

# THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES: A ZEN PERSPECTIVE

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**A**LL SPIRITUALITY is about desire or, to be more precise, about the right ordering and channelling of desire. Whether we think of the first disciples seeking out Jesus at the beginning of John's gospel or of the many questioners who came to the Buddha to have their doubts settled, spirituality begins with a movement of searching. Spirituality is yoga, a way or a means to an end, literally a yoke to get one's disordered desires and emotions under control. To that extent spirituality consists of an asceticism, a methodical structure of practices against which progress can be measured, as well as a clear vision of the ideal to which it is orientated. The problem is always to get a balance of the two. Discipline alone can kill the spirit, while the best of intentions, if unchecked, can be vapid or perhaps positively destructive. Spiritualities are differentiated both by their vision of the goal of the spiritual life and by the relative emphasis which they put on various practices, the way they seek to order the movement towards the desired goal. The object of this article is to explore something of this tension as it arises in the Spiritual Exercises and, by noting some points of comparison with Buddhism, especially in the zen tradition, to suggest how it may be resolved. Given a measure of genuine and earnest desire, how is a generous-hearted individual to be encouraged in his or her response, to be helped to a deeper conversion (to use a christian term) or to be fully enlightened (to use what I take to be an acceptable zen equivalent)? My point—not perhaps a particularly profound observation—is that both traditions approach the problem in the same way. Pure asceticism is not enough. Asceticism must lead to a contemplative way.

What follows is not an adequate account of the Exercises—still less of Buddhism. Nevertheless dialogue between religious traditions is usually enriching, not only in what one learns of the other's

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tradition but in what one discovers about one's own. Sometimes, however, the real points of similarity may surprise us and we must be careful about prejudging the issue. As Thomas Merton said, comparing Zen and Christianity is rather like trying to compare tennis and mathematics. They are qualitatively quite different.<sup>1</sup> Simply looking for points of contact between the two risks distorting both. Not that I want to be hopelessly agnostic; I just want to avoid the danger of starting from false premisses. The logical western mind instinctively confronts Buddhism as a rival system, a competing ideology. And there is some truth in this assessment. But Buddhism, especially in its zen form, is both more and less: not a systematic view of life, not a religious ideology or revelation, not a mystique or form of mysticism as we think of the term in the West. Rather Zen is yoga, a form of spiritual exercise and therefore a process of training and transformation.

My main concern therefore, is not with buddhist metaphysics; nor is it with Ignatius's theology. Let us begin instead with that word process and with the full title of Ignatius's little handbook: *Spiritual Exercises to conquer oneself and regulate one's life without determining oneself through any tendency that is disordered*. It is not difficult to give this text, and much else in the Exercises, a thoroughly pelagian interpretation. And much traditional jesuit spirituality has tended in this direction. But increasingly such a reading is seen to be quite unsatisfactory, not just because theologically it is inappropriate, but because it does not cohere with the mind of Ignatius himself or with what we now know of the earliest traditions of the Society. Ignatius was a mystic, to rank alongside John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, and his manual of Spiritual Exercises, for all that it is couched in the language of asceticism, is a school of prayer, with a much broader and more open purpose than traditionally has been realised.

What is that purpose? Without generalizing too much, it seems that two lines of interpretation may be discerned: the ascetical and the mystical.<sup>2</sup> The two are not mutually exclusive and must be held together; both agree, for instance, that the effectiveness of the Exercises comes from their being made in a logical sequence, not in their being treated as a series of isolated meditations. But the relative weight given to the different exercises will naturally determine the outcome. The ascetical tendency will see the purpose of the Exercises as the conquest of self and the perfect subjection

of the will to God. The central exercise is the election; everything else either leads up to or is a confirmation of it. One does not need to labour the point; the text is full of the imagery of armies and battles, stresses the virtues of humility and indifference and urges the exercitant to seek poverty and carefully to examine the occasions of sin. Easy, of course, to see all this as a humourless attempt to subordinate the freedom of the Spirit to the straitjacket of method. Yet at first the Exercises were attacked for the very opposite reasons. Ignatius, the untrained wandering holy man, incurred official suspicion over the exercises in prayer he was giving to people; and even after the long years of study in Paris his little book was attacked for being too mystical and affective, for relying too much on the influence of the Holy Spirit and giving undue prominence to personal decision and discernment. Melchior Cano, the theologian of the Inquisition, suspected him of being an *alumbrado*—one of the ‘illuminated’.

It is in this light that we need to see the notoriously ascetical parts of the text and the lack of reference to the Holy Spirit. In the middle of the sixteenth century what counted was purity of doctrine and loyalty to the established order. Mysticism was suspect, as were publications in the vernacular or anything which detracted from the essentially clerical if not monastic nature of prayer and the religious life. A ‘contemplative’ or ‘mystical’ reading of the text makes us aware of just those passages which must have made the Inquisition nervous. Annotation 15, for instance, speaks of the role of the director as standing in the centre like a balance, leaving ‘the Creator to act immediately with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and Lord’. The claim Ignatius is making seems pretty innocuous, but it was more than enough to make his critics feel distinctly uneasy. His assumption is that in following the way prescribed in the Exercises the exercitant may find the will of God. God *will* communicate himself. This was something he had known from his own experience; in the Autobiography he says that God taught him as a schoolmaster deals with a little boy. Essentially the Exercises are a matter of cooperation between the Creator and the creature. Everything else—the exercises of the retreatant, the guidance of the director—is subordinate to this purpose. The rules, the advice, the seemingly endless checks and balances are all there to ensure that nothing goes wrong, that the exercitant recognizes the communication of

God and does not confuse it with his own prejudices or projections or unconsciously self-induced emotional states.

This is the nub of the matter. On a superficial reading, the Exercises appear as a bag of psychological tricks which are intended to twist the exercitant's arm in order to produce a certain result or attitude. Nothing could be further from the truth. For Ignatius, God was working, wanting to communicate himself. Faced with this indescribable mystery the human response must be marked by careful self-examination and deep reverence for the Divine Majesty. Nothing must be left to chance; the possibilities for fooling oneself are too great. How this combination of the ascetical and the contemplative go together can be illustrated by referring to two of the key meditations—the Call of the King and the Two Standards. Briefly put, the former is intended to arouse a sense of generosity in service. But Ignatius does not just present us with Christ's call to go out and conquer the world, as if Christianity consisted simply in an enthusiastic determination to do great deeds for God. The meditation gives a sense of direction to the Second Week. But at the same time it remains open-ended; no attempt is made actually to elicit a response from the exercitant. Desire is present, but must be allowed to grow in its own time.

The Exercises are not just about motivation, but about getting that motivation right. Ignatius knew there was no difficulty in arousing enthusiasm in his exercitants; the problem was how to bring the intellectual grasp of a situation into a right relationship with an affective response. Hence the exercise on the King is complemented by the one entitled Two Standards. Although Ignatius describes two armies and two commanders, they are not drawn up facing each other—like a christian *Bhagavad gītā*. Warfare between good and evil is much less straightforward. Both leaders gather their followers together, give them a strategy and send them out to accomplish their purpose—the one to tempt and destroy, the other to spread a doctrine of salvation through humility and poverty. We misunderstand the exercise completely if we see it as a straight choice between Christ and the devil. Ignatius is not trying to load the argument in favour of Christ and force the exercitant to choose good over evil. If any such choice is to be made it comes in the First Week. The purpose of this exercise is explained in the Third Prelude where the exercitant is told to pray for 'knowledge of the deceits of the bad chief and help to guard

against them'. The truth about oneself has to be faced; even the most dedicated and sincere Christian is subject to illusion and misunderstanding. How am I to be sure that what I am doing is indeed God's will for me? If, as Ignatius tells us, the Exercises are 'to conquer oneself and regulate one's life', where is that right order to come from? Gradually the exercitant is led to accept the basic principle: enthusiasm is not enough; he must learn to recognize his own disordered tendencies, his own bias, that element of self-seeking which may obscure the truth. In short he must develop what Ignatius calls in the Principle and Foundation the quality of indifference. For our part, he says, we should desire and choose only what is most conducive to the end for which we are created. Implicit is a contrast between 'on our part' and 'on God's part'. Until the two converge 'it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things'.

The idea is easily misunderstood. Ignatius is often accused of being cold, aloof, unconcerned. A brief glance at his *Spiritual journal* should convince us that the opposite is the truth. Ignatius was a mystic of the highest rank, a highly emotional man given to repeated and even violent ecstasy. But he was also a man of action and his temperament developed in him a peculiar mysticism in which an intense love of God has its main effect not so much on the intellect (as in John of the Cross) as on the memory and imagination. The chivalrous knight in Ignatius had to find an outlet. All his spiritual experiences point to the felt need to resolve a tension between a deep contemplative spirit and an enthusiasm for service in action. The genius of Ignatius is that he found a way to integrate the two. The ordering of one's life, which he demands, is to be achieved through a growing contemplative union with God who alone can resolve the confusions, tensions and contradictions which the disordered person brings to the Exercises. Indifference is a basic openness to this possibility — a willingness to accept that ultimately only God can do the ordering and therefore the exercitant must sit very loose to personal enthusiasms and fits of generosity. The Exercises are not a clever tool to work up generosity; generosity is presumed. The intention is to point enthusiasm in the right direction. Only the exercitant who is really indifferent to the direction in which he or she may be led by God or is open to possibilities other than those already envisaged has grasped the true spirit of the Exercises.

To speak therefore, of 'ascetical' or 'mystical' interpretations of the Exercises rather misses the point. Ignatius is addressing himself to the problem of how to link the two together, how to hold them in some sort of creative tension. The key notion is that of indifference, the 'still point' at which our efforts to order our own lives are met by the power of God which alone can bring real order. Now it seems to me that—once we have made allowances for the language used—we have here a most important point of convergence with the Middle Way taught by the Buddha. That claim requires a little explanation. There are many parallels to be noted between buddhist and christian spiritualities. The essential outlines of the story of an Ignatius, a Francis of Assisi, a Siddhārtha Gautama are not that different—relative riches to rags and back to spiritual riches. The central motivation of their lives is much the same: a deep personal experience of Absolute Reality and a desire, founded on compassion, to share that sense of Mystery with others. The pattern of life—searching for that Ultimate Truth and leading others on the way—is one that repeats itself in both Christianity and Buddhism. But it would be quite wrong just to lump all ascetics—especially indian ones—unceremoniously together as if they all teach the same thing. Gautama, who became the Buddha or enlightened one, reacted strongly against the typical yoga practice of his day. It did not, he claimed, lead to the ultimate enlightenment of *Nirvāna* which he sought. Instead in his first sermon he taught the Middle Way, a balance between the extremes of self-indulgence and sheer meaningless self-torture, pure asceticism, which while it can certainly produce preternatural experiences can never lead to an understanding of the Ultimate.<sup>3</sup>

As with Ignatius, so with the Buddha, the key to the Middle Way is indifference. When he was asked about ultimate questions, such as the nature of *Nirvāna* or the existence of the individual after death, the Buddha, perhaps wisely, 'replied' with his famous silence. He saw himself as a practical guide on the Way, a physician who gave a diagnosis of the evils of the human condition and prescribed treatment for anyone who really wanted a cure. Thus the Middle Way, which he elaborated into the Four Noble Truths, is best understood by analogy with medical terminology: thus the diagnosis of our sickness is given in the First Noble Truth as Suffering, Impermanence and Insubstantiality; the cause of this suffering, which is rooted in human nature, is basically desire and

ignorance. The cure for human ills is the unconditioned state of *Nirvāna*; and the way to achieve that cure, the Buddha's own remedy, is the Noble Eightfold Path, a series of eight factors which together go to make up a lifetime of careful ethical and meditative practice: Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration.<sup>4</sup>

Compared with other forms of ascetical and contemplative training, this path does not seem to be in any way remarkable or to differ very much from what we might expect to find in any monastically inspired tradition of spirituality. But there is one element in the Noble Eight-fold Path which marks it off quite radically from its indian forebears and brings it very much into line with the central dynamic of the Exercises. This is in many ways that most typically buddhist of all meditative practices—Right Mindfulness. To understand it correctly let us put it into its proper context. The Second Noble Truth is given as 'this thirst which produces re-existence and re-becoming, bound up with passionate greed'. The word translated here as thirst means craving or desire, including the more subtle attachment to personal ideas, ideals and beliefs which may inhibit true freedom. In fact the descriptions of suffering vary considerably, from thirst and ignorance to the popular triad of greed, hatred and delusion. What is being described is the equivalent of the disorder and confusion of Ignatius's exercitant at the beginning of the First Week. But by the beginning of the Second Week another stage has been reached—the generous but perhaps somewhat ill-directed desire which we outlined above. This is similar to what the Buddha describes in the sixth stage of the Eightfold Path—Right Striving or Effort. This can be understood in purely negative terms as the constant control of evil inclinations and impulses. To use the popular image which occurs in the texts: as the tortoise draws in its limbs on sensing danger, so should the sage try to guard and control his senses. But, as the Buddha points out, if we think simply in these terms then the deaf man and the blind man must have controlled their senses. True discipline begins with Right Effort—meaning mental energy and perseverance—which is not an end in itself, but a necessary predisposition for the final stages of the Path. Effort is tempered by Mindfulness to produce Right Concentration which has the quality of indifference or equanimity.

In the famous sermon on the setting up of Mindfulness the Buddha says:

A monk applies full attention either in going forward or back; in looking straight on or looking away; in bending or in stretching; in wearing robes or carrying the bowl; in eating, drinking, chewing or savouring; in attending to the calls of nature; in walking, in standing, in sitting, in falling asleep, in waking; in speaking or in keeping silence; in all these he applies full attention.

*Full attention*—whatever you are doing simply be conscious of doing that and nothing else. Throughout the day try to be conscious of everything you do, however ordinary or trivial. Attention must be paid simply to the present moment or the present action. Whatever you are doing, says the Buddha, do it mindfully, with careful attention to every detail until you are minutely and exactly aware of every sensation, every reaction, every thought or feeling. Normally we do not observe what is *actually* happening but what we *think* is happening or should be happening. Very rarely do we pay full attention to the present and learn to experience what is given to consciousness without distorting reality by imposing on it our own rather ill-considered and sometimes rather trivial categories. Buddhism is all about seeing correctly, about accepting reality as it actually exists.<sup>5</sup>

Only the person who has achieved a state of true openness or indifference can see things as they really are. The word found in the Pāli texts of the theravāda school is *Upekkhā*: literally 'looking on'. It is a certain quality of consciousness which comes at the end of a number of stages of consciousness called *Jhāna* from which we get the word Zen—meditation or possibly absorption. *Jhāna* refers to a process of purification in which various hindrances to enlightenment are purged and a simplified state of consciousness developed. Taken in its fullness (and we have only been able to give the barest outline here), the Eightfold Path is the equivalent of the christian *triplex via*, the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways. Ignatius never describes the last stage, though there is no doubt that his thought moves in this direction. The Exercises prepare an attitude of indifference, a generous openness to the way the Spirit may move a person. Similarly the last stage described by the Buddha is not *Nirvāna*—for *Nirvāna* is beyond description—but the attitude of tranquillity and acceptance which leaves one



on the threshold of *Nirvāna*. The meditator is quite free from all emotional disturbances, both good and bad; from love and hate; from joy and pain. There is only an inner clarity of vision and purpose: 'looking on' with equanimity.

In other words in both the Spiritual Exercises and the Buddha's practice of Mindfulness we find described a sort of qualified asceticism: plenty of emphasis put on purging and purifying disordered tendencies, but with the overall aim of producing a state of consciousness which is essentially contemplative or mystical. Whether the Absolute is conceived in Ignatius's highly personal trinitarian terms or as the obscure agnostic emptiness of the Buddha, the key to progress is death to self. But no amount of physical yoga or psychological trickery can grasp *Nirvāna*, or achieve union with God. Such is the experience of the Buddha's life. It is significant that the unenlightened Gautama rejected the way of his two yogic teachers. He knew it was possible to transcend the experiences which they taught him, that they were no more the Ultimate which he sought than any kind of feeling caused by an expanded consciousness. *Nirvāna* is quite other; it is not to be achieved by raising consciousness to a higher level as if the Ultimate can somehow be caught sitting on the end of a massively long ladder. That is the fundamental mistake: giving some sort of ultimate significance to what is really a this-worldly experience. If *Nirvāna* is the Ultimate then no purely human effort will realise it. *Nirvāna* is not to be 'achieved' at all.

In Ignatius's spirituality, just as in the Middle Way, there is a sense of journey and movement. The Exercises can be seen as a school of prayer, leading the exercitant from a relatively straight-forward type of meditation using the three powers to ever simpler forms of affective contemplation. For Ignatius the simpler the form of prayer (with fewer words and more attention to affectivity) the closer one gets to the union with God which orders and determines everything. Ignatius's mysticism, while it must be distinguished from that of the great Flemish and Rhineland mystics, has still got its deeply apophatic side; the conviction that 'God is always greater' is implicit in every exercise. Whatever vision or idea of God we may have, the reality is always infinitely greater, beyond our feeble projections. All created things flow from God and return to God. God is the Word of the Fourth Gospel, the one who comes down 'from above', in whose image the world is created and in

whose Spirit it finds fulfilment. Thus in the final Contemplation Ignatius suggests that one should 'look how all the good things and gifts descend from above, as my poor power from the supreme and infinite power from above . . .' Only the one who has learnt real indifference, equanimity and openness—the ignatian *Upekkhā* — can contemplate the majesty of God's presence as it is manifested in and through creation.

But is there more to the buddhist *Upekkhā* than a contemplative peace before a world of suffering, impermanence and insubstantiality? It is easy to interpret the Buddha's teaching in a fatalistic way. And certainly the sort of theology outlined above is totally alien to buddhist thinking. But it is impossible to overlook the reverence the buddhist feels before the mystery of creation. The fact that the Buddha opted for silence does not turn him into an agnostic; rather for one who is being truly mindful only a contemplative 'looking on'—without words, without images—avoids the danger of reducing that mystery to purely human terms. In Zen, which takes the casting off of images much further than any form of christian mysticism, there is the famous saying: 'If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him'. The human form of the Buddha is at best a useful prop for the beginner and at worst a snare, a projection of the human mind which can subvert true progress. *Nirvāna* is mystery and must be allowed to remain so.

What I am suggesting—that both the Exercises and the Middle Way are concerned primarily with the right ordering of desire through the development of a contemplative freedom and equanimity—should not obscure the very real differences which exist between the two spiritualities. Buddhism has no sense of personal sin or offence against a loving Creator God; there is no radical conversion towards a person to whom one is intimately related; there is no equivalent to the imaginative meditations of the Exercises. But the similarities may turn out to be more significant. Both demand a radical detachment and loss of self; both stress the development and simplification of a contemplative consciousness; both lead to an awareness of reality beyond the ordinary, yet both stress that the way to find these is *in* the immediate, the ordinary and the everyday. Ignatius's life was given over to a growing sensitivity, an ever deeper awareness of God's redeeming activity at the heart of creation—an activity in which, as a collaborator with Christ the Servant-King, he had a

part to play. It is easy to see why Ignatius emphasized so much the need for indifference in our attitude to created things. If God is really working at the heart of creation then everything speaks of God—whether health or sickness, riches or poverty, honour or dishonour, a long life or a short one. Finding God in *all* things means precisely what it says.

Such is the vision of the Exercises. The Buddha starts, as it were, from the other end—not so much finding God in all things, but seeing all things as One, as part of the Holy Mystery of which all Indian scriptures in their different ways speak. Just as Ignatius proposes to put his exercitants in touch with God at the heart of their everyday experience of the world, so the Buddha tells his disciples to be mindful and aware of whatever is presented to their experience. Enlightenment means recognizing that all things *already* possess the Buddha-nature. But the fundamental dynamic of the two traditions is the same: action and contemplation, asceticism and mysticism meet and are resolved in an attitude of equanimity and openness to the Divine Mystery which allows God to be God and the rest to be silence.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In *Thomas Merton on Zen* (Sheldon Press, 1976), p 91.

<sup>2</sup> On this topic the reader is referred to the excellent account by Joseph Veale, 'Ignatian prayer or jesuit spirituality', *Way Supplement* 27, Spring 1976.

<sup>3</sup> 'Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth' (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta) Samyutta Nikāya, LVII, 11. From *What the Buddha taught*, Walpola Rahula (Gordon Fraser, 1967), pp 92-94.

<sup>4</sup> A reliable account of the Four Noble Truths according to the theravādin tradition is given by Rahula, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> cf Nyānponika Thera, *The heart of buddhist meditation*, a handbook of mental training based on the Buddha's Way of Mindfulness (London, Rider, 1962).