Ending and return

Three ways of praying

Michael Barnes

AT THE END OF THE FOURTH WEEK, just after the Contemplation to Attain Love, and just when one might reasonably expect some sage advice on how to come out of retreat, Ignatius gives us yet more ways of praying – three, to be precise. Much of what is said is familiar and the instructions straightforward. The first way, attending to the ten commandments, the deadly sins, the powers of the soul and the senses of the body, is concerned with 'providing a framework, a method and certain exercises through which to prepare oneself and to make progress' (Exx 238). The second is more obviously contemplative. Attention is shifted to the way in which five familar prayers – the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Creed, the Soul of Christ and the Hail Holy Queen – are to be prayed. Ignatius proposes that the exercitant should dwell on a particular word, thereby gaining 'rich matter for reflection and much relish and consolation' (Exx 254).

The third method has not been seen before, and it is more intriguing. Entitled by Ignatius 'by rhythm', '*por compàs*', it recommends a way of 'praying mentally with each intake or explusion of breath' (Exx 258). The breathing becomes a sort of timing mechanism, with each word of a familiar prayer, such as the *Our Father*, being correlated with the natural familiar beat of bodily rhythms. The additional notes are the same as for the first two ways. Ignatius concludes by repeating that

> He who wishes to spend more time in the measured prayer, may say all of the prayers mentioned above, or a part of them in this way. But let him keep the same method of a breath for the measure as has been explained above. (Exx 260)

Spirituality in a multi-faith world

In a multi-faith world this third way of prayer naturally arouses a great deal of interest. Who taught Ignatius this tradition? Did he perhaps take it from some existing way of prayer, a sort of Sufi hangover from Morisco Spain? It would, clearly, be quite anachronistic to read some proto-'dialogue of religious experience' into Ignatius'

text.[1] Ignatius' vision of a world shot through with the majesty and beauty of the gracious God has inspired an extraordinarily fruitful engagement with other religious traditions, from early exponents of inculturation like Matteo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili to the more recent dialogue with Zen practised by the likes of Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, William Johnston and Robert Stephens.[2] The Exercises challenge the imagination to retell the Christian story in a manner which speaks to different peoples and different cultures, but as a manual of *apostolic* prayer, they have a very precise purpose. Ignatius' advice on how to pray arose not from study of other faiths or from exotic travellers' tales but from his own experience of being led by the grace of God. It is this experience, the experience of being 'placed with the Son' in the work of redemption, which guides the whole process. Speculation about the *origins* of particular ideas and themes must be secondary to the movement of the whole process of conversion to the ways of God's Spirit.

These thoughts on 'endings' do have a certain inter-faith dimension, but they are offered as a reflection on how that awkward bridge between retreat and return can be satisfactorily negotiated. My starting point is with David Fleming's 'contemporary reading' of the text which places the three ways outside the retreat proper, ways of continuing to pray 'in the spirit', as it were, of the Exercises. They are ideal, says Fleming, for use when 'we have no text of Scripture at hand, when we are tired or travelling, or when in general we are left to our own resources'.[3] Maybe one may add, with a nod in the direction of the enigmatic third way: 'or when particular circumstances commend "other" resources'. The experience of the Exercises opens up a certain contemplative sensitivity to God's world. It does not, however, prescribe any particular form or way of contemplation. The forms and methods of prayer in other religious traditions are now common currency in our contemporary world.[4] If a modicum of inter-faith reflection in enabling the process of ending and return is justified, it is because of the very simplicity in prayer which Ignatius recommends and because, throughout the Exercises, he is conscious of the part played by the body and one's physical surroundings in responding to God. The point I want to make is that the main form of meditation taught by the Buddhist tradition does not somehow 'explain' the third way but that, properly understood within the movement of the three ways as a single whole, it can encourage a Christian form of what Buddhists might refer to as 'returning to the source'.[5]

Revisiting a tradition of prayer

First, however, let us look at the Ignatian text and the tradition of its interpretation. To what extent are the three ways to be considered an integral, even essential, part of the Fourth Week? Are they intended somehow to recapitulate the experience of the Exercises as a whole, or, as Fleming suggests, to enable the exercitant to move from the intensity of contemplation to the sort of prayer suitable for the remorseless grind of daily engagement with 'the world'? And, if the latter, how does the simple contemplative prayer which the text recommends continue that movement of conversion which is the fruit of the Exercises as a whole?

I want to argue that the three ways need to be taken together as different but continuous moments in a single process. Thus the first way is emphatically meditative in style, being based on summaries of largely abstract truths. The second is clearly more personal; the aim is to express as simply as possible the loving relationship with the one addressed. The third brings the two together: understanding and affective response become one in the natural everyday rhythms of human existence. Ignatius recommends that in the interval between breaths 'attention is especially paid to the meaning of that word, to the person to whom one is praying or to one's own lowliness or to the distance between the other's grandeur and one's own lowliness' (Exx 258). Together the three ways encourage a repetition of the great truths of faith with its own power to move the exercitant from a place of contemplation into the time-bound encounter with others.

A first reading of the Directories tends to confirm this opinion. The three ways are to be understood as additional resources, summarizing what has gone before. They are to be used with freedom, as appropriate. The first, for instance, forms a good basis for a general confession, while the second presumes upon that love and knowledge of God which comes from a regular and devout contemplation of the Christ of the Gospels. As for the third, according to Polanco only two things need to be said. Firstly, this method is 'intermediate between vocal and mental prayer' with the timed intervals allowing for a deeper consideration of, and affective response to, the meaning of the words proposed. Secondly, the intervals are not to be followed too slavishly; the exercitant may want to stay a little longer. But in that case, of course, the third method reverts to the second – pondering the meaning of a single word.[6] Dàvila notes that the three ways are 'little taught, despite their great value',[7] while Cordeses contents himself with the remark that the third way is the 'easiest and most suitable for simple persons'.[8] The Official Directory of 1599 is scarcely more forthcoming. The

assumption is that the three ways come after the Exercises proper as a 'complement to the teaching on prayer and for the sake of less educated or capable persons'.[9] They are to be learned 'for later use' and the advice offered by Dàvila is repeated, that the third way may be 'most helpful for persons who are obliged to recite the canonical hours or other vocal prayers'.[10]

But what of the three ways as a single dynamic process of entering into the joy of the Risen Lord? There is one further reference to note. And it is quite revealing. Speaking of the third way, Miró repeats Polanco almost word for word, adding that 'some people breathe more rapidly than others'.[11] Almost a throw-away remark, it seems like a statement of the blindingly obvious. In fact it reminds us that what is being described is more than a technique for easing the way into prayer. There can be nothing mechanical about a form of prayer which seeks to direct words towards persons. As the ever-wise Michael Ivens notes, 'while the breathing should be deliberate and steady, it should also be normal breathing, not altered in depth or pace for the purpose of prayer'.[12]

The crucial question here is whether the rhythm of breathing should structure the 'natural' rate of prayer or vice versa. For Ignatius, of course, there can be no question of a mechanical approach to a fundamentally affective form of prayer. At the same time, he clearly thinks the 'system of rhythmic breathing' is helpful in structuring what can easily, in the days of adjustment to the end of the formal process of the Exercises, become a very diffuse and ill-focused form of prayer. In illustration of the point a distinction from the rich Indian meditative tradition may be helpful.

Yoga and the Buddhist tradition of meditation

In the classical tradition of the *Yoga Sutras*, the aim is to control or direct the breathing so that the meditator can achieve *ekagrata* – a word which translates as 'one-pointedness of concentration'.[13] This is quite different from the earliest Buddhist tradition where the expressed aim is the achieving not of a state of enstatic isolation but what in the Pali tradition is known as *samma sati*, 'right mindfulness', the penultimate stage of the Noble Eightfold Path.[14] Here the Buddha's instructions are quite clear. There is no question of altering or manipulating the pattern of breathing. Rather the meditator follows and simply notes or 'becomes mindful' of what is given. If a short breath then one notes a short breath; if a long breath one notes a long breath. The difference between the classical yoga and the Buddhist ways is crucial: on the one

hand a rhythm is established in order to set a pattern, on the other, a rhythm is followed in order to develop a contemplative awareness of what is given. How does this distinction apply to Ignatius' third way?

Miró's statement of the obvious, reminding us that 'some people breathe more rapidly', could have come from a Buddhist meditation manual. The Buddha was something of a pragmatist and the Buddhist tradition, especially in the Mahayana school, has always been concerned for developing what is called 'skilful means', the ability to adapt methods of meditation appropriately. The Four Noble Truths, which diagnose and propose a remedy for the ills of the human condition, are directed towards a series of practices which seek to overcome what is usually translated as 'craving' or 'thirst'. These practices – sometimes summarized as the 'three trainings' of *sila, samadhi* and *prajña* (ethics, concentration and wisdom) – lead to and depend on the teaching of *anatmavada*, the paradoxical notion that the human person is essentially 'non-self'. This, however, is very far from an elaborate and distinctly counter-intuitive exercise in denying the existence of some sort of indwelling *atman* or 'inner core'. *Anatmavada* is, rather, a pedagogical device, an attempt to learn the most difficult teaching of the four Noble Truths, that there is no ultimate reality which can somehow be held or grasped, which can be made subject to craving or desire. The only desire which can be granted is 'right effort', the attempt to comprehend that vision of the inter-relatedness of all things which sees them as they are. Such an educated vision springs not from forcing a particular insight but from mind-fulness, a careful attention to whatever presents itself to human consciousness. 'Wrong effort', 'craving' or 'thirst', is destructive precisely because it distorts the truth about reality, and therefore about the nature of the human person. Not to put too fine a point on it: to control the rhythm of breathing, as the traditional yogis would teach, is to do violence to the way reality presents itself.

Responding to God's loving initiative

But, if Miró's remark is good Buddhism, it also makes for sound Christian theology. Structuring prayer around the rhythm of breathing is not an end in itself and certainly not a guaranteed technique for achieving some sort of mystical union, however that may be interpreted. It is one way, and only one way, of responding to God's loving initiative, of entering into a 'mindful' contemplative awareness of the grace of God's creative and redemptive action in the world. In other words, the third way of praying deepens and clarifies the mood of

immediate presence to the great truths of faith which are summed up in the five prayers of the second way. Such a mood of constant attention is never set and predictable. This is, in other words, no empty passivity which is content to have achieved some plateau of stillness. It keeps a quality of attentiveness to God's Word; it waits for God to speak and to act; it is ready to react to the movement of the Spirit in myriad ways. As the tradition of the Directories indicates, to pray '*por compàs*' may often have the effect of taking the exercitant back into this second way, the prayer of humble submission to the God revealed in Jesus Christ.[15]

If this is correct, then it is obvious why three ways, and not just one, are placed together right at the end of the Exercises. The final task of the exercitant is not only to effect a return to 'everyday life' while preserving the intensity of the experience of the love of God which belongs to the *Contemplatio*. It is also to maintain the spirit of the election and that conversion of heart which, as Ignatius carefully reminds his exercitant, recognizes that 'love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words' (Exx 230).

At stake here is the nature of an apostolic prayer which takes its rise from a profound personal experience of God's grace present in one's individual history and continues through a contemplative vision of the traces of the Spirit active throughout the world. The question is always how the two are to be brought together, how the mood of wonder and joy at one's own personal salvation in the First Week moves to a mood of sharing the joy of another, the Risen Lord, in the Fourth. Constructed and adapted imaginatively, the three ways – meditation on truth, affective contemplation, and a means of rooting both in the rhythm of the body – provide a very simple template for ending the retreat. It is not, in other words, a matter of avoiding the worst of the inevitable 'let-down' in leaving what has become a familiar way of relating to God; rather, the three ways enable simple repetition of the key themes and moments of the retreat which direct disinterested desire to its object – the God who wants human beings to become participants in his work of salvation.

Returning to the source

The language of Christian faith is far removed from what is normally associated with Buddhism – and I have no intention of attempting to cross that particular divide at this stage. The subject of ending and return reminds us, however, of the evocative set of images alluded to above – the 'ox-herding pictures' – which bring the two traditions into a creative dialogue. A number of drawings portray the process of

enlightenment in terms of the taming of a wild bull by a herdsman. The bull, of course, is the mind, the herdsman the archetypal searcher or seeker after enlightenment. According to a well-known Buddhist teacher, the Venerable Rahula, the basic image is as old as the most ancient texts. He quotes one of the Theravada commentaries to the effect that the mind of the meditator

> does not like to enter into the path of a subject of meditation, but runs only into a wrong path like a chariot yoked to an untamed bull. Just as a herdsman, who desires to break in an untamed calf grown up with all the milk it has drunk from the untamed cow, would remove it from the cow, and having fixed a big post on a side would tie the calf to it with a rope . . . in the same way this *bhikkhu* [the meditator] who desires to tame the villainous mind . . . should tie it to the post of the object of the presence of mindfulness.[16]

In the version described by Rahula there are ten pictures. At the beginning the ox is black but in the course of its training it becomes perfectly white. Rahula points out that 'the underlying idea' is that the mind achieves enlightenment as it is gradually cleansed of 'extraneous impurities'. In the penultimate picture the ox has disappeared. The object of the practice of mindfulness has been achieved; ideas of an *atman*, an independent 'self', have disappeared. Only the meditator, now totally at one with the landscape, remains – the great truth of *Nirvana* illustrated in the tenth picture, a totally empty (or is it completely full?) blank circle.

That, however, is not the end of the story. In some versions we are taken back to the beginning.[17] The meditator is shown mingling in the world 'with helping hands'.[18] In one way, nothing has changed. As the Zen saying has it:

> Before you study Zen, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers. While you study Zen, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers. When you have obtained enlightenment, mountains are again mountains and rivers again rivers.[19]

In another way, nothing can be the same again. The vision of quite ordinary things has developed a clarity and an immediacy which it never held before. Those who have practised Zen or the *Vipassana* school of mindfulness in the Theravada tradition speak of a heightened consciousness in which the senses become minutely attuned to the

smallest stimulus. This for the Buddhist is the threshold of enlightenment, letting things be, seeing them as they really are, in which the mind is freed from all desire, the causes of rebirth, and waits upon the moment of insight and enlightenment. It is not, then, that the meditator is granted some ecstatic moment of illumination, but that each and every moment is now experienced and valued for itself. What was once the teaching of another has become one's own.

A world transformed

There is something in the metaphor of the taming of the bull which is helpful in bringing the Exercises to an end. In amongst all the wise words about living with loss, maintaining a degree of solitude, coping with noise and the lack of support, learning how to explain the experience to others – all of which advice is clearly important – there has to be something about recognizing and cherishing this transformation of the ordinary. For a Buddhist the practice of mindfulness is not an exercise confined to particular times and places; if it fails to develop a sensitivity to the immediate and everyday, or if such sensitivity lasts only as long as the period of meditation, then it is not mindfulness that has been practised but mere self-indulgence. The mindfulness which leads to enlightenment, or, putting it in more Christian terms, the discernment of spirits which brings with it conversion of heart, undoubtedly takes time to learn. But it also leads the exercitant back into the world of time, a world shared with others and therefore a world full of new possibilities.

The point is this: to make the period of 'debrief' no more than a matter of gradually letting oneself back into the 'reality' of everyday life is to fail to recognize that the ordinary has indeed been transformed, yet remains quite profoundly itself. Our world is what it has always been, an ambiguous riot of surprising joys and dark secrets – but more obviously so.

The time of return, whether or not it centres upon the three ways of praying, is not a matter of gentle disengagement but of continuing to live out a vision of what this Supplement calls 'Resurrection *and beyond*'. The truths of faith contemplated in the Fourth Week, from the first appearance to Mary the Mother of the Lord to the great vision of God's grace coming down 'from above' in the *Contemplatio*, focus on the story of what has happened to the Risen Lord. Because the Father has raised the Son, nothing can ever be the same again. This points to a crucial difference between Christianity and Buddhism. A Christian returning to source has, like the Buddhist, learned the great comp-

lementary qualities of the Bodhisattva, wisdom and compassion.[20] What differentiates the two religions is not, however, the connotations of language but the source of motivation. Whereas in Buddhism the aim is to make the Buddha's enlightenment experience one's own, for the Christian, Christ is, in an important sense, the teaching as well as the teacher. The Risen Lord remains not just a motive for faith but the object *of* faith. It is thus that in the Exercises Ignatius stresses that it is *Christ's* joy that we share; it is *his* consolation that we seek to enjoy. The Christian lives in conscious communion with the Risen Lord who receives everything as gift from the Father and now points the way in thanksgiving to their source and origin.

It is entirely appropriate that the prayer of the final days of the Exercises should contain a repetition of what has gone before. Such prayer will also bear in mind the demands of the 'marketplace' to which the retreatant must shortly return. But most importantly it will attend to the contemplative-yet-apostolic quality of the prayer of *these days* – days unlike any others not because they entail a certain 'winding-down' and 'opening-up', but because they begin the living out of what has now become an almost intuitive response of returning all things in Christ to the God from whom they came. Resurrection points both ways, rooting beginnings and 'beyond' in the reality of the present moment. Putting it more theologically, just as the risen body of the Lord bears the marks of the crucified one, so Christ's mystical body will go on showing forth the marks of suffering humanity.

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NOTES

1 The term 'dialogue of religious experience' comes from the now standard account of four forms of inter-religious dialogue, the other three being the dialogues of common life, common action and theological exchange. They appeared first in a major Vatican statement on inter-faith dialogue: *Attitude of the Church towards the followers of other religions*, published by the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions, 1984, 27–35. They have been repeated in *Dialogue and proclamation*, published jointly by the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the Congregation for Evangelisation, 1991, 42–46; and in Pope John Paul II's 1991 encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, 57.

2 See E. G. Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, *Zen meditation for Christians* (La Salle: Open Court, 1974); *Zen – way to enlightenment* (London, 1973); William Johnston, *The still point* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); *Silent Music* (London: Fontana, 1974); *Christian Zen* (Dublin: Gill and

Macmillan, 1979); Robert Kennedy, *Zen spirit, Christian Spirit* (Continuum, 1995, 1998); and 'Zen Christian experience' in *The Way Supplement* (Summer 1999) 95, pp 75–81.

3 David Fleming, *Draw me into your friendship: a literal and contemporary reading of the Spiritual Exercises* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), p 185.

4 The work of J.-M. Déchanet on the use of Yoga-practice in prayer is still valuable; see especially his *Christian Yoga* (London: Search Press, 1960); and *Yoga and God* (London: Search Press, 1974). The works of Bede Griffiths on the Hindu – Christian dialogue of religious experience are well known, especially *Return to the centre* (London: Fount, 1978), and *The marriage of East and West* (London: Fount, 1984). The classic text on prayer in dialogue remains Abhishiktananda's brilliant treatise *Prayer* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1967). On this topic see also Thomas Matus, *Yoga and the Jesus prayer tradition* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist, 1984). More discursive is my *God East and West* (London: SPCK, 1991), especially chapters 5–7. See also two collections: *The Way Supplement* 78 (1993), 'Interfaith spirituality', and Tosh Arai and Wesley Ariarajah (eds), *Spirituality in interfaith dialogue* (Orbis, 1989).

5 See, e.g., Katsuki Sekida, *Zen training: methods and philosophy* (New York: Weatherhill, 1975), p 229.

6 See Martin Palmer (trans and ed), *On giving the Spiritual Exercises: the early Jesuit manuscript directories and the Official Directory of 1599* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), p 147.

7 *Ibid.*, p 263.

8 *Ibid.*, p 284.

9 *Ibid.*, p 343.

10 *Ibid.*, p 345.

11 *Ibid.*, pp 187–188.

12 Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), p 189.

13 On the classical yoga see the text and the commentary of Vacaspatimiśra in *The Yoga-system of Patañjali*, edited and translated from the Sanskrit by James Haughton Woods (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, reprinted 1972).

14 On Buddhist '*bhavana*' or 'mental culture' see the chapter by Paul Griffiths, 'Indian Buddhist meditation' in *Buddhist Spirituality*, volume I, ed Takeuchi Yoshinori (London: SCM, 1993), pp 34–66. For the development of the early Buddhist practice of yoga see Winston L. King, *Theravada meditation: the Buddhist transformation of Yoga* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980). For the texts of the *sati* tradition, the *Satipatthana Suttas*, see Nyananponika Thera, *The heart of Buddhist meditation* (London: Rider, 1972). Perhaps the best brief commentary on Buddhist meditation is that of Walpola Rahula in *What the Buddha taught* (Bedford: Gordon Fraser, 1967), pp 67–75.

15 For commentary on the word '*baxeza*' or 'lowliness' (Exx 258), and its link with the Three Degrees of Humility, see William Peters, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius: exposition and interpretation* (Jersey City, 1967), p 177.

16 Quoted in 'Zen and the taming of the bull' in *Zen and the taming of the bull: towards the definition of Buddhist thought*, essays by Walpola Rahula (London: Gordon Fraser, 1978), p 15.

17 E.g. Sekida, *op. cit.*, pp 223–236.

18 *Ibid.*, p 230.

19 Attributed to the eighth century Ch'an master, Ch'ing Yuan. Quoted by H. W. Schumann in *Buddhism* (London: Rider, 1967), p 168.

20 See Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: the doctrinal foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989), esp pp 49–54.