

# **A Comparison of the Thematic Unfolding of Experience in The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and the Tibetan Buddhist Lam.rim Meditations**

Susan J. Stabile

**Presented at the International Symposium of Contemplative Studies Conference  
Oct. 31-Nov 2, 2013**

## **Introduction**

My interest in this subject is a product of my own religious journey. I was born and raised Catholic, but gave up Catholicism in my teens. In my early twenties, I was first introduced to Buddhism through a Tibetan Buddhist center in New York City. (A Dharmadhatu, a center of the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.) I practiced Buddhism for twenty years, including spending some time as a Tibetan Buddhist nun (in the Gelugpa tradition, which is led by His Holiness the Dalai Lama). Although my practice included some extended periods of vipassana meditation in Thailand, my years as a Buddhist were spent primarily practicing Tibetan Buddhism.

Much of my Buddhist meditation centered on a method of practice common in the Gelugpa tradition– the *Lam.rim Chenmo* or Graduated Path to Enlightenment. I spent many years taking teachings and meditating on the Lam.rim, both in retreat settings and using individual meditations as part of my daily practice.

In my early forties, I returned to Christianity and one of the first places I found upon my return was a Jesuit retreat house. My current spirituality is heavily Ignatian, and a central practice in the Ignatian tradition is the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola (the founder of the Jesuits). I have both done the Exercises in various forms and, trained as both a spiritual director and in Ignatian retreat house ministry, have given many retreats and other programs presenting them to others.

What prompted this presentation was my observation of a parallel between the unfolding of experience that occurs in the Tibetan Buddhist Lam.rim (Graduated Path to Enlightenment) and in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. There is a natural and predictable arc to both (as there is in vipassana meditation), suggested to me that there might be value in exploring similarities and differences between the two prayer systems and their movement or flow.

I'll begin with a few words about the importance of "affective" experience in meditation, something understood across virtually all faith traditions. Then I'll give a short overview of each of the two systems that are my focus – the Spiritual Exercises and the *Lam.rim*. I'll then move onto parallels and differences both in the approaches, their arc of development, and (if there is time) speak about some of the meditations in the two systems.

Two preliminary points before I begin. First, different traditions, and even people within the same tradition have different ways of defining terms like prayer, meditation and contemplation. My personal preference to use the term *prayer* broadly to cover each of those activities, because from the standpoint of my Christian tradition, by whatever name we give them, all of these activities involve a dialogic process with God (albeit one that is sometimes wordless). And it is to underscore the dialogic or mutual nature of the activity that I tend to use the term prayer. In recognition of the diverse nature of this audience, I will generally use the term meditation here to encompass all forms of spiritual exercises, whether they might otherwise go by the name prayer, meditation or contemplation.

Second, neither Buddhism nor Christianity is monolithic. Nor is either Tibetan Buddhist or Catholic practice monolithic. So I am not here making any broad claims about either Christianity or Buddhism, or Tibetan Buddhism or Catholicism. Rather I am focusing, on the one hand, on a method of presenting Buddhist teachings and meditation that comes from a particular lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, and, on the other, on a form of spiritual exercise that originated with St. Ignatius and is widely practiced today. (And even there – other teachers of the *Lam.rim* may present the material in them slightly differently from the way they were presented to me.) Even within Tibetan Buddhism, there are teacher from a different lineage who would view the *Lam.rim* contemplations as “merely mental gymnastics,” the sort of mental activity that furthers delusion rather than leading to enlightenment.

### **Importance of Affective Experience Across Faith Traditions**

I think there is no religious tradition that fails to see the importance of affective experience rather than simply something that is an act of the intellect. Actual experience vs. theoretical knowledge

We are intellectual beings and we love to use our minds. But underlying all religious traditions is an understanding that conversion is an experience of the heart, not an experience of the intellect, an understanding that leads to an emphasis on the affective experience in prayer. Two examples, one from each of the two traditions that are my focus, are illustrative.

One of the fundamental truths of *Buddhism* is impermanence. The idea is that everything in the physical world is impermanent, changing all the time. Everything constantly rises and vanishes.

Some changes are obvious – my daughter today is visibly different from my daughter five years ago; the weather today is very different from what it was in August.

Other changes are more subtle. From a Buddhist perspective the table that exists in this instant is not the same as in the minute before. Indeed, the person standing before you is not the same as the person a moment ago. Things and people change moment by moment. Everything is impermanent and in flux, rising and passing away moment to

moment. Consciousness, the objects of which we are conscious, all the different mental factors, the body – all phenomena share this impermanence.

Now, I can say that and any Buddhist will not his or head in agreement and say “yes, that’s right; everything is impermanent.” But while one may intellectually understand impermanence, one may not really believe it. The reality is that I experience myself as the same person this morning as I was last night and I experience you the same way. I look at the table or chair I sit in every morning and it seems to be the same chair this morning as it was yesterday. Despite what one may understand intellectually, instinctively we cling to people and things as if they were permanent and unchanging. (In fact we don’t want the nice person or the beautiful object to change.) And we cling especially strongly to our view of our own person.

The only way to really grasp impermanence is through an actual experience in meditation. And I say this from my own experience both with Tibetan meditations on impermanence and with Vipassana meditation (sometimes called insight meditation), a meditation practice that combines concentration and mindfulness. The idea is to keep one’s awareness on the experience of the present moment – starting with the rising and falling of the breath, and then one’s posture, and then a moment by moment awareness of sense experiences and feelings. The idea is to let each item rise and vanish without clinging to it.

Here is what one teacher of insight meditation says about the affective experience: “The development of insight means experiencing the flow of impermanence within ourselves so that we begin to let go...Experiencing impermanence leads to an understanding of the inherent unsatisfactoriness of the mind-body process: unsatisfactory in the sense that it is incapable of giving any lasting happiness.” We actually see...feel...experience things rising and vanishing.

One finds the same emphasis on experience in the Christian tradition. Ignatian spirituality is illustrative; it proceeds from the fundamental assumption that God is constantly drawing all things and all people to God’s heart, that God is constantly trying to reveal God’s self to us, and that God reveals God’s self most profoundly in our affective consciousness.

Just as in Buddhism, there are some fundamental Christian truths, perhaps the most basic of which is God’s unconditional and unending love for us. A key to spiritual growth is understanding God’s unconditional love and fidelity. As with impermanence, it is very easy to assent at the level of the head to the proposition that God loves each of us unconditionally. But what we seek, what we need – what will affect who we are in the world – is knowledge and understanding at the level of the heart – knowing to the core of our being – that God loves us unconditionally. That God can never be separated from us. That there is nothing I can do to make God love me any less.

One of the tools for obtaining that heart-felt knowledge is Ignatian contemplation, a way of praying with Scripture that involves out putting ourselves in the scriptural scene

as a participant in that scene. It is the primary form of meditation in Week 2 of the Spiritual Exercises. We enter into an actual scene from the life of Jesus as a participant, allowing us to interact with Jesus – to experience God’s love in a very direct and personal manner. Although we use our imagination to set up the scene and to enter it, how the scene unfolds is through the power of the Spirit and allows God to communicate with us in exactly the way we need him to.

There are other forms of Christian prayer that have the same aim of affective experience, of touching our heart as well as our head so that we may integrate important truths about God and our relationship to God and others at a much deeper level than we could if we were just thinking about them. If you read any of the experiences of the Christian mystics, you know what I am talking about. Ursula Kay, in her book *Christian Mystics*, defines a mystic in this way: “A mystic is a person who is deeply aware of the powerful presence of the divine spirit: someone who seeks, above all, the knowledge and love of God and who experiences to an extraordinary degree the profoundly personal encounter with the energy of divine life. Mystics often perceive the presence of God throughout the world of nature and in all that is alive, leading to a transfiguration of the ordinary all around them. However, the touch of God is most strongly felt deep within their own hearts.”

Robert Ellwood, in his book, *Mysticism and Religion*, says that mysticism is *the* cardinal means toward ultimate transformation. He says mysticism may be seen “simply as a contact with the deity. ... Mystical experience is experience in a religious context that is immediately or subsequently interpreted by the experiencer as encounter with ultimate divine reality in a direct nonrational way that engenders a deep sense of unity and of living during the experience on a level of being other than the ordinary.”

So, again direct, experiential knowledge rather than intellectual assent.

Before I move on, let me underscore that the distinction I am drawing is not between thought and feelings – both of those are important and both come into play in both the *Lam.rim* and the Spiritual Exercises. Rather the distinction is between experiential vs. intellectual knowledge.

## **The Two Practices**

### *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*

Based on his experience of God, St. Ignatius wrote the Spiritual Exercises. Consistent with the point I just underscored, from the very beginning, Ignatius taught out of his own experience. At the time he launched the Spiritual Exercises, he was neither a preacher nor a priest, but, rather, a relatively uneducated layperson writing about his experience of God. Joseph Tetlow wrote that Ignatius “seemed to have hoped almost from the start that he would be able to lead others through what he had experienced while reading and meditating on...the life of Christ. He kept looking for men and women to guide through his Exercises.” This is something I understand well – it was my own

experience with God, especially during the time I did the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises that led to my desire to train as a spiritual director and retreat director – the desire the help others have the same experience that I did.

The traditional way of doing the exercises is as a 30-day retreat. Even in Ignatius' time, it was not always easy for people to get away for 30-days. Recognizing that reality, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation to the Exercises, Ignatius talks about adjusting the way the exercises are done. And there are multiple possibilities. When people talk about doing “the 19<sup>th</sup> Annotation” (which is the form in which I did the Exercises), they refer to doing the exercises as an 8-9-month retreat in daily living. This is now a very common way of doing them. The Exercises can also be adapted to shorter period: I have, for example, several times given the Exercises in an 8-week Lent retreat in daily living. There are now also books designed to lead one through the Exercises (although my experience leads me to strongly caution that having a director when one does the exercises is incredibly important).

A good definition of Spiritual Exercises is a universal, dynamic unfolding within the heart of every human being. Exercises are a way of experiencing God in all things. They take a process, thematic approach that leads to internal freedom, allowing us to share in the glory of God.

I called the exercises thematic. Although everyone's experience of the exercises will be different, every person follows through the same set of themes. Four “weeks” of the exercises that have different themes. “Weeks” in quotes because not literally 7 days. That is both because each of the four segments takes a different amount of time to pray with (Week 2 is the longest) and because people do them in a different time. Here is what Ignatius says about the latter in the Exercises: “We move from week to week according to the grace which God gives to us. Some people come to an appreciation of a certain mystery of God's dealings with them more rapidly than others. For each retreatant, it is the director who determines whether the time of the week should be shortened or lengthened.” (Not a competition. Not that shorter is better. All have different issues that affect what comes up as we pray through the exercises.)

The Exercises are structured to help me find what God hopes for me, and to determine that with the least amount of distortion from sinful yearnings and actions. They help me find my own original purpose. Those who make the Exercises do in fact emerge from the experience with a sense of what God hopes in them. Joseph Tetlow puts it this way:

To begin with, they accept God's acceptance of the person they are coming to be, and some of them acknowledge that God makes Himself not only our End toward Whom we grow, but also our Beginning from Whom we grow. Often they have begun a deep metanoia and have the sense that this changed heart will guide them for a long time after the retreat. Very commonly, they finish the Ignatian Exercises with a much calmer sense of their limitedness, and therefore have set

aside the debilitating guilt that they cannot do all the good things they think they want to do.

Just to give a quick nutshell, the Exercises begin with what is termed the Preparatory or Disposition Period, where get in touch with God's love at very deep level: Getting as sense of who we are in the eyes of God and a sense of self as God's creation.

Transition between the Disposition Period and Week 1 is something called the Principle and Foundation, which you might think of as the doorway into the exercises. Ignatius called the P&F the kernel, the key to the spiritual life. For Ignatius, the P&F was not a contemplation or a meditation so much as something to grapple with, to struggle with.

Week 1 relates to our sinfulness. In the context of God's love, we consider the rejection of that love through sin, as well as God's reconciling mercy in Jesus. During Week 1, we seek a deep feeling and interior taste for the mystery of sin in the self and in our society, as well as knowing ourselves as forgiven. Self and society – when we talk about sin, we are talking about both our individual sin and what we might term social sin.

Week 2, the longest of the weeks, centers on the life of Jesus, from his birth and through his public ministry. Week 2 is all about getting to know Jesus and getting in touch with his invitation that we labor with him. We contemplate Jesus as we learn about him in the Gospels and make a choice to follow him, a decision so live our life with and for Christ in service. Weeks 3 and 4 about about union with God. In Week 3 we follow Jesus to his death, developing deeper sorrow for sin and compassion for God's suffering people and drawing strength from Jesus' passion and death. In Week 4 we contemplate the risen Christ and the world that is renewed by his victory.

For each of the disposition and the weeks of the exercises, there are recommended scriptural passages to pray with and there are a number of prayer exercises that are part of the Spiritual Exercises themselves.

### *The Graduated Path to Enlightenment*

The essential points of the teaching of the Buddha were condensed into a text composed by the 11th Century Buddhist teacher Atisha titled *The Lamp Illustrating the Path* (sometimes translated as *The Light of the Lamp of the Path to Enlightenment*). Subsequently, the great Tibetan Buddhist master Je Tzongkhapa expanded on Atisha's teachings in the *Lam-Rim Chenmo* (*The Great Exposition on the Gradual Path to Enlightenment*). Likewise, utilizing Atisha's root text, the various Buddhist schools that flourished in Tibet all put forth various commentaries to the *Lam.rim*, known by different names.

The word "lam" means path and "rim" means a systematic, sequential order. Thus, the *Lam-Rim*, as its name suggests, presents a series of teachings and meditations designed to transform the mind. It is a step-by-step, sequential method of practice, a

gradual path for the transformation of the mind by ridding it of delusions, and it contains all of the major points in both the Hinayana and Mahayana collection of Buddhist teachings. Everything in the Lam.rim is believed to originate with the Buddha himself, who taught different aspects of the past at different times. The “actual root” of the *Lam.rim* is the Perfection of Wisdom sutra taught by the Buddha.<sup>1</sup>

The *Lam-Rim* contains different levels of teaching, the appropriateness of which depends on the level of capacity of the practitioner. The levels are expressed in terms of motivation, although some teachers speak in terms of level of capacity or intellect. The lowest level of teachings concerns the desire to avoid an unfortunate rebirth in the next life. The teachings and meditations in this level focus on understanding impermanence and the reality of death and the need to live a moral life.

The intermediate level seeks total liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth. It recognizes that even a happy rebirth carries the suffering of birth, sickness, old age and death and seeks to bring about the cessation of suffering by eliminating the cause of suffering. That requires the elimination of grasping, following the trainings of higher morality and wisdom.

The highest level aims at achieving enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, a term that includes all who suffer the cycle of birth and rebirth, whether they are humans, animals, or living in hell and heavenly realms. This highest level involves the wish to become a bodhisattva—a being who seeks enlightenment with the motivation of freeing others from their suffering. The teaching here involves the cultivation of bodhicitta, a mind renouncing self-cherishing and cherishing others, an altruistic aspiration to achieve enlightenment only for the sake of others. Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche explains

the very purpose of our life is to benefit other sentient beings. That is our ultimate spiritual goal in life. We practice meditation so that we can develop ourselves spiritually in order that we can make ourselves useful for other sentient beings. When we develop bodhicitta we cherish this life, take care of it, and keep it busy for the benefit of others.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the meditations intended for those of higher capacity/motivation are aimed at combating the self-cherishing mind, at cultivating *bodhicitta*—the mind that renounces the self and cherishes others. From a Tibetan Buddhist standpoint, the self-cherishing attitude is the source of obstacles for practicing Dharma. It is believed that as long as we don’t abandon the self-cherishing thought, it is not possible to develop the mind. In developing bodhicitta, the mind that cherishes others over ourselves, we develop the motivation to help all beings without distinction, the ability to cherish all others over the self—regardless of how they behave toward us. Equanimity is sometimes

---

<sup>1</sup> Rabten Essential Nectar p.17, 19. Geshe Rabten has extensive discussion of the source of the Lam. Rim at p.19-20.

<sup>2</sup> LTZR, Mandala July/Aug 96 interview

framed as one of the aims, to remind us that the compassion is a universal one that extends to all, that allows us to love our enemies as well as our friends.

Other of the *Lam-Rim* meditations aim to promote an understanding of emptiness, which is not unrelated to gaining both an appreciation for what Christians might refer to as the distinction between the true self and the false self, and an understanding of what it means to die to self and rise in Christ. They seek to dispel the delusion of independent existence, helping us to see that all things exist in dependence on causes and conditions.

Tibetan Buddhists say that some people first come to a realization of bodhicitta, and from that gain a realization of emptiness, and others first realize emptiness and then bodhicitta. Thus, they are intimately related and any effort to cleanly divide the various analytical meditations into self-contained categories is of limited value. Although each nominally addresses a different subject, there is a great deal of flow between one subject and another.

### **Comparison of the Systems**

There are many parallels between these two prayer systems

*First, both make extensive use of the imagination as well as more analytical processes.* Through his own conversion experience, Ignatius grasped the importance of imagination as a tool to know God. His own key insights about God came through his imagination based on his reading of the life of Christ and the lives of the saints. As a result, he integrated imaginative prayer into the Exercises. First, in some cases, he asks retreatants to see things from God's perspective, taking on God's qualities of love, compassion and understanding. Second, the Exercises make use of the form of contemplation I mentioned a few minutes ago – Ignatian Contemplation – which invites retreatants to place themselves within a scene from the Gospels. As David Fleming describes:

We become onlooker-participants and give full rein to our imagination. Jesus is speaking to a blind man at the side of the road. We feel the hot Mediterranean sun beating down. We smell the dust kicked up by the passersby. We feel the itchy clothing we're wearing, the sweat rolling down our brow, a rumble of hunger. We see the desperation in the blind man's face and hear the wail of hope in his words. We note the irritation of the disciples. Above all we watch Jesus—the way he walks, his gestures, the look in his eyes, the expression on his face. We hear him speak the words that are recorded in the Gospel. We go on to imagine other words he might have spoken and other deeds he might have done.

We do this over and over again during the Exercises – being with Jesus, rather than thinking about him. Seeing Jesus interact with others, seeing Jesus ministering, teaching, making decisions. We experience Jesus. Fleming continues

Imaginative Ignatian prayer teaches us things about Jesus that we would not learn through scripture study or theological reflection. It allows the person of Christ to penetrate into places that the intellect does not touch. It brings Jesus into our hearts. It engages our feelings. It enflames us with ideals of generous service. Imaginative prayer makes the Jesus of the Gospels *our* Jesus. It helps us develop a unique and personal relationship with him. We watch Jesus' face. We listen to the way he speaks. We notice how people respond to him. These imaginative details bring us to know Jesus as more than a name or a historical figure in a book. He is a living person.

Imagination similarly plays a significant role in the *Lam.rim* meditations. What are termed “analytical” meditations of the *Lam.rim* rely to a great extent on creative, imaginative thought. In one of the first meditations, appreciating our “perfect human rebirth,” one is instructed to imagine what it would be like to be an animal to understand the value of being born human, or to imagine life as a beggar or suffering from some serious mental or physical illness, as a way of appreciating the good qualities and advantages of one's current human existence. Doing so serves the same purpose as putting ourselves in a Gospel scene. As Kathleen McDonald (Sangye Khadro) explains in her book *How to Meditate*,

It is easy enough to read and repeat these words, but to really put yourself in one of these situations is another matter. Visualizing and thinking deeply about the plight of the beggar, the fear and paranoia of an animal, the hopelessness of the person in the desert, can be frightening and painful. But by understanding the agony of each of these situations we learn to appreciate how miniscule our present problems are.

The same use of imagination is present, for example, in the *Lam.rim*'s meditation on continuity of mind, where we imagine what it was like to be in our mother's womb, the meditation on death, in which we imagine what it is like lying on our deathbed, or meditation on the hell realms, where we visualize varied types of intense suffering as a consequence of creating negative karma. The latter visualizations are quite vivid. For example, in Geshe Rabten's explanation of the meditation on the suffering of the lower realms, one of the hells visualized is the Crushing Hell where

you are again standing on a burning iron ground. Sometimes you are crushed between huge iron mountains, squeezed until all your blood flows out. Sometimes, instead, great rocks of pieces of iron fall from the sky and crush you similarly.

Various visualizations continue throughout the meditations for the three different levels of motivation. As with the Spiritual Exercises, the goal is to give us a deeper experience of the subject, a deeper realization of a fundamental truth, than we would get merely thinking about the subject in analytical terms.

The use by both systems of the imagination is consistent with the emphasis of each on affective experience. In either case, these are not merely conceptual exercises. As one commentator said about the *Lam.rim*, “When we are working to generate a visualization, we are focused so fully that the mind has no choice but to drop the things it normally chases after. And this is not just true of our visual sense. Visualization practice is a multisensory experience.

Moreover, in both cases, the visualizations are not just an exercise in concentration, but a way to connect with the object of our meditation. In the Spiritual Exercises, the imagination puts us into direct experience of Jesus; in the *Lam.Rim*, if one is visualizing the guru, or visualizing an image of the Buddha, one seeks to connect with the energy of the guru or the Buddha.

In either case, these are not merely conceptual exercises. As one commentator said about the *Lam.rim*, “When we are working to generate a visualization, we are focused so fully that the mind has no choice but to drop the things it normally chases after. And this is not just true of our visual sense. Visualization practice is a multisensory experience.

*Second, although the goals are expressed somewhat differently, the mindset these two systems of meditation seek is not dissimilar.* The Spiritual Exercises speak in terms of causing the retreatant to respond more fully to the call to labor with Christ, to be the love of Christ in the world. The *lam.rim* speaks in terms of a growth toward being a bodhisattva.

There is an enormous similarity between the qualities of a bodhisattva and the qualities of Christ that Christians are called to emulate. Indeed, from a Buddhist perspective, Jesus Christ is a bodhisattva. The sole aim of bodhisattvas is to benefit others. They manifest great compassion, deep listening and understanding and actions that relieve the suffering of others. Sounds a lot like the behavior of Jesus that Christians are called to imitate.

There is also consonance in that developing the other-directed orientation sought by both the Exercises and the *Lam.rim* requires an embrace of renunciation. In Buddhist terms, renunciation is the mindset that understands that the principal cause of happiness is not external but, rather, lies in the mind, and therefore is willing and happy to let go of attachments to the external things of this world. This is reflected in the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, the first recognizing that suffering (although a better translation of the original Pali term, *dukkha*, would be “unsatisfactoriness”) of this existence, the second labeling clinging and grasping as the cause, the third recognizing that cessation of suffering is possible, and the fourth identifying the means of bringing about the cessation of suffering. Only when one develops a deep realization that all is impermanent and cannot bring lasting peace can one apprehend the cessation of suffering and the path to cessation of suffering.

Although not expressed in identical terms, one finds the notion of renunciation articulated in Christian scripture. For example, Jesus directly says: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Mt 6:24) Similarly, Jesus tells the rich man who asks what he must do to inherit eternal life, “sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” (Mt 19:21) I don’t read Jesus as literally meaning that we have to give up all of our possessions in order to attain salvation. Rather, he is talking about having a proper relationship to the things of this world, to not letting our attachment and desire for things of this world displace the centrality of God and our service to God in the world.

For both Christians and Buddhists, renunciation means living with an understanding that impermanent worldly pleasures can never be enough for us, that they are too trivial to satisfy our total nature. The Christian sentiment is summed up in St. Augustine’s prayer, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Similarly, both the *Lam.Rim* and the Spiritual Exercises are concerned with replacing craving with genuine desire and with getting rid of what Richard Rohr might call the small I egoic self and what Buddhists would describe as the “I” that does not exist. St. Ignatius said that his Spiritual Exercises “have as their purpose the conquest of self and the regulation of one’s life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment.”<sup>3</sup> What Christians call dying to self and rising in Christ is not dissimilar from (although by no means identical with) the Buddhist realization of emptiness and abandonment of the notion of self that suffers from attachment, aversion and ignorance (the root evils for Buddhists).

I want to underscore that what is sought is similar, but not identical. For all Christians, and therefore for the Spiritual Exercises, God plays a significant role. St. Ignatius’ famous *Suscipe* prayer ends with the lines, “Your love and grace is enough.” Ultimately, a Christian’s happiness lies with union with God and God’s grace helps us achieve that union. For Buddhists, the cause of happiness lies in eliminating one’s cravings and the self is the sole agent of enlightenment. Buddhism is nontheistic and so there is no help from outside of the person.

That makes the motive for nonattachment to the things of this world not quite the same. Nonattachment to particular things of this world in the Spiritual Exercises flows from the recognition that everything we experience can call forth a more loving response to God. The nonattachment Buddhists seek does not have that same aspect. I’ll say more about this in a bit.

*Third, each possesses a natural movement or flow* and there are similarities to those movements. (And this is what first interested me in this subject.) This should not be surprising: Ignatius wrote the Spiritual Exercises based on his own experience. And

---

<sup>3</sup> Par.21 Puhl translation.

the *Lam.rim* teachings are a product of the Buddha's experience. If two people are experiencing "God" (to use my Christian phrasing) or ultimate reality, although the experiences will not be identical, there will be something we can recognize as common in each.

In the Spiritual Exercises there is a natural unfolding of the graces through the "weeks" of the Exercises; in the *Lam.rim*, a natural movement from lower to higher motivation. In the Spiritual Exercises, one obtains the graces of each week before moving on to the next one. In the *Lam.rim*, one obtains some realizations of the truths of each level of motivation before moving on to the next.

A couple of things about that natural flow.

*One* (and this is implicit in something I said a few minutes ago) is that both involve a natural flow that is increasingly other-directed. Although we may use different terms to describe that movement, both contain a movement from concern for the self and one's own suffering to concern for the well-being of others; and a movement from attached love or compassion to agapic love or indiscriminating, spontaneous and unlimited compassion. That is, a love or compassion based on altruism, not on attachment.

This strikes me as not insignificant, since it suggests humans, regardless of their spiritual tradition, have a natural movement toward greater love/compassion. That, in our humanness, we are tempted by sin (in Christian terms) or delusions (in Buddhist terms) as a result of original sin (in Christian terms) or our past karma (in Buddhist terms), but that practices that overcome those temptations move us in the direction of our true selves – our natural state, if you will.

*The second thing to note about this movement or flow* is that in each of the two systems the progress along this natural path is graduated. That is, a meditator needs the grace or realization of the earlier stage in order to move onto the next one. So in the Exercise, one needs to attain the grace of Week 1 before moving on to Week 2;<sup>4</sup> in the *Lam.rim*, one needs the realizations of the lower path to move onto the next path. So one doesn't start the Spiritual Exercises at Week 3 and doesn't begin the *Lam.rim* at the meditations suitable for those at the highest level of motivation. In the words of one teacher, "If one wishes to be a Bodhisattva, one must meditate on all three Paths; each form the basis for proceeding to the next."<sup>5</sup>

I want to be clear, I'm not saying one can't do one of the *Lam.rim* meditations or an meditation from the Spiritual Exercises on a stand-alone basis. Many people do and there is value in doing so. (My book, *Growing in Love and Wisdom*, does just that – adapts for Christians some individual meditations from the *Lam.rim*, as well as other

---

<sup>4</sup> In fact, Ignatius says that when one is engaged in the First Week, it is helpful if the person knows nothing of what is to be done in the Second Week. (11<sup>th</sup> annotation)

<sup>5</sup> Preface to Rabten Essential Nectar p.9.

Buddhist sources that can be used on a stand-alone basis). But the goal of each system is a total transformation – and that total transformation requires a step-by-step process in which each realization builds on the last.

At the same time, both the Spiritual Exercises and the *Lam.rim* understand that we develop in stages. That we can have small realizations, temporary realizations, but that does not mean we do not have work to go back and do. Thus, receiving the grace of Week 2 in a retreat experience and moving on to Week 3 of the exercises does not mean I will never be back in a Week 1 or Week 2 season or state of mind. Likewise, moving through the *lam.rim*, I may attain a realization on the lower path that allows me to move onto the next stage, but I may need to return to the lower level from time to time.

Some Tibetan teachers view this as the product of our living in a degenerate time. I have heard lamas say that in prior times, a single word was enough for one to attain enlightenment, but that we now need more. Christianity has always seen spiritual growth as a process – and one we do not necessarily complete in this life time. (Buddhists recognize the same, thus the need for reincarnation. Christians don't have the same teachings on multiple lives, but the Christian myth of purgatory is our way of expressing that we recognize some people die without being ready for full union with God.)

I should mention here that although everyone engaging in either of these processes will go through the same steps, it will take them different amounts of time to do so. One doesn't move on until one receives the grace or realization being sought.

*A third thing to notice about the fact that each proceeds in a natural flow* is that forces try to interfere with the natural movement in each. Tibetan Buddhists recognize that when one meditates on the *Lam.rim* there can arise a lack of mental ease, which is termed *lung*. *Lung* is said to arise from a variety of cause such as having committed negative actions in a previous life, various spirits, an imbalance of the physical elements making up the body. It is also said that some *lung* (called *sok-lung*) can arise with no apparent reason. Different antidotes are taught to overcome *lung* created by various causes.

The Ignatian explanation is simpler: the work of what Ignatius calls the evil spirit or the enemy spirit. Most of us don't tend to use terms like that. But Ignatius took for granted that evil is real, that evil exerts a strong force in the world, and that evil is always trying to draw all things and all people away from God. Ignatius literally believed in Satan. But whether think of it as Satan, devil, evil spirit – force, etc., the idea is the same - that are two pulls – one from God and one not from God. And as we are trying to practice our faith, the enemy spirit tries to exert a pull that interferes with our practice.

In addition, both systems recognize that there will be “ordinary” difficulties, especially in the early days of practice. Mental excitement, fatigue, physical discomfort and discouragement. And each system makes suggestions for overcoming those.

And, although we don't tend to think of them as hindrances, both systems warn against confusing certain feelings/experiences with God. If one meditates regularly, one may have certain rapturous experiences. They can easily become a distraction and we can confuse them with what we are seeking. Although we use different words for these experiences in the Christian and Buddhist traditions, we need to be sure that we don't get caught up in what Chogyam Trungpa used to call spiritual materialism.

(Two final parallels)

*Fourth, both the Spiritual Exercises and the Lam.rim reflect the recognition that people come to the practice with different capacities, different situations, different woundedness, etc., and that all of that will affect their movement through the systems. In the Spiritual Exercises, this is reflected in two ways. First, Ignatius, although the parts of the Spiritual Exercises are termed weeks, Ignatius says that each week may take varying amounts of time. Because "some are slower in attaining what is being sought...some maybe more diligent than others, and some more disturbed and tried by different spirits," Ignatius tells us that it may be necessary at times to shorten a week and at other times to lengthen it.<sup>6</sup> Second, Ignatius speaks of the need to adapt the Exercises "to the condition of the one who is to engage in them, that is, to his age, education and talent."<sup>7</sup> This may mean using different exercise or making adjustments in the form in which the Exercise are given. The *Lam.rim* also recognizes different capacities, hence the teachings at different levels.*

*Finally, sixth, both systems recognize the significant role of what the Exercises call a director and what the Lam.rim calls a teacher. Although one can find many books that lead someone through the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius was insistent that there must be a companion guiding the steps of the person doing the Exercises. Optimally a director lead one individually through the Exercises. That director must be a skilled helper, himself experienced with the Exercises, who can adapt the Exercises to the needs and talents of the individual. In addition there has to be a good relationship of trust between the director and the directee.*

In the *Lam rim* a teacher gives detailed explanation of the meaning of object of the meditation and instruction on the meditation to be practiced, speaking from the depth of his or her own experience. The meditator then goes off and meditates. Ideally the teacher then helps with any problems that arise and only when that point is clear, goes on to the next.<sup>8</sup>

Although the role of the director/teacher is central, for both the Exercises and the *Lam.rim*, what is most important is the actual meditation. As I already suggested, "head-knowledge," what one can get from listening to another is not sufficient. Taking all the teachings in the world from the best teachers and practitioners is not sufficient from an Ignatian or a Buddhist perspective.

---

<sup>6</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> annotation.

<sup>7</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> annotation.

<sup>8</sup> Rabten 20. [and recognition not always have that one-on-one]

What I've said thus far suggests that there are some significant parallels between the Spiritual Exercises and the *Lam.rim*. There are, however, also some differences, some of which are perhaps already apparent.

*First, the most fundamental difference is the God-centered nature of the Spiritual Exercises.* This is something I alluded to already. A foundational presupposition of the Exercises is that God wants a personal relationship with each human person and acts in the world to bring about such a relationship.<sup>9</sup> God is constantly communicating and the Exercises help us to be more in touch with that communication and to respond to it. Related, the Spiritual Exercises explicitly recognize our need to rely on God's grace. The presupposition is that this is something we cannot do on our own. In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius says that "The Exercises are, above all, a time for intimate contact between God and a retreatant."

In contrast, the Buddhist sees herself as the sole agent of enlightenment. Even in Tibetan Buddhism, which includes prayers to Buddha and tantric practices around different deities, the work is seen as done by the meditator. Overcoming of the ego and delusions that keep one locked into samsara is the produce of one's own power of concentration and awareness.

This means that the director in the Spiritual Exercises is not really the true director. Rather, the real job of the director of the is to, in Ignatius' words, "permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and lord."<sup>10</sup> The director facilitates the encounter between the directee and God.

*Second, and not unrelated to the first, the motivation for engaging in the practices is different.* In the Spiritual Exercises the starting point is God's love and everything we do is seen as a means of returning that love. And that motivation – acting in return for God's love has no place in the *Lam.rim*. Indeed, the starting motivation for the *Lam.rim* is simply the desire to avoid the pain and suffering of being born in lower realms. It is only as one proceeds through the *Lam.rim* that one's motivation becomes more purified (for lack of a better term).

*Third, the Lam rim involves more explicit teaching accompanying the meditations.* The *Lam.rim* contemplates rather extensive teaching of the various points on the path prior to engaging in the meditations. As Geshe Rabten explains, The teacher explains from his own experience one point, such as the first, Devotion to the Guru, then the disciples go and meditate on it, the teacher helping them with any problems that arise. Then, once this point has become reasonably clear to them, the teacher goes on to the next point.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Barry in Traub at 123.

<sup>10</sup> SE annotation 15 Puhl.

<sup>11</sup> Rabten Essential Nectar 20.

In contrast, the amount of “teaching” in SE is small. Ignatius’ text of the Exercises is meant as a manual for the director, not the directee. (When I did the Exercises, my director didn’t even want me to purchase a copy of the Exercises until after I finished the retreat.) That does not mean there is no teaching; in the Spiritual Exercises, a significant part of the prayer experience in Week 2 includes listening to Jesus’ teaching through scripture. But the director is advised to only tell directees what is necessary.

*Finally, the Spiritual Exercises have a greater breadth in prayer material than does the lam.rim.* Both the Spiritual Exercises and the Lam.rim have a text. The difference is that the text of the Lam.rim contains the entirety of the teachings and that the Lam.rim meditations are largely the same for all practitioners. The instructions of different teachers may vary, as may the order in which some of the meditations appear, but generally everyone will do the same meditations.

In the case of the Spiritual Exercises, while there are some fixed meditations set out by Ignatius, those are heavily supplemented with much praying with scripture and, depending on the retreatant, other material as well. Thus in the Spiritual Exercises, it is likely that no two people are doing the exact same meditations. This relates to the point I made about the role of the director; it is intended that the director of the Spiritual Exercises will adapt them to the needs of the individual.

### **Comparison of the Meditations**

In my remaining time, I’d like to talk a little about some of the meditations themselves. My aim here is not to match up or claim any kind of one-for-one correspondence and not going to go through each meditation in both. Here I just want to talk a little about some of the parallels, similarities and differences, using several of the meditations as illustrative.

#### *Preliminary Practices*

Both systems recognize that there are preconditions to our ability engage meaningfully in their meditations, that we need to be properly disposed in order to get benefit from the meditations. This is something we can easily relate to; I’m guessing many of us have some ritualistic way we begin our prayer – even if it is as simple as lighting a candle or bowing. So it is not surprise that programmatic meditation systems like the *Lam.rim* and the Spiritual Exercises give consideration to how we begin our prayer.

The *Lam.rim* has an extensive and elaborate set of preliminary practices one is instructed to perform at the start of each session of meditation. These include cleaning the room, setting our offerings, and praying certain preliminary prayers, including taking refuge and making a mandala offering. I just described those practices in a single

sentence; Geshe Rabten's *The Essential Nectar* uses approximately twenty pages to instruct and take one through the practices.<sup>12</sup>

The Spiritual Exercises do not contain quite as structured a set of preliminary practices as does the *Lam.rim*, but there are some important preliminaries. First, Ignatius talks about approaching with "magnanimity and generosity toward his creator" and offering "Him his entire will and liberty, that His Divine Majesty may dispose of him and all he possesses according to His most holy will. Second, Ignatius speaks of one doing the Exercises organizing his life "so that he will be free to go to Mass and Vespers every day."<sup>13</sup> Third, early in the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius recommends that everyone be taught to do an Examen, and that those making the Exercises do the Examen at least once every day. The Examen is a technique of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God's presence and discern his call. Finally, we begin our prayer session by asking for the grace we are seeking.<sup>14</sup> **[more on this]**

### *Foundations*

In the *Lam.rim*, Guru Devotion and Perfect Human Rebirth are concerned with laying the foundation. In the Spiritual Exercises, that is the function of the Principle and Foundation.

It is worth spending a few minutes on Guru Devotion because there is no real Christian analogue and it is a fundamental difference between the Buddhist approach and a Christian one.

One of the distinctive features of Tibetan Buddhism is a strong emphasis on guru devotion, both a central practice of this form of Buddhism and the first meditation of the *Lam.rim*. It is considered necessary to find a spiritual master and to have faith in, and devotion to, that master. In large part this flows from the belief that one needs to learn from someone who already has attained deep realizations. Because relying on our own experience is more difficult and can lead us into error, it is considered vital to have a teacher who has himself experienced the true nature of mind and all of the realizations on the Graduated Path to Enlightenment to show us the way. Once one finds such a teacher, one must have proper devotion to him, which includes tremendous faith in the guru, seeing him as a Buddha, and engaging in practices of making offerings to and serving the guru.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Rabten p.32-54.

<sup>13</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> Annotation

<sup>14</sup> [think about whether there are other parallels to other dynamics of Ignatian prayer]

<sup>15</sup> Over the years I have come to understand that the blind adherence to guru devotion I experienced may have been less a reflection of actual Buddhist teaching than how the teaching was interpreted by those I was surrounded by and learning from. I have more recently read statements made by the Dalai Lama on the practice of guru devotion that convey his view that what is required "clear, rather than blind, devotion." He acknowledged the danger of taking too far the idea of seeing everything the guru does

On many occasions during the time I lived in Buddhist monasteries and retreat centers in Nepal and India, we received oral teachings that included the subject of guru devotion. My notes include statements like:

*The Guru is the source of enlightenment and if you go against his advice, it creates great negative karma.*

*Once one chooses a guru, you cannot change your mind or it will create an imprint not to complete the path to Enlightenment.*

*Generally, one should not view guru as separate from Buddha.*

*Once the relationship of guru-disciples is established, the guru becomes the most powerful one in your life, more powerful than all the Buddhas. Obeying every single piece of advice given by the guru purifies much negative karma.*

As I already mentioned, the first meditation in the *Lam.rim* is devoted to Guru Devotion. In the meditation, one reflects on the advantages of devotion to, and the disadvantages of not being devoted to the guru, and then meditates on how to devote oneself to the guru in thought and action.

There is important material in the Spiritual Exercises about the relationship between the director and the one making the Exercises, but very different from guru-disciples relationship, even though director takes on some of the role of the Buddhist teacher as the Exercises go on. And in the Exercises, there is a difference between the director and God, and the Buddhist meditator sees the Guru as a Buddha.

Some of language about the Guru sounds a little like how Christians speak of the Holy Spirit.

Some of the language about the Guru sounds a little like the Catholic view of the Magisterium, but that is not a necessary part of the SE (and Christians acknowledge that the Church can be mistaken).

Guru devotion is a little like devotion to Jesus, but in the SE that devotion does not come until later.

Although Ignatius is the source of the Exercises, he certainly does not view himself the way a Guru does.

So Guru is different from Jesus, Church, Ignatius, director.

Closest analogue is that in the early part of the SE, we begin to get in touch with God's love. God's love is the context within which the rest is carried out.

---

as perfect, saying that the teachings on guru devotion must be read in light of the Buddha's own words to accept his teaching "only after examining them as an analyst." To do otherwise, he suggests, risks "poison for both the guru and the disciple." His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *The Path to Enlightenment* 70 (Snow Lion 1994).

The other foundational meditations in the *Lam.rim* concern Perfect Human Rebirth and Death. (Meditation on death really operates throughout the Lam.Rim, but it serves different functions at the beginning, middle and end of practice.) The goal of both meditations in the beginning stage is motivational. The goal of Perfect Human Rebirth is to generate a deep realization that one cannot waste this precious opportunity to gain enlightenment. Death meditation helps internalize the realization that this perfect human rebirth can be lost at any moment; the idea is not just the certainty of death but the uncertainty of the time of death.

In each case the meditation is essential. A meaningful understanding that death may occur in any moment entails something more than intellectual assent. It is easy to say, “Of course I know that I can die at any time. Who doesn’t know that?” But the truth is that we don’t live that way. Instead, we live, in the words of Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, with “the hallucination that this life will last a long time, that having a human body, friends, comforts, and enjoyment will last.”<sup>16</sup>

The foundation for the Spiritual Exercises is the Principle and Foundation. Ignatius called the Principle and Foundation the key to the spiritual life and for him, it epitomizes the entire message of the Spiritual Exercises. It is, if you will, a skeletal summary of the inner journey; the kernel.

There are several important themes we can extract from it. First, we are constantly being created by God in each moment. There are a couple of different elements in that sentence. One is the simple fact of my creaturehood. God is God and I am not. From a Christian standpoint, God alone possesses the fullness of being; everyone and everything else is a participation of the being of God. The whole relationship between God and me derives from the fact that God is my creator. The second element in that first sentence is the idea of *constantly* being created. That is, our creation was not a wind-em-up and let-em-go creation. Rather, God is an intimate part of my life and continues in each moment to create me. At each moment, God is nurturing and fashioning us.

The second theme is that we are created for relationship. We were brought into existence because the Trinity wanted to share existence with us.

Third and related theme: we are created to Praise, Reverence, and Serve our God. That says something very important about our relationship to the things of this world and, indeed, our relationship to our own talents. In the language of the Principle and Foundation: “All of the things of this world are gifts of God presented to us so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more easily. We appreciate and use all these gifts of God insofar as they help us develop as loving persons.”

Fourth, *everything* on earth has been given to help us praise, reverence and serve God. The cosmos is first and foremost an expression of God’s love. *Everything* that

---

<sup>16</sup> Personal notes from teachings given by Lama Zopa Rinpoche during a Chenrezig Initiation on Dec. 23, 1987 at Kopan Monastery.

exists is a sacrament of God's love. It all has potential to deepen my life in and with God. Each person is created for others. Through me, others will deepen in intimacy with God. Through each, others will praise, reverence and serve God. I am emphasizing everything. As we've said, Ignatian spirituality is about finding God in all things – the seemingly good and the seemingly bad.

Implicit in the third and fourth, and central to the P&F is that we are invited to participate with God in a tremendous project: to establish the Reign of God among all creatures, particularly among humankind. God has a plan and we have a role in that plan. Our partner in that enterprise is Jesus, who came and comes and by his coming charges us with divinity. (Co-creation – not we sit back and God does everything.)

As my description suggests, these foundational practices are very different. The Perfect Human Rebirth is premised on the fact that our current situation is the ideal, whereas Ignatian Spirituality is about finding God in all things. So while gratitude is practiced in both systems, they have very different functions.

No time to go through the rest. If did, could show some parallels between:

- Week 1 and the Path of the “inferior person”

In Week 1 of the SE, we focus on our sinfulness – trying to get a handle on our pattern of sinfulness; our triggers for moving away from God.

In the path of the inferior person of the LR, we examine the 8 worldly dharmas – the common things toward which we experience attachment and aversion, which tempt us to acts that create negative karma.

Interestingly both include meditations on the consequences of our choices: in the SE we meditate on Hell and in the LR on the suffering of the lower realms.

- Transition between Week1 and Week2 and the Buddhist practice of taking refuge

Call of the King and Taking Refuge

Ignatius does not want a quick answer; Buddha does.

- Jesus as our model and Guide and Lam.Rim practices for developing wisdom and compassion.

Jesus and the development of our relationship with Jesus *is* the practice vs. a set of practices for developing compassion and wisdom, realizing bodhicitta and emptiness.

## Conclusion



## *Death*

### *Week 1 and the Path of the “Inferior Person”*

SE

Sin

Social sin

Lam.rim

8WD/Karma

Group Karma

Death

[[In Lam.rim death is antidote to 8WD – helps to understand impermanence of the pleasure.

At beginning of path, death impels one to engage in practice, in middle it helps maintain energy; and end it induces one to complete the practice. Idea is to understand that at death only Dharma is useful.

Nothing else enough to satisfy. Augustine – hearts restless until they rest in you. Nothing satisfies – poverty of spirit. ]]]

Hell

Suffering of the Lower Realms

[Both consequence of our actions. But Christian – self-inflicted alienation rather than consequence of actions in way it is from karmic standpoint

Tibetan - different hells depending on cause

Christian – alienation from God. Can imagine in different ways, but less physical than spiritual. (But Ignatius includes very vivid descriptions of real physical suffering.)]

[Tibetan Buddhist teaching posits very specific results of particular non-virtuous actions. E.g. Killing leads to rebirth in the hells; or if reborn human, will experience much disease and a short life; or rebirth in an inauspicious, unpeaceful, horrible country. Stealing leads to rebirth in preta realms; or if reborn human, misery due to lack of possessions and having possessions stolen, or rebirth in a country with many hailstorms. Etc. (Rest on sheet from LTZR)]