refuge and bodhicitta vows. The former is contained in the first two lines, “In the supreme Buddha, dharma and assembly,/ I take refuge until attaining enlightenment.”<sup>21</sup>

The Karmapa here instructs one to call to mind the great virtue and power of guru Avalokita<sup>22</sup> to save from the suffering of saṃsāra and to rouse great faith, longing, and trust, “faith that completely casts away all other hopes and objects of reliance, longing that calls out for his protection, and trust in such protection being certain.”<sup>23</sup> When the

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<sup>20</sup> Gyalpo, et al., *Trainings in Compassion*, 64. The Karmapa, or his editor, employs the following outline for the sādhana:

1. The Preparation
  - 1.1 Refuge and Bodhicitta
- 2 The Main Practice
  - 2.1. Meditating on the Deity
  - 2.2. Reciting the Mantra
    - 2.2.1. Invoking the Enlightened Heart through Supplication
    - 2.2.2. Practicing the Deity Yoga of the Three Gates through Emanating and Gathering
3. The Subsequent Activities
  - 3.1. Implementing the Practice in Daily Life
  - 3.2. Dedicating the Roots of Virtue and Making Aspirations

In simplifying this numbering to one through six, I have not changed any elements in any way, neither by addition, nor by subtraction, nor by altering their sequence. But, the force of my presentation here is to show that both the sādhana and the Ignatian contemplation in fact employ the same six kinds of spiritual and mental activities and employ them in the same order. The simplification of outline only makes the comparison of these similarities already present in the respective practices easier to appreciate. See the comparative chart near the end of this article.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Avalokita is simply a shortened form of Avalokiteshvara. The Tibetan is Chenrezik (sryan.ras.gzigs).

<sup>23</sup> Gyalpo, et al., *Trainings in Compassion*, 64.

mind possesses these qualities, one recites the refuge formula. Though the sādhanā text itself gives the plain instruction to take the vow three times (len.gsum.), Khakhyab Dorje's instructions are to say the formula "as many times as is suitable," which he clarifies as being until "unmoving certainty"<sup>24</sup> arises about the protection of the deity.

The bodhicitta vow is the next two lines, "Through the merit of practicing generosity and so on, / May I attain buddhahood in order to benefit beings."<sup>25</sup> One generates the wish to free all sentient beings and establish them in the happiness of buddhahood, which involves oneself becoming a buddha by practicing this sādhanā and following Avalokita's example. One takes the vow while developing this "clear certainty as to the purpose of this meditation."<sup>26</sup>

## 2. Meditating on (or Generating) the Deity

Here begins generation practice proper. First, the seed syllable HRIH is imagined or generated, sitting on a lotus and moon seat, which rests on the top of one's head. From that syllable, Avalokita arises.<sup>27</sup>

The text then describes the deity: smiling, looking on with compassion, his adornments, posture, implements, and so forth. Khakhyab Dorje instructs the practitioner to read slowly, dividing the text into sections, "clearly visualizing each aspect of [Avalokita's] body."<sup>28</sup> This refers to the first two of the three aspects of generation stage practice,

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>27</sup> This seed syllable's arising is actually the third of the three samadhis or absorptions (ting.nge.'dzin.rnam.pa.gsum) and recalling these here provides another opportunity to see the unity of creation and completion stage. The first samadhi is that of suchness, which refers to emptiness or absolute bodhicitta; the second is called all-illuminating and refers to compassion or relative bodhicitta; and the third is the causal samadhi, sometimes called the seed samadhi since it refers to the seed syllable that arises here on the sādhanā's head. What is important here is that the priority of the samadhi of suchness shows emptiness as not merely a stage or technique that sequentially follows creation stage practice; it is also the basis of the creation stage. We will soon see that the deity dissolves back into emptiness, but here we note that the deity also *arises from* emptiness, the absolute form of bodhicitta, inseparable from compassion or relative bodhicitta. On the three samadhis, see the collection of texts by Jigme Lingpa, Patrul Rinpoche, and Getse Mahapandita, in *Deity, Mantra, and Wisdom: Development Stage Meditation in Tibetan Buddhist Tantra*. Translated by the Dharmachakra Translation Committee (Ithaca and Boulder: Snow Lion Publications, 2006), especially the teachings of Jigme Lingpa and Patrul Rinpoche on 31-36. See also Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche's discussion in Kongtrul, *Creation and Completion*, 108-9.

<sup>28</sup> Gyalpo, et al., *Trainings in Compassion*, 66.

namely, clarity as ‘seeing’ the different elements of the visualization and, secondly, pure recollection, which is knowing the meaning of each element.<sup>29</sup>

It is important to realize that the practice of generation is not understood as merely mentally picturing something and has nothing whatsoever to do with pretending. Beneath the bare instructions of the text, there is meant to occur a dialogue between the sādḥaka and an enlightened being. This dialogic aspect is due in part to the fact that generation practice happens as much with heart and affect as with mind and images. Thus, while nontheistic, generation practice is indeed relational.

The sādḥaka’s own affective connection to the deity is of course only one part of this dialogic reality. To understand to whom the affect is directed and so grasp something of the relational nature of kyerim practice, we must attend to 1) the more-than-merely-representational understanding of yidams and 2) the wider tantric context of the three roots.

First, it is understood traditionally, scandalous as it may sound, that there ‘is’ a deity who, as Harding explains, is not “merely an abstract, symbolic form representing something other than themselves. This again would be a dualistic concept. They are enlightened form, and they are intrinsic as part of buddha nature.”<sup>30</sup> Thrangu Rinpoche teaches that the deities “are the forms of the sambhogakaya that buddhas take in order to communicate with and train beings.”<sup>31</sup> So the deities are not understood as *merely* representational, but as buddhas compassionately helping sentient beings. Without appreciating this traditional understanding, the teaching on yidams falls into the extreme of nihilism, the mistaken view that they simply do not exist. Second, we do well to recall the teaching on the three roots of guru, yidam, and protector and, within this context, the denotation of the word yidam. While *yid* means mind, *dam* is short for *damtshig*, the sacred vow one takes with one’s guru. The guru connects the disciple’s mind to the sacred by empowering him or her to do the practice of that yidam. When practicing one’s yidam, one is therefore also connecting to the guru. The affective and interpersonal nature of this connection is even sometimes indicated with instructions to see the yidam as one’s guru, to enliven the practice by exchanging loving glances, and so forth. And so, the relational nature of kyerim involves not just emptying oneself out into the dharmakaya, but the dharmakaya manifesting compassionately in the sambhogakaya as yidam and in the nirmanakaya as guru. Thus vajrayana is said to be, compared to the mahāyāna’s emphasis on emptiness, a return to form. This is why

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<sup>29</sup> Kongtrul, *Creation and Completion*, 15-16. We will see the third aspect, pride of the deity, in the fourth section of the sādḥana.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 10; emphasis original.

<sup>31</sup> In Kongtrul, *Creation and Completion*, 114.



Harding, in her comments on the nature of deity, ends not with the Heart Sutra's teaching that form is emptiness, but with its fuller teaching of "form and emptiness inseparable."<sup>32</sup>

### 3. Invoking the Enlightened Heart through Supplication

As prelude to the actual recitation of the mantra, the sādḥaka now supplicates by praising and prostrating to the deity. It is through such heart-felt supplications of invoking or calling down the blessings of the deity that the sādḥaka is attuned to the deity's energy and power. Thus Khakhyab Dorje instructs the sādḥaka to recite the four lines of supplication<sup>33</sup> "one hundred, twenty one, or seven times" in order to invoke Avalokita's enlightened heart (bodhicitta) within herself. "Recite," he says directly, "until certainty arises that your perceptions have changed."<sup>34</sup>

Here the affect is fully engaged in asking, calling, wanting. The importance of this in generation stage practice is evident from the fact that the two supplications which follow, "The Seven Branch Prayer" and "The Supplication of Calling with Longing," constitute the majority of the length of the entire sādḥana. Yet, even so, our annotator says, "Adding supplications of any kind that carry blessings will undoubtedly become a worthy extension."<sup>35</sup> From a Christian perspective, this is quite similar to affective prayer and, we will see, to the Ignatian prelude of petition.

### 4. Practicing the Deity Yoga of the Three Gates through Emanating and Gathering

This section, very short in the sādḥana text itself, is actually the main practice. The heart-felt supplications just completed now cause light rays to stream forth from Avalokita. When gathered, they "purify impure karmic appearances and mistaken consciousness" and render the entire world and all inhabitants, including oneself, all others, and indeed all appearing phenomena—as the very "body, speech, and mind of Avalokita."<sup>36</sup> Thus, the view that permeates the recitation of the famous six-syllable mantra, *Om Mani Padme Hum*, is that "appearances, sounds, and awareness are

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<sup>32</sup> Kongtrul, *Creation and Completion*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Gyalpo, et al., *Trainings in Compassion*, 33: "Lord, white in color, unstained by faults,/ A perfect buddha adorning your head,/ You look upon beings with eyes of compassion./ Avalokita, we prostrate to you."

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

inseparable from emptiness.”<sup>37</sup> As emanating the light rays, the sādḥaka, now practicing also the third aspect of generation, the pride of the deity which knows oneself to be inseparable from and identical in nature to the deity, streams forth purifying light to all reality and upon all beings. The mantra is “the embodiment of the energy and power of all the compassion and activity of noble Avalokita,”<sup>38</sup> and so filling one’s body, speech, and mind with it effects union with the meditation deity. Thus it is called deity yoga.

### **Brief Excursus on the Completion Stage**

At the end of the mantra recitation, one enters the completion stage. Here the generated deity dissolves into light, then into the practitioner, who then similarly dissolves into light. The sādḥana then gives these meditation instructions for the completion stage: “At the end, without conceptualizing the three spheres, rest evenly in your own nature”.<sup>39</sup> Our annotator further instructs, “Rest evenly for as long as possible in the luminous emptiness free of any conception about the three spheres [action, actor, and result] that clings to self and other, the deity and mantra. Let go of all references toward fabricated attributes such as existence and nonexistence, ‘it is’ and ‘it is not,’ and emptiness or non-emptiness. Free of viewer and viewed, not differentiating appearance, sound, and awareness from emptiness, rest for as long as possible in the mind of the Noble One, the natural face of great all-pervading dharmadhātu.”<sup>40</sup>

This is an aspect of the sādḥana without analogue in the Ignatian practice, but which provides an opportunity to mention the irreducible difference between the Buddhist and Christian understandings of the ‘existence’ of this deity and God. In the context of the dissolution into light, Rita Gross explains, “so whatever existence is attributed to [the Buddhist deity], it is not a conventionally existing, solid being. . . . In a nutshell, two points are important. First, everything that could possibly be called upon to indicate that there is no duality of self and ultimate reality is utilized in these liturgies. Second, even more important, the splendid beings visualized in these liturgies represent what we

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* This inseparability from emptiness here even at the heart of the generation stage points to a still deeper level of the unity of creation (cognizance) and completion (emptiness), known as “the profound approach.” Kongtrul indicates that authentic realization of this unity is very subtle and belongs to a quite advanced stage of the path. He writes, “Even though the unity of creation and completion is the profound approach, until the movement of thoughts arises as meditation, it is not the real practice of unity, so you should alternate their practice. Contrived unity is a mental fabrication and should be abandoned” (*Ibid.*). In other words, the very distinction of creation and completion as two stages is itself provisional, a skillful means.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

really are beneath our cramped, tiny sense of selfhood. . . . The question of the existential status of such beings cannot be answered by appeal to any conventional category. . . . [U]ltimately they are beyond the ‘four extremes’ [of existence, non-existence, both, and neither] . . . . Thus, they do not exist in the same way that the deity of Christianity is said to exist, *though the assumption that therefore they do not exist is also erroneous.*<sup>41</sup>

Gross is likely correct in thinking “there is [no] Western equivalent to this ‘status’<sup>42</sup> and if that is true of the nature of the yidam, then I suggest it is also true of what we can say about the nature of the relationship with the yidam: Without a Western (or better, Christian) equivalent, we must nonetheless recognize that it is characterized neither merely by the alterity of a real opposition of persons, nor by mere (i.e., merely representational) sameness.

## 5. Implementing the Practice in Daily Life

This section consists of just three lines of text, but they are important instructions or reminders not to abandon the sacred view upon completing the recitation.<sup>43</sup> As Khakhyab Dorje says, “In all activities . . . abandon mundane, attached ways of thinking.”<sup>44</sup> The purpose of sādhana practice is to train the mind in sacred outlook, in the perception of the true nature of reality. This outlook is now to be implemented in all the activities of everyday life.

## 6. Dedicating the Roots of Virtue and Making Aspirations

Here are given multiple dedications of merit. More than a formulaic ending, by dedicating merit the sādhanika reiterates the intention of the mahāyāna to attain buddhahood for the benefit of others. This completes the sādhanika.

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<sup>41</sup> Rita Gross, “Meditation and Prayer: A Comparative Inquiry,” in Gross and Muck, eds., *Christians Talk*, 97 (emphasis added).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* Finally, absent Christian equivalents, and allowing Tantra to speak in its own voice, perhaps we can appreciate the possibility of meaningfully speaking of a sādhanika-yidam relationship if Gross’s explanation here about the yidam abiding beyond the extremes of existence and non-existence are read while recalling what I said earlier about 1) the more-than-merely-representational understanding of yidams and 2) the fuller tantric context of the three roots, and especially of the union of the guru and the yidam.

<sup>43</sup> Gyalpo, et al., *Trainings in Compassion*, 42: “The physical appearance of myself and others is the body of the Noble One./ Sounds are the melody of the six syllables./ Thoughts are the expanse of great wisdom.”

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

## B. Ignatian Contemplation Practice

Ignatius Loyola wrote his *Spiritual Exercises* between 1522 and 1524.<sup>45</sup> The contemplations presented in his text belong to a long and wide tradition of mental prayer in the Church and surely represent one of the high points of that tradition. While only one of many spiritual exercises Ignatius's text includes, the contemplations are a central aspect of the Exercises in full retreat and as they employ the imagination, supplications, i.e., prayers, and the like, they provide a good analogue for sādhana practice.<sup>46</sup>

The discreet parts of any given contemplation may vary, but they do so while following a clear pattern. Here is my distillation of that pattern:

1. Preparatory Prayer
2. First Prelude: History
3. Second Prelude: Composition
4. Third Prelude: Petition
5. The Various Points (typically ranging in number from three to six)
6. The Colloquy and Concluding Our Father

The Exercises join this formal repetition to personal adaptation. A notable difference, therefore, is that while a sādhana provides the very words to be recited by the practitioner, Ignatius, with the exception of the concluding Our Father, leaves the choice of words to the retreatant.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> For fuller background and context on *Spiritual Exercises* and Ignatius, see the introduction in Joseph A. Tetlow, *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola with Commentary* (Crossroad: New York, 1992).

<sup>46</sup> George E. Ganss, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. A Translation and Commentary* (Institute of Jesuit Sources: St. Louis, 1992) 162. All references to the text of *Spiritual Exercises* are to this translation and will be cited as S.E., followed by the paragraph number.

<sup>47</sup> Though a full discussion of the differences between the Buddhist and Christian theories of words is well beyond my scope here, we can consult the Karmapa and the apostle Paul for perhaps the most significant differences. The Karmapa (in *Gyalpo, et al., Trainings in Compassion*, 69-70) explains how each of the six syllables of Avalokita's mantra corresponds to one or another part of the entire Buddhist cosmology. For example, Om is the self-display of the five buddha wisdoms; it purifies the affliction of pride and especially the suffering of the god realm within saṃsāra; it is inseparable from the buddha of that realm, Shatakratu; etc. Mantra, therefore, is to be repeated exactly (so that mistakes in the recitation of mantra require purification by other mantras) because it is understood to correspond to reality very precisely, both in its samsaric manifestation and as embodiment of all enlightened aspects of reality. Christian prayer, by contrast, is a trinitarian reality within the dynamics established by salvation history. In his life, work, and entire person, the Son who is the Word has made it possible for the Christian to address the ineffable Father efficaciously, but always as participating in his own person and prayer, e.g.,

In order to provide the specificity required for comparison with the *sādhana*, I have selected a particular contemplation: the first one of the first day of the third week, dedicated to Christ's journey from Bethany to Jerusalem for the Last Supper.<sup>48</sup>

## 1. Preparatory Prayer

Here Ignatius instructs "to ask God our Lord for the grace that all my intentions, actions, and operations may be ordered purely to the service and praise of the Divine Majesty."<sup>49</sup> With this prayer, meant to be quite brief, the retreatant renews the great intention of the principle and foundation provided earlier, which is "to desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created."<sup>50</sup> In this way, the retreatant gathers the will within the great work of serving and glorifying God and attaining one's salvation.

## 2. First Prelude: History

Ignatius's instructions are to recall the gospel narrative of the events from the preparation of the supper, through the washing of the feet, to the first Eucharist and Judas's departure to betray Jesus, ending with the subsequent farewell discourse.<sup>51</sup> George Ganss explains why Ignatius calls this *historia*. While the general meaning of the word in the sixteenth century was a simple narration or retelling of past events, for Ignatius it also bears the theological weight or connotation of "the authentic basis" of the

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in the Our Father. Such participation is by the Spirit, the grace of adoption whereby the Christian can address the Father as *Abba* (Rom 8:15). But between the first fruits of the reception of the Spirit and the eschatological fullness of Christ, Christian prayer is in the obscurity of faith. Paul says, "we do not know what to pray for" (Rom 8:26) and so the Spirit, who knows the will of God, intercedes for Christ's members in accordance with the will of God. Thus the relation between words and prayer is one of non-identity. Christians are, therefore, helped in their weakness by the Spirit who intercedes for them through wordless groans (Rom 8:26). Finally in Ignatian terms, every sort of spiritual exercise, including contemplation, is but a way to seek and find the will of God (S.E., 1) and in this the retreatant is led by the Spirit and so engaged in the discernment of spirits (S.E., 313-336).

<sup>48</sup> S.E., 190-199.

<sup>49</sup> S.E., 46.

<sup>50</sup> S.E., 23. While the preparatory prayer corresponds roughly with the *sādhana*'s refuge and *bodhicitta* section, one cannot overlook the importance of the more general or remote preparations of the entire first week of the Exercises, which include self-examination, reconciliation or confession, and meditations on important themes.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

gospel story.<sup>52</sup> This is what anchors the retreatant's contemplation in the religious realities of objective salvation history.

In so doing, it is also what anchors the retreatant's work of contemplation within the prior, effective grace of God, whereby Christ died for us while we were yet sinners (Rom 5:8). In a way quite different from the Buddhist use of imagination already discussed, for Ignatius, employing imagination helps the retreatant to respond more generously to the love of God that has already transformed him through sacramental incorporation into Christ, and so already given the grace whereby he is made a partaker in the divine nature.

### 3. Second Prelude: Composition

For this, the retreatant mentally represents or imagines (Ignatius's word is *composición*) the place in which the *historia* occurs. For this contemplation, one 'sees' the road to Jerusalem and the room of the Last Supper. Reminiscent of the characteristic of clarity in generation practice, Ignatius encourages the retreatant mentally to compose the place in some detail, seeing the width and contour of the road or the size and appearance of the room of the Supper.<sup>53</sup> The point of the composition of place is to put oneself "into the right disposition for praying."<sup>54</sup>

### 4. Third Prelude: Petition

The saint gives this simple instruction for petitionary prayer: "to ask for what I desire."<sup>55</sup> In the numerous 'points' which come next he will repeat an injunction to work to 'draw some fruit' from the contemplation of the mysteries. The petitions serve to ready the heart for that work, providing a way to lift one's affect up to God so that the depths of the will, and not *mere* imagination, are engaged fully in seeking the "sorrow, regret, and confusion" befitting the experience of Jesus "going to His Passion for my sins."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ganss, *The Spiritual Exercises. Translation and Commentary*, 163, note 63. Ignatius's *historia* is not so-called critical history, to be sure, for he conflates different gospel stories and traditions.

<sup>53</sup> S.E., 192.

<sup>54</sup> Ganss, *The Spiritual Exercises. Translation and Commentary*, 155, note 34.

<sup>55</sup> S.E., 193.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

## 5. The Various Points

These three preludes have now brought the retreatant to the main body of the contemplation. In the first three of six points, the practice is “to see the persons at the supper ... to listen to what they are saying ... and see what they are doing,”<sup>57</sup> always with the intent to derive some fruit (*capere aliquem fructum; sacar algún prouecho*). As Brou points out, the specific fruit to be drawn is sometimes indicated in the third or final prelude, which is the case here. The fruit, therefore, is sorrow, regret, and confusion in the experience of the passion of Jesus.<sup>58</sup>

Of the next three points, Joseph Tetlow writes, “[Y]ou are required by these three considerations—how Jesus suffered in His humanness, how He hid His divine power, how He did this for you—to enter reverently into Jesus’ thoughts and feelings, desires and revulsions ... You will feel His powerlessness; you may be given to share it with Him.”<sup>59</sup> Thus the retreatant enters into union with the very mind and heart of Jesus, hopefully sharing by grace (as Tetlow says, it “may be *given*”!) the Lord’s own experience, feelings of powerlessness, and so on. “Much of the spiritual work of prayer on Jesus’ Passion is just to be with Him.”<sup>60</sup>

## 6. The Colloquy and Concluding Our Father

The saint gives the simple instruction, “Finish with a colloquy to Christ our Lord,”<sup>61</sup> but earlier had instructed the retreatant in the first person, “I will beg favors according to what I perceive in my heart, that I may better follow and imitate Our Lord.”<sup>62</sup> Such a colloquy is very appropriately followed by the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, wherein one prays for the kingdom and the accomplishment of the will of the Father.

## III. The Practices Compared: Shared Wisdom in Cultivating Spiritual Progress

Placing our two practices side-by-side now, one notices rather striking parallels of two kinds: 1) in the specific kinds of practices employed by each and 2) even in the very

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>58</sup> Alexandre Brou, S.J., *Ignatian Methods of Prayer*. Trans. William J. Young (Bruce: Milwaukee, 1949) 119.

<sup>59</sup> Tetlow, *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola with Commentary*, 78.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>61</sup> S.E., 198.

<sup>62</sup> S.E., 109.

ordering of those elements into a form useful for deep training. Following this order, six points of comparison are gathered.

1. Our two practices begin with the renewal of vows in the *sādhana* and with the preparatory prayer in the Exercises. The Buddhist vows reiterate the foundation of the *hīnayāna* and *mahāyāna* intentions, namely individual liberation and the benefit of others. Ignatius's opening prayer brings the all-important principle and foundation into the start of every contemplation, so that seeking God, God's glory and God's will, rather than one's one, is the animating spirit of the contemplation. Within these differences, then, is the shared wisdom of ardently lifting up the heart to rouse deep trust and complete reliance; i.e., of bringing to bear the power of setting one's ultimate intention. Spiritual wildness or waywardness, whether of the mind wandering in *saṃsāra* or of the sinner in the wastelands of sin, requires for its remedy a constantly renewed clarity of commitment and intention.

2. But intention is not of itself enough. Both practices then enter the mind and heart into the sacred sphere through the imagination. In the *sādhana*, the deity suddenly appears, fully manifesting the attributes of Buddha nature, right on the crown of one's head. And this, we noted, is an experience of vital, felt contact with Avalokita and thus with one's own true nature. In the *Exercises*, one composes oneself in the place or on the scene in which saving history occurred—the road to Jerusalem or the room of the Last Supper. Here, the sacred sphere is actually sacred 'history', the events in the life of Christ. We must note the difference in these spheres, as construed. The deity and one's own Buddha nature certainly contrast with the eternal-intervening-in-time that is signified for the Christian by the life of Christ. Nonetheless, I would submit that this entrance into the sacred sphere by imagination is a very significant similarity. Both religions possess profound didactic and theoretical traditions, and those traditions are here brought fully to bear, but it is *through the imagination* that they are subjectivized, interiorized, and invited to have their influence in personal and interpersonal transformation.

3. Imagination here, however, especially involves the heart and affect. The deity generated or the scene composed and entered is not a static picture; it has life, 'presence', and dynamism. Most important is connecting with that through the affect. Thus, the themes of wanting, asking, and begging which are found in both the *sādhana*'s supplications and in Ignatius's final prelude serve to engage the practitioners in generating not just the scene, but the appropriate heart-felt dispositions, the correlative, subjective states or virtues. The general Buddhist term for this is mind training (*blo.sbyong*). The western Christian tradition perhaps generally follows



Augustine, who said of the journey to God, it “is not a road from place to place but a road of the affections.”<sup>63</sup>

4. It is in the main parts where one experiences the truth imaginatively but most directly, whether by the dialogue known as emanating and gathering the light of the deity in the recitation of mantra or by entering the gospel scene interiorly with the fullness of sense and imagination, seeing the persons, hearing their conversation, and pondering the mysteries of Christ’s life. All preparations and preludes have led to these encounters. For the sādḥaka, this is non-dual union with the yidam, deity yoga. For the retreatant, it is interior union with the Lord, a union of memory, intellect, will, and affect with the experience of Christ.

Both of these practices are concerned only with entering into the deepest truth of one’s tradition. In this light, we note that the object of the practice is never understood as fictional. Said differently, while ‘imagined’, it is never merely imaginary.<sup>64</sup> Every detail of the generation, every attribute, accoutrement, and quality of the deity is an image of the truth of the essence of mind and nature. This is the “pure recollection” mentioned earlier which knows and remembers the symbolic meaning of the various aspects of the deity (clothing, posture, implements, etc.). Commenting on this, Sarah Harding writes, “None of these details are arbitrary, and as manifestations of the body of reality [likely her translation of dharmakāya, ultimate truth], they are naturally meaningful and potent.”<sup>65</sup>

This is equally true, *mutatis mutandi*, in Ignatian contemplation. Brou says of the contemplations that their subjects “ought to be certain. It is not a matter of feeding on fictions, even if they are pious, nor on systems, nor on controverted interpretations. There must be a solid, real, historical foundation to our meditations, *tomando fundamento verdadero de la historia*.”<sup>66</sup>

5. In both traditions, such union or encounter intends to be transformative of the entire life, existence, and behavior of the practitioners, and so it is followed in both cases by parts intending to help them follow-through in everyday life. The sādḥaka readies

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<sup>63</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Bk. I. XVII. 16.

<sup>64</sup> This is, as we saw earlier, the skillful means of using the imagination to “undermine the deluded appearance of ordinary reality” (Kongtrul, *Creation and Completion*, 41). The use of the imagination here is away from delusion and toward truth.

<sup>65</sup> Kongtrul, *Creation and Completion*, 15.

<sup>66</sup> Brou, *Ignatian Methods*, 114.

herself for the basic post-meditation practice of sacred view,<sup>67</sup> while in the colloquy Ignatius instructs the retreatant to beg favors in order “to better follow and imitate Our Lord.”<sup>68</sup>

6. Both practices then end with summaries of the path that bring one back to the beginning, as it were, back to the foundational level of rousing one’s intention. The Buddhist dedicates the merit of the session to the liberation of all others, thus enacting the essence of the mahāyāna, while the Christian recites Jesus’s own résumé of the life of discipleship in the Our Father.

It is, therefore, striking that both Buddhist generation practice and Ignatian contemplation skillfully employ the imagination to engage practitioners at the deep interior levels of intention and affect, and so they each convey the practitioner to an experience of union with their respective ‘Ultimates’ that they may attain their respective goals. For the sādḥaka, this is the attainment of perfect buddhahood for the benefit of all beings and for the Christian, the commitment to “praise, reverence, and serve God” and thus “save one’s soul.”<sup>69</sup>

The chart that follows shows these parallels at a glance:

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<sup>67</sup> Until buddhahood is realized, two parts of life are distinguished: meditation, which is formal practice “on the cushion,” and post-meditation, which is all other times. The latter is sometimes called “everyday practice” and the point then is to stabilize or maintain the view of meditation practice throughout all activities.

<sup>68</sup> S.E., 109. This following and imitating of Jesus is of course the Christian’s “everyday practice,” the living of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love in all daily activities.

<sup>69</sup> S.E., 23. It may surely be taken for granted that for Ignatius, as for the whole Christian tradition, serving God includes the love of neighbor.

BUDDHIST GENERATION	IGNATIAN CONTEMPLATION	SIMILARITY
1. Refuge and Bodhicitta Vows	1. Preparatory Prayer	1. Setting One's Intention
2. Generating the Deity	2. First Prelude: <i>Historia</i> 3. Second Prelude: Composition	2. Entering in through the Imagination
3. Invoking and Supplicating	4. Third Prelude: Petition	3. Connecting Affectively
4. Practicing the Deity Yoga	5. The Points	4. The Main Part: Union with the Truth
5. Implementing the Practice in Daily Life	6.a. Colloquy	5. Determining to Follow-through
6. Dedicating the Roots of Virtue and Mak Aspirations	6.b. The Our Father	6. Returning to the Intention to Tread the Path or Way

#### IV. Conclusion

While not focusing on difference, this paper has not ignored some of the substantive matters separating the Buddhist and Christian traditions, issues which theologically

determine these practices. These included those between generating and dissolving a deity within one's own mind and turning to the truth of salvation history in the life of Christ; as well as the Buddhist view of the identical nature of deity and practitioner and the Ignatian sense of the virtue of sorrow and regret at the thought of Christ dying for one's sins. Differences are perhaps greatest in the ways in which the Buddhist deity and the Christian God are understood to exist and in the understanding and nature of one's relationship to them. Indeed, there is much that indicates two irreducibly distinct religious worlds here. But very real differences such as these make it all the more noteworthy that these traditions should share so much practical anthropology, as it were, both in terms of skill at the level of the form and structure of spiritual training and in terms of insight into the power of human imagination in the spiritual life.