MEADVILLE LOMBARD THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

MANY PATHS THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF QUAKERISM, CATHOLIC MYSTICISM, AND THERAVADA BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines similarities and differences between the contemplative paths of Quakerism, Catholic Mysticism, and Theravada Buddhism. Drawing from research and personal experience in each of these traditions, it advances a new metaphor for religious diversity as many paths through the wilderness of Ultimate Reality. It explores the rich diversity of trailheads, destinations, views of Ultimate Reality, terrain, and guides of these different paths, and remarks on how travelers on each of these divergent paths are nonetheless transformed in similar ways. The paper champions the value of embracing both the tension of meaningful difference, as well as the convergence of wisdom across traditions in the shared journey through the wilderness.

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It is also indebted to the courage of contemplatives across millennia who refused to accept simple answers in their quest for deeper wisdom, and who sometimes lost their lives for it. And it is, hopefully, an expression of Spirit, which has lovingly but unrelentingly led me into the Great Mystery. It has been one of the great privileges of my life to explore this wilderness, and I am filled with gratitude for the opportunity to articulate some of the territory I have had the chance to traverse so far.

For any ways I distort what I have been given to say, or misrepresent the teachers and traditions I write about, I ask for the reader's forgiveness. May this thesis be of benefit to all beings and fellow travelers, that we may find a way to peace, love, and freedom for all.

1. Introduction

In 1984, the Catholic monk Father Thomas Keating convened a group of spiritual teachers from various religions to explore their common ground and differences. In what came to be known as the Snowmass Conference, this group of Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Islamic, Native American, Russian Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic teachers investigated a range of topics over 20 years.[1] Father Keating recounts, "We were surprised and delighted to find so many points of similarity and convergence in our respective paths. Like most people of our time, we originally expected that we would find practically nothing in common."[2]

Over the past 15 years, I have had the privilege of delving into a variety of spiritual traditions, with a particular focus on Quakerism, Catholic mysticism, and Theravada Buddhism. Like the participants in the Snowmass Conference, I have been struck by common threads in these traditions. All three are what could be called contemplative or mystical traditions focused on silent meditation or prayer as a means to directly experience an "Ultimate Reality" beyond our day-to-day sense of the material world. When I first heard the phrase, "religions are all different paths up the same mountain," it made sense to me: I felt a similar sense of freedom, playfulness, and deep compassion from elders who seemed to be at the mountaintop of each tradition.

But with further reflection over the years, that metaphor has felt incomplete. Alongside the similarities, I have also perceived meaningful differences between what these traditions are pointing towards and the kinds of Ultimate Reality they emphasize. I have also struggled with

[1] Netanel Miles-Yépez, *The Common Heart: An Experience of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Lantern Books, 2006), xvii.

[2] Miles-Yépez, *The Common Heart,* xvii.

the image of climbing a mountain, since my experience has often felt more like slipping and sliding down into an infinite valley! Further, I have been uncomfortable with the hierarchy this metaphor implies between spiritual practitioners, rising above the plateau, and everyone else stuck down below.

While every metaphor has its limitations, in this paper, I will suggest an alternative analogy that better suits my experience, of many paths through the wilderness. Focusing on the three traditions I am most familiar with, I will explore Quakerism, Catholic mysticism, and Theravada Buddhism as three of the countless paths that wind through a shared wilderness of Ultimate Reality.

In the first section, I will explore the varying trailheads and stated destinations of each tradition, considering their foundational concerns about the condition of humanity, and aspirations for where we might be headed. I will proceed to investigate the view of Ultimate Reality each tradition offers its travelers along the way, suggesting each path reveals Ultimate Reality from a different vantage point. I will demonstrate how these differences are directly tied to where each paths begins and aims to go. Next, I will reflect on similarities and differences in the terrain of these paths. I will particularly focus on the ways each path emphasizes willful scrambling and climbing, as opposed to effortless surrendering to the momentum of divine gravity. Then I will consider the role of guides in each tradition, reflecting on their conceptions of spiritual authority and the function of external direction. Finally, I will explore how these paths impact their travelers' relationships to their own hearts and minds, and to the condition of all beings.

Every religion has such internal diversity that it is impossible to capture the range of perspectives within a tradition. As I have heard Quakers say, "if you ask ten Quakers to define

Quakerism, you'll get twelve answers!" But in this paper, I will attempt to draw out key themes that seem to be representative of meaningful swaths of each tradition, based on my research and personal experience. To represent Quakerism, also known as the Religious Society of Friends, I will focus on the 17th century writings of the first Quaker, George Fox, as well as a range of more contemporary writers from the liberal tradition of modern Quakerism. To illustrate Catholic mysticism, I will draw primarily from the 16th century Spanish nun, St. Teresa of Avila, and the 13th -14th century German preaching friar Meister Eckhart. These two voices can in no way represent the full diversity of Catholic mysticism, but they reveal threads common to many Catholic mystics. Finally, for the Theravada Buddhist perspective, I draw primarily from translated teachings of the Buddha as recorded in the Pali Canon, and from contemporary, western Theravada teachers in the Insight Meditation tradition. This paper focuses exclusively on the Theravada tradition and does not consider the vast variety of other Buddhist schools. Where possible, I include not just teachings from these individuals, but also the stories from their lives and excerpts from their writings that travelers within each path are exposed to. This allows us to appreciate contrasts not just in content, but also in the mythos, ethos, and language of each tradition. Some of the excerpts use only male pronouns to describe their readers, demonstrating how these contemplatives can be enlightened in some ways, and stuck in the sexist cultural norms of their times in other respects.

As we explore these varying paths, we will see they do not start from the same place, claim the same destination, reveal the same kind of Ultimate Reality, present the same kind of terrain, or offer the same kinds of guides. And yet, perhaps we will find, as I felt in my early experiences meeting elders from each tradition, that their travelers somehow still end up similarly transformed by their journeys in the wilderness.

2. Trailheads and Destinations

What are each tradition's primary concerns and aspirations for humanity?

In his book, God Is Not One, Stephen Prothero claims, "What the world's religions share is not so much a finish line as a starting point. And where they begin is with this simple observation: something is wrong with the world."[3] While Quakers begin from a place of distress about the gap between society's choices and God's vision for humankind, our Catholic mystics add to this a concern for a deeper separation from God in our very being. The Buddha, meanwhile, sets his sights on the problem of human suffering. These different concerns lead each tradition to start from unique places, and to articulate different visions of where their path leads.

Quakerism

At the core of the Quaker tradition is an aspiration to harmonize our individual lives, our spiritual communities, and society at large with God's loving vision for humanity. George Fox, the first Quaker, was driven by a deep concern that the people of the world were, "strangers to the covenant of life with God,"[4] living "out of Christ's life, against the gospel practice, and contrary to the manner and order of the saints."[5] Like many good things, Quakerism can trace its origins to a bad experience at a bar. In his journal, Fox recounts a formative experience meeting with his cousin and an acquaintance at a pub when he was 19. After a first round of drinks, his companions began, "calling for more, and agreeing together, that he that would not drink should pay all. I was grieved that any who made profession of religion, should do so."[6] Fox reports

[3] Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One*: *The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 11.

[4] George Fox, *Journal of George Fox,* ed. Wilson Armistead, 7th ed., vol. 1 (London: W. And F.G. Cash, 1852), 50.

[5] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 258.

[6] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 50.

being so disturbed that he left the pub in a huff, and, "returned home, but did not go to bed that night, nor could I sleep, but sometimes walked up and down, and sometimes prayed and cried to the Lord, who said unto me, 'Thou seest how young people go together into vanity, and old people into the earth; thou must forsake all, both young and old, and keep out of all, and be a stranger unto all."[7] It was this revulsion to the lack of integrity and faithfulness he perceived in those around him, and the revelation he received from God, that led Fox to set out from home and begin the journey that resulted in the formation of the Quaker faith. The Quaker tradition was a direct response to this gap between people's behavior and Fox's understanding of God's will. George Fox articulates his sense of purpose around bridging that gap, noting that helping people to, "walk in the heavenly divine light, grace, and Spirit of Christ…hath been, and is, my travail and labour in the Lord to turn all to."[8]

While the Spirit may have strong opinions about how we are to live, Quakers are clear its foundation is always love. George Fox's journal is full of references to the, "love of God," which he describes as "great,"[9] "infinite,"[10] and "everlasting."[11] So central is the theme of love that it is not uncommon for today's Quakers to substitute "Love" for "God" as the center of their faith.[12] But all Quakers would agree this is not a sentimental Love, for it conveys a challenging vision for the world. They would further claim its loving vision cannot be pursued in solitude. Contemporary Quaker Sandra Cronk notes, "At the heart of the Quaker faith is the understanding that one cannot live God's new order alone…It is necessary to have a community to embody a

[7] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 50.
[8] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 2, 162.
[9] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 79.
[10] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 60.
[11] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 55.
[12] Mary Pagurelias, "Perspective of a Nontheist," *New York Yearly Meeting* (blog), accessed March 17, 2024, https://nyym.org/content/perspective-nontheist.

new pattern of living. A single person cannot live a new social pattern alone."[13] One could say the trail-end of Quakerism is to discern and live into the will of God/Love for humanity, together.

Catholic Mysticism

Catholic mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila and Meister Eckhart share the Quakers' deep concern for living faithfully according to God's loving will. St. Teresa's memoir is full of confessions of times when she has "not served Him,"[14] and in pointing to the endpoint of the spiritual life, St. Teresa asks, "Do you know what it means to be truly spiritual? It means becoming a slave to God. We are branded with the sign of the cross. It is the token that we have given him our freedom. Now he can offer us as servants to the whole world, as he offers himself. This does us no harm. In fact, he is granting us a great boon."[15]

Meister Eckhart similarly points to the rarity of sincere devotion and faithfulness, lamenting, "There are plenty to follow our Lord half-way, but not the other half,"[16] proclaiming, "to fulfill God's will is heaven,"[17] and declaring, "A human being should seek nothing — neither discernment nor knowledge nor inwardness nor devotion nor rest — but only the will of God."[18] Eckhart adds some nuance, however, when he notes, "If our will is God's will, it is good. But if

[13] Sandra Lee Cronk, *Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1991), 7-8.

[14] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, trans. E. Allison Peers, 1995, 107, https://www.carmelitemonks.org/Vocation/teresa_life.pdf.

[15] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr (New York: Penguin, 2003), 289.

[16] Meister Eckhart, *Eckhart*, trans. Franz Pfeiffer and C. de. B Evans (London: John M. Watkins, 1924), 45.

[17] Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, trans. Bernard McGinn and Frank Tobin (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), 309.

[18] Meister Eckhart, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation*, trans. Matthew Fox (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 231.

God's will becomes our will, it is far better."[19] For Eckhart, ideally we do not align our will to God's will, but rather we so surrender our own will that we have no will of our own to speak of, leaving only God's will itself.

Like the Quakers, both Eckhart and St. Teresa are clear the God they speak of is a deeply loving God, as St. Teresa remarks on the "greater extremity of Thy Love,"[20] and Meister Eckhart explains, "Should anyone ask what God is, this is what I should now say, that God is love."[21] Both St. Teresa and Eckhart lament the disconnection between this loving God and our will and actions, and suggest bridging that gap is a priority of the spiritual life.

Yet St. Teresa and Eckhart add an additional concern for a deeper sense of separation from God, not in what we do in life, but in our very being. St. Teresa recounts her childhood longing for eternal rest in God, describing how she and her brother would brainstorm elaborate plans for how to become martyrs, "to attain as quickly as possible to the fruition of the great blessings which, as I read, were laid up in Heaven." [22]

> We agreed to go off to the country of the Moors, begging our bread for the love of God, so that they might behead us there; and, even at so tender an age, I believe the Lord had given us sufficient courage for this, if we could have found a way to do it; but our greatest hindrance seemed to be that we had a father and a mother."[23]

This wish for eternal transcendence into God, foiled in her youth by loving parents, appears to have accompanied St. Teresa for most of her life. She remarks about her early years as a nun, "I do not think I was in the least afraid of being ill, for I was so anxious to win eternal blessings that

[19] Eckhart, *Breakthrough,* 227.
[20] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 144.
[21] Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice Walshe (New York: Herder & Herder, 2009), 62.
[22] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 35.
[23] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 35.

I was resolved to win them by any means whatsoever,"[24] and even in her later writings she continually refers to human existence in this world apart from God as "our earthly exile.[25]"

Meister Eckhart also speaks about this deeper disconnection from God, quoting St. Augustine's proclamation, "'Our hearts are restless until they rest in you,"' and continuing to say, "every agent and even the subject of action is restless, is not self-sufficient, does not rest from motion and from the labor of action and passion."[26] For Eckhart, this restlessness stems from a mistaken sense that we are apart from God, when in fact, "God is near to us, but we are far from him. God is in, we are out; God is at home, we are strangers."[27] For Teresa and Eckhart, our tragic separation with God is experienced not just in our doing or not doing, but also in our simple being.

Theravada Buddhism

In contrast to the Quakers and Catholic mystics, the primary concern for the Buddha is suffering. While Quakers can trace their tradition back to a bar, the Buddhist origin story begins on a royal chariot ride. Siddhartha Gautama, the man who would become the Buddha, was raised as a prince in the lap of luxury, where, "lotus ponds were made just for me…[and] a white parasol was held over me night and day, with the thought: 'Don't let cold, heat, grass, dust, or damp bother him."[28] According to legend, despite his father's wealth and best efforts to protect

[24] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 46.

[25] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman O.C.D. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 2011), 60.

[26] Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher,* 94.

[27] Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart's Sermons*, trans. Claudia Field (London: H.R. Allenson, n.d.), 43, accessed March 18, 2024. https://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/Meister-Eckharts-Sermons.pdf

[28] Buddha, "Numbered Discourses," trans. Bhikkhu Sujato, *SuttaCentral*, 2018, https://suttacentral.net/an3.39/en/sujato.

him from all traces of suffering, on a chariot ride the young Siddhartha catches a glimpse of an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a renunciate spiritual seeker.[29] Siddhartha is so struck by these "four sights," and the inescapable realities of aging, sickness, and death, that he decides to follow in the footsteps of the spiritual seeker, leaving behind all possessions and family to pursue freedom from the bondage of human suffering.[30]

This focus on suffering is reiterated throughout the Buddha's teachings, including in his very first discourse, where he articulates what he calls the Four Noble Truths: there is suffering, suffering is caused by craving, cessation of craving leads to cessation of suffering, and the Noble Eightfold Path is the way to cessation of craving and suffering.[31] Contemporary Theravada teacher Joseph Goldstein elaborates on the role craving plays in this dynamic as, "the powerful force in the mind that keeps the whole wheel of samsāra, of conditioned existence, rolling on…craving is the translation of the Pali word tanhā, which means 'thirst' or 'fever of unsatisfied longing.'[32] Craving, which can also be understood as a desire for things to be different from how they are, is at the root of the Buddha's understanding of suffering.

Within the Buddhist cosmology of reincarnation, the ultimate realization of the Buddha's goal of cessation of craving, and thus of suffering, is to attain nibbana. Bikkhu Bodhi defines nibbana as, the "final release from the cycle of rebirths,"[33] where one is no longer reincarnated and does not return to the world after death. Yet the Buddha is clear his teachings are also oriented to overcoming suffering within this very lifetime. The Theravada tradition is a direct

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[29] T.W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Birth Stories (Jataka Tales)* (London: Routledge, 1878), 166-167.
[30] Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Birth Stories,* 172.
[31] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon*, trans. Bikkhu Bodhi (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2005), 76
[32] Joseph Goldstein, *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2016), 299.
[33] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon*, 109.

response to the Buddha's own distress about the suffering implicit in the human condition, and it aspires to nothing less than total freedom from that suffering.

Conclusion

In contrast to the "many paths up the same mountain" metaphor, if we listen to what the Quakers, Catholic mystics, and Theravada Buddhists tell us about where their paths lead, we cannot help but conclude they have different destinations. One promises to lead to greater alignment with God in the world, another brings us to union with God in God, and another offers us freedom from suffering. As we will see, every aspect of each tradition ties back into these starting and ending points, including their varying views of Ultimate Reality.

3. The View along the Path

How does each tradition conceive of Ultimate Reality?

After several years of meetings, participants in the Snowmass Conference developed eight "Points of Agreement" to articulate their common ground. Seven of these eight points address a shared emphasis on experiencing a connection with "Ultimate Reality." The document notes, Ultimate Reality, "cannot be limited by any name or concept," but, "is the ground of infinite potentiality and actualization," and, "as long as the human condition is experienced as separate from Ultimate Reality, it is subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering."[34] This document makes clear that directly experiencing Ultimate Reality – a presence or perspective beyond the ever-changing conditions of our material world – is very important to each of the represented traditions! Yet, the participants also acknowledged diversity in what the term Ultimate Reality refers to.[35] In his book, *Circling the Elephant*, Jon Thathamanil explores these differences in Christianity, Madhyamaka Buddhism, and Advaita Vedanta Hinduism to conclude that each tradition is pointing to different aspects of a shared Ultimate Reality.[36]

Similarly, the Quaker, Catholic mystic, and Theravada Buddhist paths all encourage us to learn to abide in an Ultimate Reality, which each tradition understands in different ways. But these differences are not random or arbitrary: each tradition emphasizes a kind of Ultimate Reality that specifically addresses that tradition's primary concern and aspiration for humanity. In response to its attention to our estrangement from God's will, the Quaker path invites us into a **relational** Ultimate Reality that lovingly speaks to us, dreams for us, and challenges us to help us align our individual and collective actions with God. The Catholic mystics encourage us to go

[34] Miles-Yépez, *The Common Heart*, xvii.
[35] Miles-Yépez, *The Common Heart*, 30.
[36] John J. Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (Fordham University Press, 2020), 17.

further to address their additional concern about a deeper separation from Love by experiencing a **unitive** Ultimate Reality where the boundaries between self and God dissolve entirely into oneness. The Theravada Buddhists, meanwhile, claim the only path to full cessation of suffering is to live within a **formless** Ultimate Reality of emptiness, devoid of both self and God.[37]

Quakerism

For George Fox and Quakers ever since, direct experience of a relational, loving God within has been the primary means of advancing towards their trail-end of faithfully embodying God's vision in the world. In the distressing period after George Fox's experience at the pub, he became so distraught by the lack of integrity and faithfulness he observed around him that he describes an experience of attempting to "let blood" in the hopes of finding some relief, but finding:

> They could not get one drop of blood from me, either in arms or head (though they endeavoured to do so), my body being, as it were, dried up with sorrows, grief and troubles, which were so great upon me that I could have wished I had never been born, or that I had been born blind, that I might never have seen wickedness or vanity; and deaf, that I might never have heard vain and wicked words, or the Lord's name blasphemed.[38]

In the midst of this spiritual and physical agony, Fox sought help from established priests, as well as dissenting preachers seeking some understanding, hope, or relief, but it wasn't until he lost faith in all outward counsel that a path forward revealed itself: "I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. When all my hopes in them and in all men, were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do; then, O! then I heard a

[37] These categories of relational, unitive, and formless Ultimate Reality are different, but draw important inspiration from Thatamanil's categories of ground, singularity, and relation in *Circling the Elephant* (2020), 217.
[38] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 52.

voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition;' and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy."[39]

The path to greater alignment with God's will, Fox found, began with a direct experience of God within. Rather than relying on scripture or priests to guide us into greater harmony, Fox emphasizes, "That inward light, Spirit, and grace, by which all might know their salvation, and their way to God; even that Divine Spirit which would lead them into all truth, and which I infallibly knew would never deceive any."[40] Attentive listening to this inward light, and faithfulness to its call, became the core of the Quaker approach to aligning their individual, collective, and social lives with God's love and will. Ultimate Reality, for Quakers, then, is not a transcendent place to go to outside of the world, but rather an immanent place to start from, and then to seek to embody within the world. As contemporary Quaker Tom Gates notes, the experience of Ultimate Reality for Quakers has never been, "a state of divinity, but a state of obedience; not about a metaphysical union with God, but a yielding of the individual will to God's will…for it conveys a sense of movement: sometimes an outward and geographical movement, but always an inward and spiritual one."[41]

Catholic Mystics

The Catholic mystics point us to both the relational kind of Ultimate Reality emphasized by Quakers, as well as to a unitive Ultimate Reality that dissolves the very separation between self and God. Meister Eckhart parses out the difference between these two experiences of Ultimate Reality in a sermon where he speaks first of a "pathless path, free yet bound, raised

[39] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 55.
[40] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 71.
[41] Thomas J. Gates, *Members One of Another: The Dynamics of Membership in Quaker Meeting* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2007), 31-32.

aloft and wafted off almost beyond self and beyond will and images…drawn up by the power of the heavenly Father above all created powers of comprehension to the rim of eternity…addressed from above in tones created and sweet."[42] This, to my reading, rings of the Quaker tradition in its pathless focus on direct relationship and communication with God. Eckhart by no means demeans this approach, but goes on to describe another path that, "is called a path and yet is a being-at-home. It is to see God immediately in his ownness…to be within and without, to grasp and to be embraced, to see and to be what is seen, to hold and to be held."[43] In another sermon, Eckhart clarifies the distinction between these two paths, describing the experience of a relational, active "God," on the one hand, and a being-at-home "Godhead" experience on the other: "The Godhead never goes searching for a deed. God and the Godhead are distinguished through deeds and a lack of deeds." [44] While we are in relationship with the God who invites us into movement or action, for Eckhart there is no relationship with the Godhead, but rather unity: "when the soul has got so far, it loses its name and is drawn into God, so that in itself it becomes nothing, just as the sun draws the dawn into itself and annihilates it."[45]

St. Teresa further explains this unitive experience, comparing it to, "rain falling from the sky into a river or pool. There is nothing but water. It's impossible to divide the sky-water from the land-water. When a little stream enters the sea, who could separate its waters back out again?"[46] This unity with the Ultimate is explicitly not a relational experience, because relationship requires two. But these Catholic mystics point us to what another Catholic mystic, Julian of Norwich, calls "oneing."[47] In so doing, these experiences heal the separation between

[42] Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 341.
[43] Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 341.
[44] Eckhart, *Breakthrough,* 77.
[45] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works*, 573.
[46] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr, 274.
[47] Julian of Norwich, *Showing of Love* (Callender Press, 2013), 162.

human and God not on the level of doing, but rather being. In Eckhart's words, it is "the final end where the spirit remains at rest in the unity of blissful eternity."[48]

Theravada Buddhism

While the Quakers invite us to deepen our relationship between self and the loving Ultimate, which we could call *twoness*, and the Catholic mystics point us towards unity of self and the Ultimate in *oneness*, the Buddha commends us to experience the *formlessness*, or emptiness of both self and Ultimate. For the Buddha, this is the only way to arrive at his goals of complete cessation of craving, and thus, cessation of suffering. In one discourse, the Buddha conveys the importance of this insight into emptiness, inviting his students to recognize there is no self to be found in form, feeling, perception, choices, or consciousness:

> "So you should truly see any kind of form at all—past, future, or present; internal or external; coarse or fine; inferior or superior; far or near: all form—with right understanding: 'This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.'
> Any kind of feeling at all …
> Any kind of perception at all …
> Any kind of choices at all …
> You should truly see any kind of consciousness at all—past, future, or present; internal or external; coarse or fine; inferior or superior; far or near: all consciousness—with right understanding: 'This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.'
>
> Seeing this, a learned noble disciple grows disillusioned with form, feeling, perception, choices, and consciousness. Being disillusioned, desire fades away. When desire fades away they're freed. When they're freed, they know they're freed. They understand: 'Rebirth is ended, the spiritual journey has been completed, what had to be done has been done, there is no return to any state of existence.'"[49]

Much of the Theravada teachings are oriented around facilitating insight into this emptiness of self, or *anattā*, and learning to live in the world from that non-self perspective. Indeed,

[48] Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 340.
[49] Buddha, "Linked Discourses," trans. Bhikkhu Sujato, *SuttaCentral*, 2018, https://suttacentral.net/sn22.59/

contemporary Buddhist teacher Rodney Smith suggests the entire Buddhist path could be seen as the movement from a life oriented around form, which "covers all experiences and appearances and has the quality of standing outside of, and in isolation from, everything else," to the formless, which is, "empty of 'thingness' and undifferentiated, yet embraces all expressions of form and therefore is free of all conflict and suffering."[50] For Smith, the movement from form to formless is another way of articulating the movement from suffering to end of suffering, since craving and its consequent suffering only arise from the sense of existing as a discrete, formed self.[51]

While there is some overlap between anattā and the falling away of the self the Catholic mystics describe in union with God, the Buddha is clear to distinguish the two experiences. In a discourse tracing the chain of causes that lead to suffering, the Buddha points to just these kinds of unitive experiences when he says:

> With the complete transcending of perceptions of [physical] form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance, and not heeding perceptions of diversity, [perceiving,] 'Infinite space,' one enters and remains in the dimension of the infinitude of space.[52]

The Buddha here acknowledges the kind of unity with infinite formlessness spoken of by the Catholic mystics, but characterizes it as only the fourth of eight emancipations, noting it still creates a delineation of self and identity that leads to suffering. The Buddha describes, "one who, when delineating a self, delineates it as formless and infinite, either delineates it as formless and infinite in the present, or of such a nature that it will [naturally] become formless and infinite [in the future/after death]…a fixed view of a self formless and infinite obsesses him."[53] As

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[50] Rodney Smith, *Touching the Infinite: A New Perspective on the Buddha's Four Foundations of Mindfulness* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2017), 15.

[51] Smith, *Touching the Infinite*, 21.

[52] Buddha, "Maha-Nidana Sutta: The Great Causes Discourse," trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight*, 1997, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.15.0.than.html

[53] Buddha, "Maha-Nidana Sutta."

Thanissaro Bikkhu notes in a commentary on this sutta, “The inclusion of an infinite self in this list gives the lie to the belief that the Buddha's teachings on not-self were denying nothing more than a sense of ‘separate’ or ‘limited’ self. The discourse points out that even a limitless, infinite, all-embracing sense of self is based on an obsession in the mind that has to be abandoned.”[54] For the Buddha, then, neither relationship nor unity with Ultimate Realty can actually be Ultimate. If cessation of suffering is the goal, only complete emptiness and formlessness is Ultimate, as he proclaims, “as for another release in both ways, higher or more sublime than this, there is none.”[55]

Conclusion

Arising from each tradition’s different concerns and aspirations, the Quaker, Catholic mystic, and Theravada Buddhist paths each emphasize an Ultimate Reality beyond the relative reality of the material world that we can glimpse and eventually learn to abide within. Yet each tradition gives us a different view of Ultimate Reality. The Quakers bring us into relationship with a moving, guiding, loving Ultimate, the Catholic mystics invite us into “oneing” with a unitive Ultimate, and the Buddha calls us to awaken to an empty, formless Ultimate. These meaningful differences shape how each tradition understands the terrain of the paths that lead to intimacy with the various kinds of Ultimate Reality.

[54] Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “Translator’s Introduction to the Maha-Nidana Sutta,” *Access to Insight,* 1997, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.15.0.than.html.

[55] Buddha, “Maha-Nidana Sutta.”

4. Terrain

What kinds of effort and spiritual practices does each path ask of its travelers?

The eighth principle in the Snowmass Points of Agreement states, "Disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life; yet spiritual attainment is not the result of one's own efforts, but the result of the experience of oneness with Ultimate Reality."[56] In this section, we will consider the roles each tradition suggests individuals can play to move forward on their paths to allow Ultimate Reality to do its work. We will explore how each tradition understands the processes that allow for a letting go of our self-oriented worldly priorities and an opening to Ultimate Reality. We will also consider a chicken-or-egg paradox each tradition acknowledges: on the one hand, it is contact with Ultimate Reality that leads to our letting go and movement along the path, but on the other hand, letting go and movement along the path is what leads to our contact with Ultimate Reality. In each case, Quakerism, Catholic mysticism, and Theravada Buddhism suggest some amount of willful effort is typically needed to open ourselves to receive the Ultimate at least at the beginning stages of the path, but that as we make contact with Ultimate Reality, we are asked to surrender and allow ourselves to be carried.

Quakerism

For Quakers, it is God that leads individuals and communities to God. As Tom Gates says, "Like falling asleep or falling in love, obedience [to God] is not something we accomplish, but something we can only allow to happen. It is something we receive as a gift: grace."[57] Nonetheless, Quakers acknowledge the decisive role sincere intention and practice can play in

[56] Miles-Yépez, *The Common Heart*, xvii.

[57] Thomas J. Gates, *Members One of Another: The Dynamics of Membership in Quaker Meeting* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2007), 30.

preparing us to receive this gift. Speaking about the importance of our intention and longing, Rufus Jones proclaims:

> The person who hungers and thirsts for goodness will get what he wants. He who seeks, with undivided aspiration, will always find. He who knocks with persistent desire for the gates of life to open will see them swing apart for him to go through to his goal. He who asks, with the ground swell of his whole inner being, for the things which minister to life and feed its deepest roots, will get what he asks for. The very pity of the Pharisee's way of life is that he has his reward—he gets what he is seeking. The glory of the other way is the glory of the imperfect—the glory of living toward the flying goal of likeness to the Father in heaven.[58]

While Jones' vigorous pep talk may seem to contrast with Gates' emphasis on allowing and grace, Jones does not suggest we can break down the door to God – just that we can eagerly knock. It is this sincerity of intention and longing that provides energy for the other ways Quakers invite us to apply our wills to ready ourselves for grace: through Meetings for Worship, business meetings, and service in the world.

In Meeting for Worship, Quakers' version of a religious service, individuals sit together in silence listening for messages from Spirit. When given a message to share, they rise to offer "vocal ministry," speaking what they have heard from Spirit. While there is no uniform technique for this practice, many Quakers would agree with John Punshon's description of its impact:

> What I had to do was simply to wait and exercise patience. That was the discipline. Without that, the Quaker way to God was closed. Meeting became a school for faithfulness, a way of directing my attention away from myself towards God, so it would be possible to look for the person God wanted me to be, and into which I had to grow.[59]

In Meeting for Worship, Quakers practice letting go of their own, self-centered agendas and patiently wait for the grace of God's call. The communal aspect of Meeting plays an important role in this discipline, as Punshon notes, "I came to understand why it is impossible to be a

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[58] Rufus Jones, *The Inner Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 13.

[59] John Punshon, *Encounter with Silence: Reflections from the Quaker Tradition* (Richmond: Friends United, 1987), 13.

Quaker without a meeting. One needs a great basic security to come to God in silence, and the meeting members gave it to me."[60]

This practice of redirecting attention away from the self to cultivate deep listening to God in the safety of Meeting is central not only to developing the relationship between individuals and God, but also to the community's collective faithfulness. In "Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business," Quakers practice the same approach of putting aside their individual opinions to listen to Spirit for direction as they make communal decisions. Everyone is invited to Meetings for Business and has an equal voice, and decisions can only move forward if there is unity among the entire body. In my experience, opening to the beauty and frustration of this sometimes-painstaking process, while staying grounded in Spirit and attempting to "love thy neighbor" is a challenging practice requiring deep patience and humility! For Quakers, these are the same qualities needed in any relationship, and Lloyd Lee Wilson notes, "Our meetings for business are the places where we learn the discipline of being God's community."[61]

When God calls individuals or groups to share that discipline of being God's community with the broader world outside of Meeting, Quakers have another opportunity to support one another in the practice of following Spirit's leadings through acts of service.[62] Rufus Jones describes how being of service, in turn, feeds back to strengthen our capacity to listen faithfully to God during Meeting for Worship:

> It is in the actual sharing of life through love and sympathy and sacrifice, in going out of self to feel the problems and difficulties and sufferings of others, that we find and form a life rich in higher interests and centered on matters of eternal value. A man who has traveled through the deeps of life with a fellow man comes to his hour of worship with a

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[60] Punshon, *Encounter with Silence,* 13.

[61] Lloyd Lee Wilson, *The Exercise of Spiritual Authority within the Meeting* (Arden, NC: School of the Spirit Ministry, 2014), 18, https://www.dropbox.com/s/h3n3h62wpwtk1rg/LLW%20Pamphlet%20042015.pdf.

[62] Thomas J. Gates, *Members One of Another: The Dynamics of Membership in Quaker Meeting* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2007), 22.

> mind focused on the Eternal and with a spirit girded for the inward wrestling, without which blessings of the greater sort do not come.[63]

Following God's call to be of service supports the aspiration to realign our life priorities towards God. Tom Gates notes, "Obedience can occur only when we get our selves out of the way."[64] In their worship, business meetings, and actions in the world, Quakers do the hard work of learning to do just that: to decenter themselves and be patient, open and receptive to the gift of faithfulness.

While these are all practices individuals can willfully show up for, Quakers also have a long tradition of recognizing the power of "dark night" experiences where the will is nowhere to be found. In these moments of helplessness, many Quakers find they finally let go of control and let in God's grace – not because they want to, but because they have given up on everything else. George Fox's own experience of opening to God's love and guidance in the depths of despair, quoted earlier, is case in point:

> When all my hopes in them and in all men, were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do; then, O! then I heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition;' and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my conditions, namely, that I might give Him all the glory.[65]

According to Fox and countless Quakers since then, we are given the harrowing experiences we need to crack us open and let God in. When we find ourselves in such a place, our role, like in Quaker Meeting for Worship, is to show up, wait and listen, as Fox advises: "Therefore, all wait patiently upon the Lord, whatsoever condition you be in; wait in the grace and truth that came by Jesus: for if ye do so, there is a promise to you, and the Lord God will fulfill it in you."[66] When

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[63] Rufus Jones, *Spiritual Energies in Daily Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 55.
[64] Thomas J. Gates, *Members One of Another: The Dynamics of Membership in Quaker Meeting* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2007), 30.
[65] Gates, *Members One of Another*, 55.
[66] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 56.

we are able to follow this advice and wait patiently, Sandra Cronk elaborates on how dark night experiences can work to transform our relationship with self and God:

> We desperately try to cling to some way of finding worth and meaning through our old activities and relationships. But these pillars which used to be the center of our lives are gone. We come to the end of our "self" and its power. We find we cannot create our own salvation.
>
> As the old self dies, however, we recognize a deeper "I" which has been there all along. Our deepest self is a gift from God, loved into being by God's love. We no longer have to prove that we are worthwhile by measuring our success in the world, even our "religious success." …We can let go of using ourselves and other people as possessions in our self-constructed world. In the midst of the abyss of darkness, we find the One who has been calling us all along. The dark night journey ultimately brings us to the real center of our lives. We can finally be ourselves because we are rooted in God.[67]

For Quakers, allowing ourselves to be transformed by experiences of helplessness and despair may be one of the most important things we can do on our spiritual paths. Of course, a dark night is not something we can or would want to seek out, but the efforts Quakers put into their other practices prepare their hearts to be ready when the time comes.

The main role Quakers play in their own spiritual lives is to show up with an intention to listen to God. To bring themselves with sincerity to worship and business meetings, to times of service in the world, and to dark night experiences. In their presence and aspiration to learn how to be faithful, Ultimate Reality finds its way in, and starts to do its work to bring them closer to God's vision, individually and collectively. Sandra Cronk describes how in this process, Quakers gradually find their wills naturally moving into greater alignment with God's, noting, "God does not call us to give up desire; we grow, instead, to desire what God desires for us and for the whole of creation."[68] While that growth comes by grace, Quakers see themselves as active

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[67] Sandra Lee Cronk, *Spiritual Nurture Ministry Among Friends* (Arden, NC: School of the Spirit Ministry, 2015), 35, https://www.dropbox.com/s/yqnoqd6d3ua568d/S%20Cronk%20Pamphlet.PDF?dl=0.

[68] Sandra Lee Cronk, *Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1991), 39.

participants in creating space in their hearts, lives, and communities to receive it, and then to live it. As they do so, Quakers are incrementally led deeper and deeper. As 19th century Quaker Caroline Fox assures as, "Live up to the light thou hast, and more will be granted thee."[69]

Catholic Mystics

The Catholic mystics also speak about the dance between effort and grace on the spiritual path. Yet the precise nature of this dance is an area where St. Teresa and Meister Eckhart diverge. St. Teresa and Eckhart, like the Quakers, both start from an appreciation for the centrality of grace. In her autobiography, St. Teresa describes painful moments of realizing her soul was in "captivity," and how she "used to beseech the Lord to help me; but I now believe I must have failed to put my whole confidence in His Majesty and to have a complete distrust in myself. I sought for a remedy, and took great trouble to find one, but I could not have realized that all our efforts are unavailing unless we completely give up having confidence in ourselves and fix it all upon God."[70] She describes her breakthrough moment of surrender, when she finds herself at the foot of an image of Christ, "shedding floods of tears," recognizing she had "lost trust in myself and was placing all my confidence in God," and notes, "from that time onward I began to improve."[71] Surrendering and opening to grace, for St. Teresa, is paramount.

Yet St. Teresa, like the Quakers, also emphasizes the role of the will in preparing to receive God's grace. Particularly at the beginning of our spiritual journey, St. Teresa advocates for practices that create space for God to flow in. Teresa instructs beginners, "to start by detaching

[69] Britain Yearly Meeting (Society of Friends), *Quaker Faith and Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain* (Quaker Books, 2009), 26.04. https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/passage/26-04/.

[70] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, trans. E. Allison Peers, 1995, 64. https://www.carmelitemonks.org/Vocation/teresa_life.pdf

[71] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 65.

themselves from every kind of pleasure, and to enter upon their prayer with one sole determination, to help Christ bear His Cross," emphasizing an effortful renunciation of worldly pleasures, a practice of prayer, and a clarity of intention to be of service to Christ.[72] Teresa focuses much of her writing on this practice of prayer, suggesting it is one of the most profound ways we can participate in the movement towards God. She offers a rich metaphor of a garden to clarify the role our own effort must play at four different stages of our prayer life:

> We have now, by God's help, like good gardeners, to make these plants grow, and to water them carefully, so that they may not perish, but may produce flowers which shall send forth great fragrance to give refreshment to this Lord of ours, so that He may often come into the garden to take His pleasure and have His delight among these virtues…
>
> It seems to me that the garden can be watered in four ways: by taking the water from a well, which costs us great labour; or by a water-wheel and buckets, when the water is drawn by a windlass…or by a stream or a brook, which waters the ground much better, for it saturates it more thoroughly and there is less need to water it often, so that the gardener's labour is much less; or by heavy rain, when the Lord waters it with no labour of ours, a way incomparably better than any of those which have been described…
>
> Beginners in prayer, we may say, are those who draw up the water out of the well: this, as I have said, is a very laborious proceeding, for it will fatigue them to keep their senses recollected, which is a great labour because they have been accustomed to a life of distraction.[73]

For Teresa, the beginning stage of the spiritual life, when we are "drawing up the water from the well," is when our own effort is most important. At this stage, Teresa instructs:

> They have to endeavour to meditate upon the life of Christ and this fatigues their minds. Thus far we can make progress by ourselves -- of course with the help of God, for without that, as is well known, we cannot think a single good thought. This is what is meant by beginning to draw up water from the well -- and God grant there may be water in it! But that, at least, does not depend on us: our task is to draw it up and to do what we can to water the flowers.[74]

[72] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 93.
[73] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 73.
[74] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 74.

Teresa emphasizes both the mental exertion beginners experience when learning to concentrate in meditation, and the importance of grace even at this stage, and highlights our lack of control over whether our efforts actually produce any water. Yet Teresa is also clear on the limitations of our own efforts in advancing from this first stage of prayer:

> It is best for a soul which has been raised no higher than this not to try to rise by its own efforts. Let this be noted carefully, for if the soul does try so to rise it will make no progress but only go backward…the will must be calm and discreet and realize that we cannot treat effectively with God by the might of our own efforts and that these are like great logs of wood being heaped up indiscriminately so that they will quench this spark. Let it recognize this and with all humility say: "Lord, what can I do here? What has the servant to do with her Lord? What has earth to do with Heaven?"…A few little straws laid down with humility (and they will be less than straws if it is we who lay them down) are more to the point here, and of more use for kindling the fire, than any amount of wood.[75]

Teresa encourages a gentle determination that honors God's central role in the drama. And, with God's grace, Teresa tells us, the contemplative life can move into later stages of prayer where less effort is required. In these stages, Teresa describes how the mind settles into quiet with greater fluidity, and, how willful renunciation turns into effortless renunciation, as the mind: "begins to lose its covetousness for the things of earth….for it sees clearly that on earth it cannot have a moment of this joy; that there are no riches, or dominions, or honours, or delights which suffice to give it such satisfaction even for the twinkling of an eye; for this [prayer] is true joy, and the soul realizes that it is this which gives genuine satisfaction."[76] Teresa remarks on how unparalleled pleasure in prayer allows us to naturally let go of our "covetousness" and worldly desires.

This letting go of worldly desires, made possible by our efforts and grace in prayer, is the key to deepening our connection with God in will and in being. St. Teresa explains, "when we

[75] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 77-78, 92-93.
[76] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 87.

empty ourselves of all that is creature, detaching ourselves for love of the Creator, the same God will fill our souls with himself."[77] We move towards union with God, in other words, by making space for God through meditative prayer.

St. Teresa is clear there are setbacks on this path, noting, "the Lord is pleased that such diminution should take place…in order to humble us for our greater good, and so that we may not grow careless,"[78] and conveys the continued need for effort at these times. Yet in general, she suggests our willful effort has less and less of a role as God pulls us closer to God. For Teresa, then, prayer is the gradual process that allows us to connect with Ultimate Reality by creating a vacuum that God fills, bringing both our will and being into greater unity with God.

While St. Teresa advises an important role for effortful intentional spiritual practices to support our receptivity to grace, for Eckhart, we have only one role in the process of awakening to God: to let go. Eckhart might respond to St. Teresa's garden metaphor by insisting God is the only one who can water our garden. Not only can we not help, but we must not even try to help: "All your activity must cease, and all your powers must serve His ends, not your own. If this work is to be done, God alone must do it, and you must just suffer it to be."[79] Spiritual practices, according to Eckhart, are only needed to help us cease our activity so we can be prepared to receive God.

This emphasis on letting go leads Eckhart scholar Matthew Fox to describe Eckhart's invitation as "a free and easy path. A path of laughter and freedom."[80] While Eckhart certainly invites us into a kind of ease, and his sermons reveal a vibrant sense of humor, Eckhart is not handing us a piña colada and inviting us onto a pool chair (although I hope he would be open to

[77] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr, 272.
[78] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 94.
[79] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works,* 56.
[80] Eckhart, *Breakthrough*, 232.

the possibility God might call us there!). Eckhart's process of letting go, it seems to me, can be its own, intense discipline. To return to St. Teresa's garden, although Eckhart would maintain we cannot help water the seeds, he does seem to invite our efforts in clearing the soil of weeds. Eckhart explains, "A man cannot attain to this birth [of union with God] except by withdrawing his senses from all things. And that requires a mighty effort to drive back the powers of the soul and inhibit their functioning. This must be done with force; without force it cannot be done. As Christ said, 'The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force' (Matt. 11:12)."[81] Eckhart is not calling us into a carefree path of surrendering to the existing currents of our lives, but rather into a rigorous path of surrendering to the subtle call of God. To surrender to God, Eckhart might say, we must actively surrender ourselves.

What are these selves Eckhart invites us to let go of? Eckhart focuses on our will, our knowledge, and our identity as a separate self, inviting us to become "a poor person who wills nothing and knows nothing and has nothing."[82] He elaborates that people with this kind of blessed poverty, "will and desire as little as they willed and desired when they were not yet…desire not to understand or know anything at all of the works of God," and are so free of a sense of identity distinct from God that, "if God wants to act in the soul, God himself becomes the place wherein he wants to act."[83]

Eckhart's insistence on letting go of ourselves does not imply there is something profane or immoral about ourselves or our faculties. As Matthew Fox makes clear, Eckhart's entire spiritual vision is grounded in a deep reverence for the sacredness of every being as a "divine spark," and "the purpose of letting go is to experience the divinity in all creation to an even

[81] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works*, 46.
[82] Eckhart, *Breakthrough,* 53.
[83] Eckhart, *Breakthrough,* 54-60.

greater depth."[84] The practice is not so much about what we are letting go of, as much as what we are making space for. As Eckhart explains, letting go is what allows God in: "If a cask is to contain wine, one must necessarily pour out the water; the cask must be bare and empty. Therefore, if you would receive divine joy and God, it is necessary for you to pour out the creatures…everything that is to receive and to be receptive must and should be empty."[85] Paralleling St. Teresa's description of God filling the vacuum created by self-emptying in prayer, for Eckhart, when we make space for God by letting go, "that detachment forces God to me…God is bound to give Himself to a detached heart."[86] Eckhart advises us: "the more barren you are of self and unwitting of all things, the nearer you are to Him."[87] So radical is the letting go Eckhart challenges us into, that we are even to let go of God: "The highest and loftiest thing that man can renounce is to renounce God for the sake of God…If you do not seek him, you will find him."[88] For Eckhart, the very desire for God separates us from God, who emerges only through emptying ourselves even of this desire.

While the Quakers and St. Teresa recommend practices to support this process of creating space for God, for Eckhart it is simpler. He tells us to just let go. He acknowledges it can be hard, but assures us: "The more a person renounces, the easier he finds it to renounce."[89] Like in St. Teresa's description of prayer, Eckhart notes the beginning stages of letting go may take the most effort. He also recognizes the "gloom and desolation" we can experience when we have let go of parts of ourselves that previously gave structure or meaning to the self and are still waiting for

[84] Eckhart, *Breakthrough,* 223.
[85] Meister Eckhart, *Western Spirituality: Historical Roots, Ecumenical Routes*, trans. Matthew Fox (Santa Fe: Bear, 1987), 230.
[86] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical,* 566.
[87] Eckhart, *Breakthrough,* 57.
[88] Eckhart, *Western Spirituality*, 228-22.
[89] Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 294-295.

God to fill into the empty space, but Eckhart maintains we should avoid practices such as, "praying or listening to sermons or doing something else that is virtuous, so as to help…Absolute stillness for as long as possible is best of all for you. You cannot exchange this state for any other without harm. That is certain. You would like to partly prepare yourself and partly let God prepare you, but this cannot be. You cannot think or desire to prepare yourself more quickly than God can move in to prepare you."[90] Echoing the dark night experiences that Quakers and St. Teresa speak of, for Eckhart the uncomfortable helplessness that accompanies letting go is part of the point. Spiritual techniques we might try to use to accelerate the union with God will backfire.

Yet, in what may seem like a contradiction, Eckhart does strongly recommend intentional spiritual practices or techniques when we find we are not able to wait in receptivity for God:

> All works and pious practices - praying, reading, singing, vigils, fasting, penance, or whatever discipline it may be - these were invented to catch a man and restrain him from things alien and ungodly. Thus, when a man realizes that God's spirit is not working in him and that the inner man [or soul] is forsaken by God, it is very important for the outer man [or will] to practice these virtues, and especially such as are most feasible, useful, and necessary for him; not however from selfish attachment, but so that, respect for truth preserving him from being attracted and led astray by what is gross, he may stay close to God, so that God may find him near at hand when He chooses to return and act in his soul, without having to seek far afield.[91]

The key distinction between this passage and the prior quotation is the intention behind the spiritual practices. Eckhart advises us to stay away from spiritual practices we might undertake "so as to help" when we are struggling, but to embrace these practices when we need them simply to keep us out of trouble so we can be receptive to God. Recognizing the simpler time Eckhart was preaching in -- before clocks were commonplace, let alone smart phones and social media -- I cannot help but wonder if Eckhart would look at today's world of distractions and suggest most of us could benefit from intentional practices to keep us receptive to God. But they

[90] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works,* 58.
[91] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works,* 52.

are not a major emphasis of Eckhart's preaching, and he goes on to say, "If a man knows himself to be well trained in true inwardness, then let him boldly drop all outward disciplines, even those he is bound to and from which neither pope nor bishop can release him,"[92] encouraging even vowed monastics to defy their vows to particular kinds of practices if they are no longer needed. Matthew Fox further explains Eckhart's concern that, "methods weigh us down, make us uptight, interfere with the God of creation, and destroy our senses of humor, rendering us more ego-oriented instead of less…they never allow the letting go experience to happen within the grace of creation itself…Eckhart is not forbidding the use of exercises – only counseling that the spiritual life may be a great deal simpler than one might think."[93]

Finally, since this practice of letting go comes not from a place of self-denial or self-hatred, but from love, Eckhart is particularly skeptical of penitential exercises, advising us to leave the hairshirt behind and instead to don…

> The bridle of love! With love you overcome it most surely, with love you load it most heavily. Therefore God lies in wait for us with nothing so much as with love. For love resembles the fisherman's hook. The fisherman cannot get the fish till it is caught on the hook. Once it takes the hook, he is sure of the fish; twist and turn as it may, this way or that, he is assured of his catch. And so I say of love: he who is caught by it has the strongest of bonds, and yet a pleasant burden. He who has taken up this sweet burden fares further and makes more progress than by all the harsh practices any men use. And, too, he can cheerfully bear and endure all that befalls him, whatever God inflicts on him, and can also cheerfully forgive whatever evil is done to him. Nothing brings you closer to God or makes God so much your own as the sweet bond of love.[94]

God's love, for Eckhart, is the starting point, the ending point and the path of our journey. It is God's love that hooks us, God's love that makes it possible to start letting go, God's love that carries us through the valleys, and God's love that we ultimately unite with when we say yes. For Eckhart, it is already here. Our job is simply to make space for it. When we do so, Eckhart

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[92] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works,* 53.
[93] Eckhart, *Western Spirituality*, 232.
[94] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works,* 60.

assures us this relationship with God becomes, "so charming and delightful that you become weary of all things that are not God or God's,"[95] echoing St. Teresa's description of the natural, effortless letting go facilitated by the deeper pleasures of divine communion.

Theravada Buddhism

While the Quakers and Catholic mystics recognize both the centrality of God's grace in leading us to Ultimate Reality, and a role for the will in helping us open ourselves to receive that grace, the Buddha places greater emphasis on our own efforts. Yet even though the Buddha does not use words such as grace or God, many Theravada Buddhists find surrender to be a critical part of his teachings. The Buddha's focus on surrender allows for parallels between how the Buddha speaks about "the path," and how the Quaker and Catholic mystics speak about God.

This is an area where it becomes particularly difficult to generalize about the entire Theravada tradition, which has many schools of thought that interpret the Buddha's teachings on effort in different ways. But the Buddha leaves no question about what the path is. In his first teaching on the four noble truths, the Buddha is clear: "Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: it is this Noble Eightfold Path."[96] The Noble Eightfold Path is the Buddha's recipe for awakening, offering guidance for how every part of life can support cessation of craving and freedom from suffering. One interpretation of the Buddha's teaching emphasizes that the role of the individual is only to cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path and let the Path do the rest of the work. Contemporary Theravada Buddhist teacher Chas DiCapua notes:

> Perhaps the most subtle misconception we bring to the practice is that we do the practice, and it is our ideas and will power that will create the transformation that we are after.

[95] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works,* 40.
[96] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words,* 76.

> Based on this, we feel that we have to change and become a better version of ourselves in order to progress along the path. There is a person who is walking along the path and it's the person who is transforming.
>
> In fact, the exact opposite is true. The person is almost irrelevant to the process. It's the path that gets cultivated. The Buddha stated that "the Noble Eightfold Path is to be developed." What we are doing is cultivating the conditions that are supportive of awakening and letting go of cultivating the conditions that are supportive of non-awakening or suffering. When the conditions that support awakening are known and cultivated, our lives naturally incline in that direction. There's no one doing that. It's just the nature of things to work that way. Just like it's the nature of things that when flour, baking soda, sugar and eggs get put together, mixed and put in a hot oven, cookies manifest.[97]

Similar to how the Quaker and Catholic mystics insist we cannot will ourselves to God, but that we can participate in creating the conditions that allow God to emerge by grace, in this representation of the Buddha's teachings, we are just asked to create the conditions that allow awakening to happen, and then to let go. In a sutta describing four ways Buddhists attain nibbana, the Buddha's words support this understanding. In describing how monks start from four different places, he notes in each case: "While he thus develops insight preceded by serenity [or any of the other three starting points], the path arises in him**.** He now pursues, develops, and cultivates that path, and while he is doing so the fetters are abandoned and the underlying tendencies eliminated."[98] The role of the individual is to "pursue, develop, and cultivate" the path, and the "fetters" that tie us to suffering and the cycle of rebirth, "are abandoned." The individual does not abandon them. In this sutta, the individual does not even find the path to begin with, but rather "the path arises." While there is no God here, the Buddha is describing a process that many theists would say is imbued with grace.

[97] Chas DiCapua, "'Progression' on the Path," Open Door Portland (blog), July 6, 2023, https://www.opendoorportland.org/post/progression-on-the-path

[98] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words,* 268.

Other parts of the Pali Canon suggest a more direct role for the individual in the awakening process, as in a passage describing a monk who, "Has severed craving, flung off the fetters, and with the complete penetration of conceit he has made an end of suffering."[99] Here the monk, not the Eightfold Path, gets the credit for severing craving and ending suffering. There are certainly many strands of contemporary Theravada Buddhism that understand practice in this way. But whether the individual has more or less of a role in severing craving and making an end to suffering, all Theravada Buddhists would agree the individual's efforts are critical. Even DiCapua, I think, would agree that, "cultivating the conditions that are supportive of awakening and letting go of cultivating the conditions that are supportive of non-awakening or suffering" by undertaking the Buddhist practices requires significant effort from the will.

The Buddha taught countless practices within the Noble Eightfold Path that ask for willful effort. Contemporary teacher Gil Fronsdal notes the Buddha would typically start by teaching the practice of generosity, then introduce the practice of ethics, and only on that foundation would he offer meditation instruction.[100] In one sutta on generosity, the Buddha describes giving something of value as a forceful battle against the forces of greed. [101] In another sutta describing the different intentions for giving, Pali scholar Lily De Silva notes the Buddha conveys: "The only valid motive for giving should be the motive of adorning the mind, to rid the mind of the ugliness of greed and selfishness."[102] For the Buddha, generosity is an important practice precisely because it engages the will to challenge greed.

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[99] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words,* 277.

[100] Gil Fronsdal, *The Issue at Hand* (Redwood City, CA: Insight Meditation Center, 2008), 128, https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/iah/IssueAtHand4thEd.pdf

[101] Lily de Silva, "Giving in the Pali Canon," *Access to Insight*, 1995, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel367.html#pali

[102] Silva, "Giving in the Pali Canon."

The next area of practice the Buddha emphasizes is ethical living through "the five precepts." The Buddha explains how a disciple following the five precepts, "gives up the destruction of life and abstains from it…gives up the taking of what is not given and abstains from it…gives up sexual misconduct and abstains from it…gives up false speech and abstains from it…gives up wines, liquors, and intoxicants, the basis for negligence, and abstains from them."[103] The Buddha describes these areas of renunciation as gifts, both for all beings, and for the individual practicing the precept, who is able to dedicate themselves to their practice free from "fear, hostility, and oppression."[104] While these seem like reasonable practices, anyone who has tried to go a day without saying anything untrue, or to allow a mosquito to bite them without killing it, can attest to the willful effort these precepts ask of us!

Based on the foundations of generosity and ethical practice, the Buddha's teachings finally arrive at the practice of meditation. Effort is such an important part of this field of practice that one of the eight factors of the Eightfold Path is "right effort," which specifically addresses effort in the context of meditation. The Buddha explains:

> And what, monks, is right effort? Here, monks, a monk generates desire for the nonarising of unarisen evil unwholesome [mind]states; he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives. He generates desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states…He generates desire for the arising of unarisen wholesome states…He generates desire for the continuation of arisen wholesome states, for their nondecline, increase, expansion, and fulfillment by development, he makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his mind, and strives.[105]

Right effort begins with desire for onward-leading mindstates to arise and increase, and for unhelpful mindstates to not arise and to be abandoned, and entails effort, energy, and striving towards those goals. The Buddha does not shy away from the will in meditation, regularly

[103] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words,* 173.
[104] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words,* 173.
[105] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words,* 239.

stating, “an exertion should be made,”[106] instructing his disciples to “direct” their minds,[107] and, in a list of instructions for meditators working with distracting thoughts, he goes so far as to suggest, “with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he [the meditator] should beat down, constrain, and crush mind with mind,” (although this is a last resort he recommends only if other, less forceful methods have failed!).[108] The Buddha also uses terms such as “mastery,”[109] “skill,”[110] or “attainment.”[111] This ascendent language, in emphasizing the individual’s role over any concept of grace, is a far cry from the humbling descent into not-knowing, helplessness, and spiritual poverty that the Quaker and Catholic mystical paths entail.

Yet the Buddha also recognizes the limits of effort. In one sutta, the Buddha compares effort to the tuning of the strings on a musical instrument. Like a string on an instrument, the Buddha teaches, effort should be neither too tight, nor too loose, warning: “over-aroused persistence leads to restlessness, overly slack persistence leads to laziness.”[112] And, like St. Teresa, he suggests effort eventually becomes less critical in meditation practice. In speaking about the “defilements” of greed, hatred, and aversion that underly craving and arise during meditation practice, the Buddha notes that earlier in the path, “Concentration…is maintained by strenuous suppression of the defilements…But there comes a time when his mind becomes inwardly steadied, composed, unified, and concentrated. That concentration is then calm and refined; it has attained to full tranquility and achieved mental unification; it is not maintained by

[106] Buddha, *In the Buddha’s Words,* 359, 360, 363, 364.
[107] Buddha, *In the Buddha’s Words,* 266.
[108] Buddha, *In the Buddha’s Words,* 277.
[109] Buddha, *In the Buddha’s Words,* 274.
[110] Buddha, *In the Buddha’s Words,* 267.
[111] Buddha, *In the Buddha’s Words,* 235.
[112] Buddha, “Right Effort: samma vayamo,” ed. *Access to Insight (BCBS Edition),* 2013, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sacca/sacca4/samma-vayamo/index.html

strenuous suppression of the defilements."[113] The need for "strenuous suppression" of the mind in meditation decreases with practice.

Rodney Smith elaborates on this dynamic, noting that while many meditators begin by trying to control the mind, the practice ultimately must bring them to a place of surrender. In the path from form to formlessness, Smith notes:

> If we attempt to control this process, the very act of asserting our will keeps us within form, but once our personal will is surrendered there is nothing that can pull consciousness back into separation. This continual return to form through our control and the eventual surrender of our will back into the formless continues for some time. At some point the pull of our will is no longer strong enough to draw us out of the formless, and the formless surrounds and engulfs form.[114]

Since willful effort exists in the world of form, Smith tells us, it is only by surrendering our willful effort that we can develop intimacy with the formless. Smith suggests meditators may need to bang their head against the wall for some time trying to control the process, but at a certain point, the will sees the futility of this, and it gradually learns to let go and allow the practice to do the work.

As some combination of effort and surrender in meditation practice and the other parts of the Eightfold Path bring us towards insight into formlessness, Smith explains how contact with this Ultimate Reality then leads to a natural and effortless release of craving and suffering:

> When we focus on the forms of the world for the pleasures we derive from them, we simply do not care about the formless that does not offer any of the same benefits. We look through the formless so our desires can be served. Over time wisdom intervenes, and our desire for objects fades, and we become more open to seeing life in its formless shape. As we dwell more and more with the formless, it is like coming out of a cavern into light, and we have no interest in turning around and going back inside the cave.[115]

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[113] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words,* 273-274
[114] Smith, *Touching the Infinite,* 41.
[115] Smith, *Touching the Infinite,* 40.

This natural shift in our desires mirrors the Buddha's description of how craving and suffering simply release with greater insight into formlessness of self. The Buddha explains, "'This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.' Seeing this, a learned noble disciple grows disillusioned with form, feeling, perception, choices, and consciousness. Being disillusioned, desire fades away. When desire fades away they're freed."[116] It is contact with the emptiness of Ultimate Reality, for the Buddha, that allows for an effortless letting go of craving and suffering.

The Theravada tradition is not shy in inviting the role of willful effort, but these Theravada teachers also recognize the need for surrender, not to God, but to the practice or path itself. In my experience in western, largely white and academically educated Insight Meditation spaces saturated with a culture of striving and achievement, this perspective on surrender is sorely needed, and often missing. But even the most intense practitioners recognize and welcome a kind of surrender in their striving towards what is called "stream-entry," where practitioners are said to have entered the stream of the path, and are guaranteed to be carried by its momentum to full enlightenment within seven more births.[117] Of course this does not mean there is no role for effort, but rather the needed effort itself becomes less driven by the will, as the stream pushes them onwards to nibbana.

Conclusion

The Quakers, Catholic mystics, and Theravada Buddhists all offer different techniques and philosophies for how to contact and live from the Ultimate. Yet all of these contemplatives agree that the path to intimacy with Ultimate Reality runs through a process that somehow decenters

[116] Buddha, "Linked Discourses," trans. Bhikkhu Sujato, *SuttaCentral*, 2018, https://suttacentral.net/sn22.59/.

[117] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words,* 374.

our own sense of self and its desires as the focal point of our lives. They would further agree that this shift is made possible by our contact with that very same Ultimate Reality. While they have different perspectives on the role of willful effort in arriving at that Ultimate Reality, they all acknowledge that at least the beginning stages of the spiritual path require some willful effort to make initial contact with or to become receptive to it-- whether by showing up and listening for Spirit at Quaker meeting, cultivating a practice of prayer, "letting go," or practicing generosity, ethics, and meditation. It is through these practices that we make ourselves available to catch our first glimpse of Ultimate Reality, and "enter the stream" of grace or of the path, which leads to a softening of the self and its pressing desires. This in turn, opens us to greater connection with the Ultimate, which enables a natural letting go of the self and its worldly desires and a deepening of connection to the beyond.

To return to our wilderness metaphor, perhaps our contemplatives tell us there is a first leg of the path where the view of Ultimate Reality is hidden. For this stretch of the path, we need to use our will and our faith in what we have been told awaits ahead to energize ourselves to stay on the path, even though we can't see where we're headed. Once the Ultimate begins to reveal itself to us, however, we can, and perhaps must, begin to allow ourselves to be pulled forward by its gravitational force, trusting it is moving in us even in those moments when the path dips and we lose sight of it again.

5. The Guides

How does each tradition understand the role of elders, directors, or teachers?

While many religions cast spiritual leaders as intermediaries between individuals and Ultimate Reality, contemplative traditions emphasize direct connection with the Ultimate. This perspective is evident in Quakerism, Catholic mysticism, and Theravada Buddhism, where clergy or teachers are not understood to be the primary sources of authority to direct us along the spiritual path. These traditions are equally clear that our own thoughts or feelings are not the ultimate guide, either. For the Quakers and Catholic mystics, the definitive source of direction is God, while in Theravada Buddhism, the ultimate guide is empirical experience. Nonetheless, each tradition acknowledges the critical roles other human beings play in helping to create the conditions that allow for us to receive guidance from these deeper sources.

Quakerism

Unsurprisingly for a tradition focused on discerning God's will, Spirit itself is the only true guide in the Quaker tradition. As we have already seen, Quakerism began with George Fox's conclusion that ministers and preachers had nothing to offer him.[118] Fox would later elaborate on his sense that, "The ministry of Christ Jesus, and his teaching, bring into liberty and freedom; but the ministry that is of man, and by man, and which stands in the will of man, bringeth into bondage, and under the shadow of death and darkness."[119] For Fox, guidance arising from the human will always leads to a dead end, while guidance from God always leads to freedom. In his Journal, Fox repeatedly speaks of being taught by the "anointing" within, as when he asks, "Did not the apostle say to believers, that 'they needed no man to teach them, but

[118] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 55.
[119] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 59.

as the anointing teacheth them?'"[120] This direct anointing by God, for Fox, was even more important than Scripture. Margaret Fell, another founding Quaker, writes of her first encounter with Fox, quoting his ministry on this subject:

> The Scriptures were the prophets' words and Christ's and the apostles' words, and what as they spoke they enjoyed and possessed and had it from the Lord…Then what had any to do with the Scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth. You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is inwardly from God?[121]

For Fox, if Scripture is valid, it is only because its authors are speaking from Spirit. It is this very same Spirit that Fox encourages everyone to contact, asking, "what canst thou say?," by which he means, "what does Spirit say through you?" Fox also makes clear that no one has more or less access to Spirit than anyone else, as he speaks of "the universal Spirit in…every man and woman."[122]

Fox's non-hierarchical and egalitarian understanding of spiritual authority does not, however, suggest we have nothing to learn from one another. Fox himself did not hesitate to offer guidance to others – his prophetic preaching and letters were often admonitory or directive, as in a 1668 Epistle where he instructs: "Keep at a word in all your dealings without oppression. And keep the sound language, thou to everyone. And keep your testimony against the world's vain fashions. And keep your testimony against the hireling priests, and their tithes, and maintenance. And against the old mass-houses, and the repairing of them."[123] Clearly, Fox did not take issue with expressions of spiritual authority, but rather with the assumption that spiritual authority rests in a person, rather than in the Spirit. Contemporary Quaker Lloyd Lee Wilson

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[120] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 53.

[121] Margaret Fox, *Journal of George Fox* ed. Wilson Armistead, 7th ed., vol. 2 (London: W. And F.G. Cash, 1852), 358.

[122] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 2, 223.

[123] Paul Buckley, *Quaker Testimony: What We Witness to the World* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2023), 15. Kindle.

parses out the difference, explaining: "God's authority is the one authentic spiritual authority in our meetings, yes, but God's authority is often given voice through an individual."[124]

With this understanding, Quakers emphasize an important role for ministers and elders as channels for Spirit to work through to help Friends hear God's guidance along the path. Spirit uses ministers and elders to offer inspiring messages, conceptual teaching, and affirming listening. A Quaker "minister" is anyone who speaks from Spirit, particularly during Meetings for Worship, while an "elder," is someone who supports ministers and the entire Quaker community in their faithful listening and speaking from Spirit.[125] Sometimes ministry or eldering shows up as vocal ministry that ignites a spark of motivation. One early friend, Francis Howgill, offers an example, recounting how George Fox's preaching, "reached unto all our consciences and entered into the inmost part of our hearts, which drove us to a narrow search and to a diligent inquisition concerning our state, through the Light of Christ Jesus…the Kingdom of Heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a net, and his heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land."[126] According to Howgill, the ministry spoken through George Fox offered a powerful taste of the Kingdom of Heaven, but only after inviting a "diligent inquisition concerning our state," and the ways the assembled community did not live up to that vision. This anecdote illustrates how Spirit can speak through an individual's ministry to motivate others through both admonishment and inspiration.

Other times, ministry and eldering can look more like teaching. Sandra Cronk notes that despite Quakerly reluctance to impose ideas on each other, teaching details about the Quaker faith is critical to help Friends, "bring their conceptual understanding to the same level as their

[124] Wilson, *The Exercise*, 11.
[125] Cronk, *Gospel Order,* 33.
[126] Punshon, *Encounter with Silence,* 5.

inward experiences."[127] Without a conceptual framework to help make sense of spiritual experience, individuals fall back on existing paradigms that can flatten, reify, or otherwise misconstrue those experiences. Elders or ministers can be invited by Spirit into a teaching role to help the mind understand what happens during Quaker worship.

Finally, sometimes Spirit asks elders to simply listen. Cronk describes how the act of listening conveys, "that what the journeyer describes about her life is important and that God is present in these experiences. The journeyer may need this expression of trust and of deeply centered listening to begin to listen to God herself."[128] Sometimes, we only learn to listen to Spirit by being listened to ourselves.

These forms of ministry and eldering can happen one on one, or in a group setting. Much of Quaker "spiritual formation" takes place during Meeting for Worship itself, or through the practice of clearness committees gathered to support an individual's faithful discernment of Spirit's direction.[129] In every case, Wilson notes, the litmus test for what a minister, an elder, a Meeting, or a clearness committee offers is: "whether it tastes of the Gospel…Discernment is necessary. We need to be very careful about whether that individual is creating a fire from their own kindling (to use an old Quaker phrase) or whether in fact God is at work."[130] And, it is our own relationship with Spirit that serves as the frame of reference to evaluate whether God is moving in a message from another individual.

In the Quaker path towards embodying God's will in the world, there is only one guide: Spirit itself. But Sprit works through individuals offering messages, conceptual frameworks, and listening to help one another hear and live into its call.

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[127] Cronk, *Spiritual Nurture Ministry Among Friends*, 25.
[128] Cronk, *Spiritual Nurture Ministry Among Friends*, 23-24.
[129] Gates, *Members One of Another,* 24.
[130] Wilson, *The Exercise*, 11-13.

Catholic Mystics

While St. Teresa and Meister Eckhart would agree with the Quakers' conviction that God is the ultimate guide and can communicate with individuals in both mediated and unmediated ways, St. Teresa places greater emphasis on the need for spiritual directors to help us discern God's guidance.

St. Teresa and Eckhart both acknowledge the powerful unmediated ways God can communicate directly with individuals. St. Teresa reflects that her own learning about the life of prayer came directly from God, noting, "As I had no director, I used to read these books, and gradually began to think I was learning something. I found out later that, if the Lord had not taught me, I could have learned little from books, for until His Majesty taught it me by experience what I learned was nothing at all; I did not even know what I was doing."[131] St. Teresa, like George Fox, learned her most important lessons directly from God. St. Teresa further describes these "divine communications" from God, which can appear "by means of words addressed to the soul in many different ways; sometimes they appear to come from without, at other times from the inner depths of the soul, or again, from its superior part, while other speeches are so exterior as to be heard by the ears like a real voice."[132] Similarly, Meister Eckhart assures us: "In whichever soul God's Kingdom appeareth, and which knoweth God's Kingdom, that soul needeth no human preaching or instruction; it is taught from within and assured of eternal life."[133] In another sermon, Eckhart elaborates on this inner source of direction: "Directly he turns to God, a light begins to gleam and glow within him, giving him to

[131] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 124.
[132] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 154.
[133] Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart's Sermons*, 20.

understand what to do and what to leave undone, with much true guidance in regard to things of which before he knew or understood nothing."[134]

Despite this emphasis on direct communication with God, St. Teresa and Eckhart also acknowledge how God's guidance can be channeled through the voices or writings of other people, particularly at the beginning of the spiritual life. St. Teresa suggests divine guidance is likely to come channeled through an external source at first: "God here speaks to souls through words uttered by pious people, by sermons or good books, and in many other such ways."[135] St. Teresa's own writing seeks to be this kind of channel for God's wisdom, as she introduces her Interior Castle by noting, "If anything is to the point, they will understand that it does not originate from me and there is no reason to attribute it to me, as with my scant understanding and skill I could write nothing of the sort, unless God, in His mercy, enabled me to do so."[136] Meister Eckhart shares this understanding that some of us must first receive God's truth from outside of us. Eckhart writes, "If a man has not the truth within, let him love it outside, then he will also find it within,"[137] suggesting this kind of mediated communication lays the groundwork for hearing God's truth from within. Presumably Eckhart's entire ministry as a prolific preacher aspires to be such a channel for this truth. Eckhart also suggests God's wisdom can flow through the ministry of nature. Eckhart preaches, "Whoever knew but one creature would not need to ponder any sermon, for every creature is full of God and is a book."[138]

While St. Teresa and Eckhart both acknowledge direct and indirect channels for God's wisdom, they offer different perspectives on which avenue holds ultimate authority. St. Teresa

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[134] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works,* 40.
[135] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 29.
[136] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 3.
[137] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works,* 583.
[138] Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 259.

strongly cautions against impulsively following the guidance we receive from within. St. Teresa writes, "There is need for caution, both with feeble and strong souls at first, until it is certain from what spirit these things proceed. I maintain that, in the beginning, it is always wiser to resist these communications; if they come from God this is the best way to receive more, for they increase when discouraged."[139] St. Teresa continues to explain these messages, "may come either from God, the devil, or the imagination,"[140] and offers several indicators to support our discernment. St. Teresa notes that messages from God, as opposed to those from other sources, are delivered with great confidence, lead to a sense of inner peace, firmly take root in our memories, make us feel like we are listening as opposed to composing the message, and leave us with an understanding of something that is greater than the sum of the words we hear.[141]

While St. Teresa suggests these signs can help our discernment, she maintains that the ultimate authority as to whether a message comes from God should still lie outside of ourselves in Scripture and confessors or spiritual directors. St. Teresa writes, "Take no more notice of any speeches you hear which disagree with the Holy Scriptures, than if you heard them from Satan himself…Always resist them; then they will leave you, and cease, for they have little strength of their own."[142] She further advises:

> If they [messages] refer to some weighty matter in which we are called upon to act, or if they concern a third person, we should consult some confessor who is both learned and a servant of God, before he attempt or think of acting on them, although we may have heard them repeated several times and are convinced of their truth and divine origin…Our Lord will reassure our confessor, whom, when He so chooses, He will inspire with faith that these locutions are from the Holy Ghost. If not, we are freed from all further obligations in the matter. I think it would be very dangerous to act against our confessor's advice, and to prefer our own opinions in such a matter. Therefore, sisters, I admonish you, in the name of our Lord, never to do anything of the sort.[143]

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[139] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 155.
[140] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 155.
[141] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 157-165.
[142] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 156.
[143] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 162.

For St. Teresa, it is essential to verify an unmediated message we receive from God, with Scripture and with a confessor. Yet even in her description of the relationship with a confessor, it is important to note St. Teresa does not suggest the confessor is the authority. The confessor is simply another channel for God, who remains the ultimate authority and "will reassure our confessor" if we are on the right track.

St. Teresa's emphasis on external ways of receiving God's guidance is also reflected in her emphasis on the importance of spiritual directors to both inspire and teach us. In many of St. Teresa's books, she encourages her readers to find a spiritual director, noting, "The beginner needs counsel to help him ascertain what benefits him most. To this end a director is very necessary,"[144] and, "Even if they are not in the religious state, it would be well if they, like certain other people, were to take a director."[145] For St. Teresa, these directors provide important guidance, in part through their own example: "It is encouraging to see that trials which seemed to us impossible to submit to are possible to others, and that they bear them sweetly. Their flight makes us try to soar, like nestlings taught by the elder birds, who, though they cannot fly far at first, little by little imitate their parents: I know the great benefit of this."[146] St. Teresa also explains how spiritual directors are invited by God to teach and support individuals in their prayer practice. Indeed, she sees her own writing as reflecting this kind of spiritual direction, noting, "He who bids me write this, tells me that the nuns of these convents of our Lady of Carmel need some one to solve their difficulties about prayer."[147]

[144] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, 83.
[145] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 55.
[146] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 56.
[147] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 3.

Again, St. Teresa does not suggest a spiritual director's authority comes from their title or position, but rather from their experience and capacity to be a channel for God. She encourages choosing a director who is "thoroughly detached from worldly things,"[148] and "a man of experience, or he will make a great many mistakes and lead souls along without understanding them or without allowing them to learn to understand themselves…directors who cannot understand spirituality afflict their penitents both in soul and in body and prevent them from making progress."[149] While St. Teresa encourages a level of deference to directors, she is equally emphatic on the need for careful discernment in selecting a director to ensure God can speak through them.

Eckhart, on the other hand, emphasizes a simpler and more internal approach to receiving God's guidance. Eckhart does not give detailed instructions for discerning whether inner guidance comes from God or not. Instead, he says, "Just pay attention. Your heart is often moved and turned away from the world. How could that be but by this illumination?...It draws you to God and you become aware of many a prompting to do good, though ignorant of whence it comes."[150] Eckhart suggests as long as we are being drawn to God and are prompted to do good, we do not have to know the source of the guidance. In contrast to St. Teresa, Eckhart further suggests this inner guidance is the ultimate authority, declaring, "as soon as God inwardly stirs the ground with truth, its light darts into his powers, and that man knows at times more than anyone could teach him. As the prophet says, 'I have gained greater understanding than all who ever taught me.'"[151] While St. Teresa suggests God's guidance expressed through directors should have the final word, Eckhart indicates the inner light will transcend what anyone else can

[148] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 55.
[149] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of Teresa of Ávila*, trans. E. Allison Peers, 83.
[150] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works,* 40.
[151] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works,* 41.

offer. Nor does Eckhart emphasize the importance of instruction around prayer since, as already noted, he is less interested in structured spiritual practices to begin with.

For both St. Teresa and Eckhart, God is the ultimate guide for the spiritual life. The only question is how we are best to receive God's guidance. While both St. Teresa and Eckhart speak about mediated and unmediated lines of divine communication, St. Teresa encourages deference to the former, whereas Eckhart emphasizes the latter.

Theravada Buddhism

In Theravada Buddhism, there is no "God" or "Spirit" guiding individuals along the path. Instead, the Buddha encourages students to approach the spiritual life like research – testing hypotheses and allowing the results to be our guide. Wise teachers, according to the Buddha, have a critical role to play in providing hypotheses to test, supporting the experimental conditions, and affirming research results.

The Buddha's story, like George Fox's, begins with a journey to discover what other teachers had to offer. The Buddha recounts studying with a series of teachers, and in each case, he makes important progress along his path before realizing, "'This Dhamma [set of teachings] leads not to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to Awakening, nor to Unbinding…so, dissatisfied with that Dhamma, I left.'"[152] The Buddha's own spiritual history is a series of experiments: he practices with teachers long enough to see the results of their Dhamma in his own heart and mind. Dissatisfied with the outcomes, the Buddha

[152] Buddha. "Ariyapariyesana Sutta: The Noble Search," trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight,* 2004, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.026.than.html.

ventures off into the countryside to continue his investigation on his own, where he ultimately finds what he has been seeking.[153]

His own early experiences of dissatisfaction do not, however, lead the Buddha to minimize the importance of teachers. As demonstrated in the prior section of this paper, more than any of the other contemplatives we have explored, the Buddha centers himself as a guide. He lays out a meticulous curriculum with detailed instructions for every part of life, assures students, "This Noble Eightfold Path is the way,"[154] and invites us to take refuge in him as one of the "three jewels" that lead to happiness.[155]

Beyond offering his own teachings as the foundation of the Buddhist path, the Buddha also stresses the importance of direct relationships with teachers. The teacher-student dynamic is so important to the Buddha's understanding of the spiritual life that the first two of eight causes and conditions he names for "obtaining the wisdom fundamental to the spiritual life" address this relationship:

> 1) Here, a monk lives in dependence on the Teacher or on a certain fellow monk in the position of a teacher, and he has set up toward him a keen sense of shame and moral dread and regards him with affection and respect. This is the first cause and condition for obtaining the wisdom fundamental to the spiritual life…
> 2) 'As he is living in dependence on such teachers, he approaches them from time to time and inquires: 'How is this, venerable sir? What is the meaning of this?' Those venerable ones then disclose to him what has not been disclosed, clear up what is obscure, and dispel his perplexity about many perplexing points.[156]

In another sutta, the Buddha describes five aspects to the relationship between students and teachers:

> There are five ways in which pupils should minister to their teachers as the southern direction: by rising to greet them, by waiting on them, by being attentive, by serving

[153] Buddha. "Ariyapariyesana Sutta."
[154] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words,* 356.
[155] Buddha, "Ratana Sutta: The Jewel Discourse," trans. Piyadassi Thera, *Access to Insight*, 1999, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.2.01.piya.html.
[156] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words,* 322-323.

> them, by mastering the skills they teach. And there are five ways in which their teachers, thus ministered to by their pupils as the southern direction, will reciprocate: they will give thorough instruction, make sure they have grasped what they should have duly grasped, give them a thorough grounding in all skills, recommend them to their friends and colleagues, and provide them with security in all directions.[157]

The Buddha directs students to show teachers appropriate respect, and teachers to provide students with the skills, conceptual understanding, relationships, and general safety they need to progress along the path.

Like St. Teresa, the Buddha cautions us to take great care in selecting teachers. First and foremost, the Buddha insists we ensure the teacher is speaking from direct, personal knowledge of spiritual truths. He compares teachers who pass along what they have been taught without personally experiencing the fruits of those teachings to, "a row of blind men, as it were: the first one doesn't see, the middle one doesn't see, the last one doesn't see."[158] Buddhist scholar K.N. Jayatilleke further notes that the Buddha suggests a teaching should be considered, "only after ensuring the honesty, unbiased nature and intelligence of the person from whom such a statement is accepted."[159]

While wise, qualified teachers play a central role in the Buddha's understanding of the spiritual life, the Buddha still does not suggest they provide the definitive or conclusive answers. The Buddha encourages teachings to be accepted only provisionally as hypotheses, subject to rigorous testing by the student. Jayatilleke points to the Mahaparinibbäna Sutta, "which portrays the dying Buddha [and] still represents him as being anxious that his seeming authority should not stand in the way of the doubts of the monks being dispelled by questioning. He reproves

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[157] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words,* 117.

[158] Buddha, "Canki Sutta: With Canki," trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu *Access to Insight*, 1999, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.095x.than.html.

[159] K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theories of Knowledge* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), 392.

Änanda for trying to prevent Subhadda from coming to question…and later says that 'if anyone would not question out of respect for the teacher let a person tell his friend.'"[160] Respect for a teacher, the Buddha insists, must not be confused with unquestioning deference. Further, even if a student is satisfied with a teacher's response to a line of questioning, teachings still must be verified through personal experience. In one sutta, the Buddha declares:

> Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, "This contemplative is our teacher." When you know for yourselves that, "These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering" — then you should abandon them.[161]

While teachers can offer critical suggestions, as well as skills, concepts, and relationships to help a student explore the spiritual terrain, the Buddha insists students must ultimately arrive at wisdom based on their own direct experience. Just as he tested the Dhamma of his own teachers, he encourages us to assess how a teaching impacts us, as well as to investigate the reputation of that teaching among "the wise." The results of this internal and external research serve as the ultimate guide along the Theravada path.

Conclusion

To varying degrees, George Fox, St. Teresa of Avila, and the Buddha all recount feeling unsupported by teachers or clergy in their own spiritual lives. We do not know as much about Meister Eckhart's life story, but his trailblazing preaching suggests he also would have been dissatisfied with the conventional wisdom of the day. Despite their personal experiences of bushwhacking their way to Ultimate Reality, these contemplatives do not suggest we should

[160] Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theories,* 401.

[161] Buddha, "Kalama Sutta: To the Kalamas," trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight*, 1994, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html.

shun all support from other humans. Indeed, in each case, the disappointed student becomes a teacher. While the Quakers, Catholic mystics, and Theravada Buddhists would all agree teachers or directors are never the ultimate source of authority, each tradition also acknowledges the important role human guides can play in helping us access a deeper source of direction along the spiritual path.

6. The Travelers

How do these paths impact their traveler's relationship to their own suffering?

Having clarified each path's starting and endpoints, explored the different views of Ultimate Reality each path offers in service of their broader objectives, investigated the terrain and will required by each path, and considered the guides each tradition offers, we now turn to consider the impact of each path on their travelers' relationship with their own suffering, as well as with the suffering of the world. As we begin by first looking at the impact of these paths on their travelers' own suffering, the theme of surrender returns. While these traditions approach the question of suffering in different ways, they all describe how surrendering resistance to painful feelings allows for a resilient, inner peace.

Quakers

Quakers would probably not have any qualms with the Buddha's claim to teach the only path to complete cessation of suffering. For the Quakers, that is not the point. In fact, as Fox says, "You must have fellowship with Christ in his sufferings: if ye will reign with him, ye must suffer with him; if ye will live with him, ye must die with him; and if ye die with him, ye must be buried with him."[162] Yet in giving oneself to faithfulness, many Quakers find that even as the conditions of their life become more stressful, as certainly was the case for early Friends who were persecuted, imprisoned, and tortured, life becomes imbued with meaning and a peace unaffected by outward conditions. As Rufus Jones says, "He who forgets himself in loving devotion, he who turns aside from his self-seeking aims to carry joy into any life, he who sets

[162] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1 278.

about doing any task for the love of God, has found the only possible road to the permanent peace of God."[163]

This kind of resilient peace is exemplified in the story of Mary Dyer, a Quaker who was hanged in Boston for her Quaker faith. According to contemporaneous reports, when asked if she felt ashamed as she walked to the gallows, she replied, "No – this is to me an hour of the greatest joy I ever had in this world: no ear can hear, no tongue can utter, and no heart can understand, the sweet incomes or influences, and the refreshings of the Spirit of the Lord, which now I feel."[164] Mary Dyer's commitment to follow God's will was so deep that her execution was a joyous opportunity to fulfill this purpose! In finding meaning in their suffering as a part of their faithfulness to God, many Quakers find they are able to surrender their resistance to it, which allows it to transform into an entirely different experience.

Catholic Mystics

The Catholic mystics share a similar understanding of how contact with Ultimate Reality, in either its relational or unitive manifestation, does not lead to a cessation of suffering, but rather flips the entire paradigm of suffering on its head. In describing the limits of what unitive experience offers, St. Teresa notes, "Just because the soul sits in perpetual peace does not mean that the faculties of sense and reason do, or the passions. There are always wars going on in the other dwellings of the soul. There is no lack of trials and exhaustion."[165] Similarly, Eckhart states, "I say a saint never reached nor can reach the state where suffering does not hurt him and

[163] Jones, *Spiritual Energies,* 10.

[164] *Narrative of the Martyrdom, at Boston of William Robinson, Marmaduke Stevenson, Mary Dyer, and William Leddra, in the Year 1659: With Some Particulars of the Judgments Which Befel Their Persecutors and the State of New England* (Manchester: John Harrison, 1841), 11.

[165] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr, 274.

pleasure not please him."[166] Yet for St. Teresa and Eckhart, like the Quakers, this is not a problem. Eckhart continues to say, "But this certainly happens to saints that nothing can move away from God. Even if their hearts are made to suffer (if they are not in grace), their will remains utterly steadfast in God, and they say, 'Lord, I belong to you and you belong to me.' Whatever then happens does not conflict with eternal happiness."[167] In another sermon, Eckhart goes even further, remarking, "the greater the suffering in God's will, the more happiness there is."[168]

St. Teresa remarks on a similar pattern among those with an advanced prayer life, whose "only wish is that His will be done…not only are they no longer interested in dying, but they have a wish to live for many, many years and suffer the most intense trials if it means that they can contribute to the praising of the Lord in even the smallest way."[169] For one deeply committed to faithfulness to God, moments of suffering offer precious opportunities to be in fellowship with Christ on the cross and carry out their soul's calling: to love and serve God even when the conditions of life do not make it easy to do so. While the Catholic mystics, like the Quakers, find that Ultimate Reality offers no escape from suffering, they testify to something radically different: its power to transform suffering into a blessing. Yet they would also be quick to remind us that this is a side-benefit, and that the primary intention always remains to serve God with all our hearts for its own sake. Indeed, if one were to try to walk the Quaker or Catholic mystic paths with a primary intention of escaping suffering, it would not work. The transformation of suffering described by the Quakers and Catholics rests on the foundation that one is willing to accept suffering in service of a deeper commitment to what lies beyond it.

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[166] Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 342.
[167] Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 342.
[168] Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 309.
[169] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr, 278.

Theravada Buddhism

In contrast, as we have already explored, the Buddha does promise a path to complete cessation of suffering. But it is important to clarify what the Buddha means by suffering, as distinct from pain. While suffering can be overcome, the Buddha, like Meister Eckhart, does not seem to suggest that pain can cease in this lifetime, even for those with deep insight into the Ultimate Reality of emptiness. The Buddha articulates the difference between pain and suffering in his sutta on the two darts:

> When an untaught worldling is touched by a painful (bodily) feeling, he worries and grieves, he laments, beats his breast, weeps and is distraught. He thus experiences two kinds of feelings, a bodily and a mental feeling. It is as if a man were pierced by a dart and, following the first piercing, he is hit by a second dart. So that person will experience feelings caused by two darts. Having been touched by that painful feeling, he resists (and resents) it.
>
> But in the case of a well-taught noble disciple, O monks, when he is touched by a painful feeling, he will not worry nor grieve and lament, he will not beat his breast and weep, nor will he be distraught. It is one kind of feeling he experiences, a bodily one, but not a mental feeling. It is as if a man were pierced by a dart, but was not hit by a second dart following the first one. Having been touched by that painful feeling, he does not resist (and resent) it.[170]

Suffering, for the Buddha, is defined not by pain, but by our reaction, and specifically our resistance, to the pain. Even the Buddha himself is reported to experience, "excruciating…painful, fierce, sharp, wracking, repellent, disagreeable" sensations in one sutta when his foot is pierced by a stone splinter, yet he demonstrates the difference between pain and suffering as he endures the pain, "mindful, alert, and unperturbed!"[171] For the Buddha, when

[170] Buddha, "Sallatha Sutta: The Dart," trans. Nyanaponika Thera, *Access to Insight*, 1998, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn36/sn36.006.nypo.html.

[171] Buddha, "Sakalika Sutta: The Stone Sliver," trans. Thanissaro Bikkhu, *Access to Insight*, 1999, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn01/sn01.038.than.html.

there is less identification with the self as a result of insight into emptiness ("this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self"[172]), there is naturally less resistance to pain that occurs to that self, and correspondingly less suffering. In distinguishing between pain and suffering, the Theravada path invites individuals into a particular kind of happiness can include pain yet be unaffected by it.

Conclusion

The Quaker, Catholic and Theravada Buddhist traditions all speak about the possibility of a kind of inner peace independent of outward conditions. In each case, a surrender of resistance to pain is the key to freedom. But the traditions arrive at this point in different ways. While the Buddha leads with his promise to end suffering and encourages his followers to orient their lives around this aspiration, the Quakers and Catholic mystics warn against this as a central intention for the spiritual life. Further, for the Buddha, the dropping of resistance to pain is facilitated by deidentification with the self, whereas for the Quakers and Catholics it results from a sense that the suffering is in service of something far bigger than the self. Finally, for the Buddha, there is no "second dart," whereas for the Quaker and Catholic mystics, the second dart is not just avoided, but is transformed into a seed of joy. Despite these meaningful differences, the end result of greater inner peace seems comparable across traditions.

How do these paths impact their traveler's relationship to the suffering of the world?

Having considered the impact of the Quaker, mystical Catholic and Buddhist paths on the individual's relationship to their own suffering, we now turn to the social implications of these

[172] Buddha, *In the Buddha's Words,* 242.

traditions. This theme feels particularly relevant as we consider these traditions in a world that feels like it is on the brink of collapse. We have already explored some of the ways these traditions invite us into service as part of the terrain of practice that helps us contact Ultimate Reality, but in this section we will explore how they lead their travelers into lives of service as a consequence or expression of that relationship with the Ultimate. We similarly find that each path supports the development of compassion and the move to be of service, although this manifests in different ways.

Quakerism

From its earliest days, the Quaker tradition has been convinced God has a loving vision not just for us as individuals, but for humanity as a whole. Quakers believe that if they are faithfully listening and responding to God's will, they will be asked to serve as, "the hands, feet, and voices so that God's healing love, mercy, and forgiveness can reach broken people around the world,"[173] in the words of Sandra Cronk. Quakers have been challenged to serve God by working towards social change in three primary ways: through their living example, through their "testimonies" in the world, and through their ministry.

George Fox articulates the lead-by-example approach, saying, "Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come; that your life and conduct may preach among all sorts of people, and to them."[174] Rufus Jones elaborates on the transformative potential of this kind of faithful living, tracing it back to Jesus' model of inspiring change through his loving presence:

> It was His faith that, if you get into the world anywhere a seed of the Kingdom, a nucleus of persons who exhibit the blessed life, who are dedicated to expanding goodness, who

[173] Cronk, *Gospel Order*, 20.
[174] Fox, *Journal of George Fox*, vol. 1, 260.

> rely implicitly on love and sympathy, who try in meek patience the slow method that is right, who still feel the clasping hands of love even when they go through pain and trial and loss, this seed-spirit will spread, this nucleus will enlarge and create a society. If the new spirit of passionate love, and of uncalculating goodness gets formed in one person, by a silent alchemy a group of persons will soon become permeated and charged with the same spirit, new conditions will be formed, and in time children will be born into a new social environment and will suck in new ideals with their mother's milk. [175]

The Quakers believe that living faithfully cannot help but rub off on those around them. Yet for Quakers, when we live faithfully, we are also called into active engagement and resistance to what is "out of the light" in the world through testimonies. Paul Buckley defines the Quaker concept of testimony as, "an act that publicly witnesses or testifies to an aspect of our most basic spiritual beliefs; it is an outward expression of something that the Inward Light has revealed to an individual or a group of people."[176] Over the years, Quaker testimonies have included a commitment to use the informal "thee" and "thou" to address everyone, rejecting the norm of addressing those of higher social status with the more formal "you."[177] This commitment was grounded in the clarity of teachings from the Inner Light that all are equal. Similarly, the Quaker conviction that there is "that of God" in everyone has led to their long and vocal history of pacifist activism, as well as to their less consistent, but still notable, efforts to abolish slavery and advance racial and economic justice, among many other social concerns. For Quakers, there is no split between "inner" and "outer" faithfulness: since God is love, if someone is listening faithfully to God's leading, they will inevitably be led inwardly and outwardly to advance what Rufus Jones calls, "a world which is built and held together by the inner gravitation of love."[178]

Finally, as already explored in the section on guides, many Quakers are called to serve through ministry, offered in their own communities or further afield as "traveling ministers." It is

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[175] Jones, *The Inner Life*, 27.
[176] Buckley, *Quaker Testimony,* 7, Kindle.
[177] Buckley, *Quaker Testimony,* 9, Kindle.
[178] Jones, *The Inner Life*, 50.

important to remember, however, that despite this focus on service in its various forms, for Quakers, faithfulness to God is primary. Service is an important expression of that intimate relationship with a loving God. Quakers are not asked to calculate, anticipate or even understand the service they're called to, but to simply follow and trust the guidance of Spirit. The story of one traveling minister, Stephen Grellet, provides an example of this kind of faithfulness to a call that did not seem to make any sense:

> [Grellet] felt a strong concern to visit some lumber men who were working in the forest a long way from home. Obedient, as always, to what he recognised as the Divine Call, he rode to the camp, only to find it deserted. Still he could not rest until he had delivered his message and so, in the empty mess hut, with apparently none to hear him save the animals and birds which stirred in the stillness of the forest, he preached what may well have been the sermon of his life. Years afterwards, on London Bridge, he was stopped by a burly stranger who asked him if he remembered preaching in an empty lumber camp in America. He replied that he had indeed done so, but not another soul had been present. The stranger shook him by the hand. There had indeed been another soul present: he himself had returned in search of some tools and, attracted by the sound of a voice, had peeped through a crack in the logs of the mess hut and seen a man 'preaching to nobody.' …a ringing voice with a touch of foreign intonation proclaiming the Truth in passionate sincerity – no wonder the stranger had never forgotten. He had been a changed man from that day, and had set out to change the lives of others, beginning with his workmates. Now who could tell how many hearts had been touched by the sermon which had been 'preached to nobody'?[179]

Quaker lore is full of stories like this, which emphasize the centrality of following Spirit's call towards service, without needing to control or even understand the impact.

Catholic Mystics

The Catholic mystics are similarly clear about how their relationship with God in both the personal and unitive sense strengthens and compels them towards being of service. Speaking of the peace and joy of unitive experience, St. Teresa warns: "don't think the reason for these favors is to gratify the soul. That notion would be seriously erroneous. The greatest favor the Lord

[179] Elfrida Vipont, *Quakerism -- A Faith to Live By* (London: Bannisdale Press, 1965), 133-134.

could offer us would be to give us the opportunity to emulate the life his beloved Son lived. What I know for sure is that these blessings are intended to fortify our weakness so that we can follow in his footsteps and feel his suffering."[180] She goes on to say, "This, my friends is the purpose of prayer. This is the reason for the spiritual marriage. Good works are born from this. Good works…We should engage in prayer — thirst for it, even — not because it feels good, but because it gives us the strength we need to be of service."[181] For St. Teresa, the contemplative life is not about escaping the world – it is about gathering strength to be of greater service to God in the world.

Similarly, Meister Eckhart makes clear he sees contemplation as a foundation for service, declaring: "what we plant in the soul of contemplation we shall reap in the harvest of action,"[182] and, "we take only from the same ground of contemplation and make it fruitful in works, and thus the object of contemplation is achieved…For God's purpose in the union of contemplation is fruitfulness in works: for in contemplation you serve yourself alone, but in works of charity you serve the many."[183] Eckhart describes how unitive experience with God becomes the bedrock for works in the world, noting, "in the One, there is no longer any distinction, there is neither Jews nor Greeks."[184] When we experience our unity with God, Eckhart suggests, we cannot help but experience our unity with all of creation, and this inspires us to act and to love our neighbors and enemies as ourselves.

Furthermore, for Eckhart, contemplation and action are not two distinct activities. In an unconventional interpretation of the biblical story of Mary and Martha, Eckhart praises Martha,

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[180] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr, 287.
[181] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr, 289-292.
[182] Eckhart, *Breakthrough,* 243.
[183] Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works,* 48.
[184] Eckhart, *Western Spirituality,* 241.

who is busy preparing a meal for Jesus, over Mary, who sits at Jesus' feet listening to him. Martha, Eckhart suggests, is "so grounded in being that her activity did not hinder her," as she is able to combine contemplation with action.[185] Both St. Teresa and Eckhart model this fusion of contemplation and loving action in their own lives. St. Teresa pours herself into traveling across Spain to start a reformed monastic order and writes several books to support others in their spiritual lives,[186] while Eckhart centers the plight of the poor, the aspiration for justice, and the equality of all in his busy life of preaching.[187]

Although St. Teresa and Eckhart speak powerfully about the importance of merging action and contemplation and model it in their own lives, I suspect, like the Quakers, they would also caution against trying to control or predetermine the kind of service we are being invited into. St. Teresa invites us into a humble kind of service focused on simply living our love for God among our immediate circle of companions:

> Do not try to help the whole world, but principally your companions; this work will be all the better because you are the more bound to it. Do you think it is a trifling matter that your humility and mortification, your readiness to serve your sisters, your fervent charity towards them, and your love of God, should be as a fire to enkindle their zeal, and that you should constantly incite them to practice the other virtues? This would be a great work, and one most pleasing to our Lord."[188]

St. Teresa urges us not to underestimate the impact of simply living a faithful life on those around us. Further, contemporary Catholic mystic James Finley describes how for some individuals, God's calling might not even lead to a life of visible, tangible action. In reflecting on a particular hermit described in a mystical text, Finley notes:

> I think in our society, our understanding of faith is so action-oriented. You might say, "Here's a person who never leaves his estate. Reads devotional books." We could say he's not out there changing the world…It could be true. There are people who in the

[185] Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, 343.
[186] St. Teresa of Avila, *Book of the Foundations*, trans. John Dalton (London: T. Jones, 1858), 7.
[187] Eckhart, *Breakthrough,* 11.
[188] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Benedict Zimmerman, 292.

> name of spirituality, shut themselves up and they have their own little devotional practices. But also, this is seen as a mysterious kind of fidelity to God, and our fidelity to God is touching the world in ways we don't understand. This is the intuition in cloistered monasticism, that our effectiveness in the world isn't dependent upon the ways that we're physically present to and help others. It is important that we're physically [present] and help others, but what really matters is we follow our vocation. This is this interior vocation of being led by God into every deep reunion with God, which touches the world.[189]

St. Teresa and Eckhart, who lived at a time where cloistered monasticism was far more respected and less radically counter-cultural than it is today, may not have felt the need to emphasize the potential intangible impacts on the world of that kind of service. Perhaps they were more focused on challenging people who, "in the name of spirituality, shut themselves up" through contemplation to escape a vocation of action in the world. I wonder if in today's culture they would be similarly concerned with people who, in the name of spirituality, push themselves into the world through action to escape a vocation of contemplation. I am not sure. But regardless, they certainly would agree it is hubris to assume we know best how we are to be of service. For the Catholic mystics, our primary task in both action and contemplation is to follow where we are led, trusting that it will be of service to all.

Theravada Buddhism

While the inner and outer life are similarly intertwined for the Buddha, the Buddha does not suggest being of service is an inherent expression of contact with the Ultimate, as the Quakers and Catholic mystics do. We have already explored the meaningful ways the Buddha encourages generosity and ethical living, yet these are presented as practices to support the

[189] James Finley, "The Way of a Pilgrim: Session 1," *Turning to the Mystics*, March 25, 2024, https://cac.org/podcasts/the-way-of-a-pilgrim-session-1/.

individual's awakening rather than as expressions of that awakening.[190] The Buddha does assert that awakening will stop all anti-social behavior, noting that, "taking up of sticks and knives; conflicts, quarrels, and disputes, accusations, divisive speech, and lies" are all dependent on craving, such that one who is free from craving would be free of these anti-social behaviors.[191] But he does not suggest awakening necessarily leads to proactive service in the world. In fact, after his own awakening, the Buddha is on the fence about whether to teach, noting: "This Dhamma that I have attained is deep, hard to see, hard to realize…if I were to teach the Dhamma and if others would not understand me, that would be tiresome for me, troublesome for me'…As the Blessed One reflected thus, his mind inclined to dwelling at ease, not to teaching the Dhamma."[192] Further, the Theravada Buddha's articulation of the ultimate goal of practice -- to escape the cycle of birth and rebirth -- does not seem to prioritize sticking around to help others, in contrast with later schools of Buddhism.

Yet the Buddha does, of course, ultimately decide to teach. After a deity pleads with the Buddha to reconsider, the Buddha, "out of compassion for beings, surveyed the world with the eye of an Awakened one," and, seeing some who will be receptive to his teachings, agrees to teach.[193] As a close reading reveals, it is not the Buddha's "wisdom," or insight into Ultimate Reality, that lead him to take a second look and decide to teach, but rather his compassion. Although compassion is distinct from the Theravada understanding of Ultimate Reality, it certainly can be interwoven, as Gil Fronsdal describes from his own experience:

> The consequence of doing intensive Vipassana [Theravada] practice was the rise of a powerful sense of compassion. This is partly because one learns how deep and subtle

[190] Lily de Silva, "Giving in the Pali Canon," *Access to Insight*, 1995, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel367.html#pali

[191] Buddha, "Maha-Nidana Sutta."

[192] Buddha, "Ayacana Sutta: The Request," trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight,* 1997, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn06/sn06.001.than.html.

[193] Buddha, "Ayacana Sutta."

> human suffering can be. One discovers an underlying layer of suffering that is not personal, does not arise from the stories and events of our particular life. To thereby realize the pervasiveness of how people suffer, while at the same time having an open and relaxed heart, evokes empathy and compassion for others. Much as one may only see how hazy the air has been when there is a day without haze, the ability to see suffering grows as a person is liberated from self-centeredness and attachments.[194]

While the Buddha does not emphasize service in the world as an integral or necessary result of contact with Ultimate Reality, Fronsdal's description shows how compassion supported by Theravada practice may still spur practitioners into service. Fronsdal continues to describe how this compassion manifests in Thailand and Burma, where, "Theravada temples are often involved in supporting their surrounding communities. In addition to being places that offer spiritual guidance and teachings, Theravada temples can function as community and medical centers, schools, orphanages and homes to the homeless."[195] Fronsdal further notes that the Buddha would often encourage his students to action in the world when they had awakened.[196]

Finally, it is again important to avoid limiting our view of what constitutes "being of service" to tangible actions, or to disregard the power of an awakened being simply sharing their centered presence with the world. Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh offers one example of this kind of impact when he describes the experience of refugees fleeing Vietnam by boat. Thich Nhat Hanh notes, "When the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained calm and centered, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive."[197] Particularly amidst

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[194] Gil Fronsdal, "The Bodhisattva and The Arhat: Walking Together Hand-in-Hand," *Inquiring Mind* 28, no. 1 (2011): https://inquiringmind.com/article/2801_5_fronsdal/.

[195] Fronsdal, "The Bodhisattva and The Arhat."

[196] Fronsdal, "The Bodhisattva and The Arhat."

[197] Thich Nhat Hanh, "Quotes — Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation," Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation, accessed April 13, 2024, https://thichnhathanhfoundation.org/quotes.

today's urgent social, political, and ecological challenges, the kind of calm and centeredness cultivated through the Theravada path can itself be of tremendous service to the world.

Conclusion

While the Quakers and Catholic mystics describe being of service in the world as a direct expression of their relationship with Ultimate Reality, in Theravada Buddhism the relationship is more indirect. Perhaps this is because Ultimate Reality on the Quaker and Catholic mystic path is experienced as love, whereas on the Theravada path it is emptiness, which does not inherently invite movement and action. Nonetheless, the compassion and centeredness developed on the Theravada Buddhist path and the longstanding tradition of turning to service after awakening seem to bring seasoned Theravada Buddhists to the same place as Quakers and Catholic mystics: into a vocation that touches the suffering of the world through presence, teaching, or social action.

7. Conclusion: Many Paths Through the Wilderness

In describing the progression of the Snowmass conferences, Father Thomas Keating notes that after a few years of meetings, the participants:

> Spontaneously and somewhat hesitatingly began to take a closer look at certain points of disagreement until these became our main focus of attention. We found that discussing our points of disagreement increased the bonding of the group even more than discovering our points of agreement. We became more honest in stating frankly what we believed and why, without at the same time making any effort to convince others of our own position. We simply presented our understanding as a gift to the group.[198]

In this paper, I have explored how despite a similar focus on direct experience of Ultimate Reality through contemplative practice, the Quaker, Catholic mystic, and Theravada Buddhist paths exhibit rich diversity. They each start from a different concern, convey a different aspiration for where they will lead, invite us to live in contact with a different view of Ultimate Reality, ask for varying levels of willful effort, and offer different kinds of guides for the journey. These are meaningful differences. When we reduce this multiplicity through metaphors such as "many paths, one mountain," we may deny ourselves the gifts Thomas Keating speaks of. These gifts can include the intimacy of better understanding one another, the ability to honor the significance of practices within the appropriate context of their traditions, and the sublime appreciation of people across time and space discovering different answers to different questions in a shared quest to make meaning of the human existence.

Exploring the diversity of spiritual traditions can also enrich our relationship to our own life path. While this takes many shapes, I will now share examples from my own experience to illustrate how wrestling with the differences between traditions can enable a personal, synergistic, and flexible spiritual life.

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[198] Miles-Yépez, *The Common Heart,* xviii.

Honoring difference has been the only way I have been able to triangulate a truly personal relationship to my spiritual path. At times when I have focused exclusively on one tradition and assumed it leads to the same place as any other, I have lost touch with my direct experience of truth, dhamma, Spirit, or God. No matter how much a tradition emphasizes direct experience and inner guidance, I have found the natural desire for belonging and for simple answers easily overpowers the quieter currents of wisdom within as I fall into lockstep with a perspective or practice I'm offered. This is impossible to do, however, when I am grappling with differences between traditions. Embracing areas of friction forecloses any simple, prepackaged answers and demands an ongoing sensitivity to my own experience. It is similar to the dynamic when I ask my toddler niece, "I think this car is blue, what do you think?" and she reflexively responds, "ya!" In contrast, when I say, "I think it's blue, but your mommy thinks it's green, and your daddy thinks it's grey, what do you think?" she can only respond by looking at the car and seeing for herself. In either case, she is being asked to discern what is true according to her own experience, but presenting her with diverging viewpoints leaves her with no other option. Perhaps I am more toddler-like in this respect than others, but I have needed that confrontation with contrasting perspectives to continuously force me back to my own direct experience!

As I have stayed with the creative tension between Quakerism, Catholic mysticism, and Theravada Buddhism, I have been led to a path that incorporates aspects of each of these tradition's stated destinations. The aspiration of my path, as it stands now, is summed up by a phrase that recently came to me in Quaker worship, "the freedom to be faithful." This formulation draws from the Quaker and Catholic mystical goal to live in devoted service to something bigger than myself. But it also acknowledges how hard that can be, and reflects the Theravada focus on freedom from fetters created by my relationship to suffering and the forces

of greed, hatred, and delusion. It acknowledges the importance of this freedom not as an end in and of itself, but as a means to support my aspiration to live the life I'm being called to live. For me, this hybrid understanding of the destination of the spiritual life avoids pitfalls of under- or over-focusing on my own individual suffering and liberation. It also speaks more directly to the deepest longings of my heart than the off-the-shelf stated goals of any existing spiritual tradition. As I have sat in the friction between the distinct goals of various traditions, I have naturally been pushed towards this personal articulation of my path.

Honoring difference has also allowed for powerful synergies to emerge. These traditions' varying views of Ultimate Reality as a relational, unitive, and formless experience all work together to support my freedom to be faithful. Contact with the relational, guiding Ultimate Reality of the Quaker tradition gives me something to be faithful to. Whether called Spirit, God, Love, or the life that wants to be lived through me, it is a presence deeper than my thoughts or emotions. I often sense its guidance as a physical sensation of rumbling in my heart that points me to my place in the world.

When I tune into this rumbling of the heart, one of the places I am led is to practices that open me to the unitive Ultimate Reality emphasized by the Catholic mystics. Merging with this unitive field of Love, in turn, emboldens me to be faithful to the guidance I receive in the rest of my life. This is hard for me to describe and still evolving, but I will try my best to say more, knowing tomorrow I may understand it differently. Unitive experience softens the ego's fears and desires to allow the leadings of Spirit to take center stage. When I am able to sense my oneness with everything, I experience an unconditional sense of calm, support, safety, and connection even when faithfulness guides me to places that evoke fear, loneliness, sadness, shame, or disappointment. As I merge with this okayness that can coexist with even the biggest

feelings, I am learning I do not have to fight those feelings or orient my life around avoiding them: they can just be there. With practice, I can unblend myself from the feelings and begin to identify as the calm, breathing, expansive field that holds them.

When I can experience myself as this unitive field of Love, not only am I more free to follow Spirit when it leads me towards places my ego does not like, but so am I also more able to follow it away from places that are comfortable or validating to my ego. There is a deepening faith that even painful experiences when I do not get what I want are an invitation to fall, that I may better know the ground. Indeed, there is a kind of intimacy with the unitive experience of God that seems to be only possible in this falling. As I open to the whole array of human emotions that arise in the descent, I discover the depths of what unitive experience can support, including stuck and unprocessed feelings from younger, wounded parts of myself. These old emotions, too unbearable to fully feel in the past, can now resurface and meet the field of Love that offers all the care they have needed. This allows for the natural release of tight, controlling, egoic strategies and desires that have tried to protect me from the old pain. As this process unfolds over time, especially in lying-down meditation and practices that invite ease into the nervous system, I am seeing how I neither need to repress my desires, nor try to bend the universe to satisfy them. It can be interesting or joyful when things go my way, and, when the conditions allow for enough access to unitive experience, it can still be interesting and joyful when they don't and I get to learn something new: how the field of Love can meet even this painful moment; how maybe I didn't need whatever my ego thought I needed; and how in my very nakedness without that object of desire, I am often able to feel closer to God than when I am clothed by all the trappings of the world. The softening of both fear of painful emotions and craving for comfort or validation enabled by the deep okayness of unitive Ultimate Reality, in

turn, quiets the inner landscape to allow me to better sense and follow the soft rumblings of Spirit wherever they lead.

Finally, insight into the Theravada Buddhist understanding of a formless Ultimate Reality supports the spaciousness to be faithful by allowing greater access to the relational and unitive expressions of Ultimate Reality. One of the greatest obstacles to sensing the guidance of the rumble of the heart and to merging with the field of Love is the tendency to identify as my thoughts, feelings, and body. This leads me to live in automatic reaction to impulses from the gut or the mind, and to feel disconnected from my bigger identity as the field of Love. But when I catch a glimpse of another reality where my thoughts, emotions, and body are impersonal processes that do not cohere into a solid self, this opens a crack. Thoughts, emotions, and body can be present without being *me*, which creates the space to connect with Spirit's guidance, as well as to identify as the field of unitive Love around thoughts, emotions, and body. In revealing who I am not, formless ultimate reality opens space for an alternative experience of who I am.

If I took any one of these tradition's understanding of Ultimate Reality to be exclusive, or assumed they were all the same, I would miss the unique ways they support each other's contributions towards the freedom to be faithful. I would also forego the varied practices and guides each tradition offers to facilitate connection with their different views of Ultimate Reality.

Not only does engaging with differences between traditions allow for a personal and synergistic path to emerge over time, but so does it allow for greater flexibility to respond to the conditions of any given moment. The Buddhist teacher Rob Burbea describes this possibility as a "flexibility of view" that allows for different "ways of seeing" based on the needs of a particular circumstance.[199] This perspective acknowledges that sometimes one view of Ultimate Reality is

[199] Rob Burbea, *Seeing That Frees* (Devon, UK: Hermes Amara Publications, 2014), 102.

more helpful than another. There have been times in my life, for instance, when I have been overcome by a nihilism and a painful sense of being totally isolated and disconnected. In one of these times, I had an experience of formlessness during a two-week silent Theravada meditation retreat when I looked at my hand and sensed there was no self connected to it. I then looked around at the other bodies around me and sensed no selves there, either. While this formless view of Ultimate Reality felt liberating while it was happening, and perhaps has had fruits in various ways in the years since then, in its immediate aftermath I felt reaffirmed in my sense that the world was cold and empty with no one there, not even me! A unitive experience of merging with the field of Love, on the other hand, could have been deeply responsive and healing. At other times when I have felt aloof and disconnected from the suffering of the world, merging into the absolute okayness of unitive Love has carried me even further into the clouds, while contacting the relational form of Ultimate Reality has brought me back down to earth. Finally, in times when I have reified or inflated my perception of myself or my work, the relational form of Ultimate Reality has sometimes led to a greater sense of egoism by imbuing everything with an extra layer of self-importance. In those moments, insight into formlessness has cut through the grandiosity. This flexibility of view and the potential for different aspects of Ultimate Reality to emerge based on the needs of the moment is only possible when we experience the diversity offered by different traditions.

Diving deeply into multiple paths and wrestling with their subtle differences has allowed for this personal, synergistic, and flexible spiritual life to emerge. I am not suggesting, however, that this kind of intentional, rigorous interspiritual approach is best. Many people are drawn to the stability and coherence of focusing on one spiritual tradition, just as many are not called to any explicitly spiritual path. I have seen the beauty of lives lived in each of those directions, and

I also do not believe we have much of a say over what path speaks to us. Regardless, it seems a sincere exploration of the diversity of spiritual traditions can offer all of us a conversation partner to help us reflect on our relationship to life's big questions.

Even as we appreciate difference, it is equally fruitful to note the areas where varied spiritual traditions converge. In our exploration of Quakerism, Catholic mysticism, and Theravada Buddhism, we have seen how each tradition invites us to dedicate ourselves to learning to abide in an Ultimate presence or perspective beyond the material world. Each tradition describes how contact with this Ultimate Reality allows for a natural letting go of our focus on self-gratification, which facilitates further contact with the Ultimate, which allows for further letting go of our self-focus in a virtuous cycle. Each tradition identifies the need for some level of willful effort, particularly at the beginning of the spiritual life, which must then be released as we surrender more and more to the spiritual current. Each honors the role of human teaching not as an ultimate source of guidance, but in a supporting role to help us connect with a deeper source of direction. And each tradition emphasizes the power of perspectives that help us drop resistance to pain, rather than overcome it. Noticing the same wisdom appear in such different places suggests it is worth paying attention to, no matter what path we may be on.

Finally, there is one last area where all these paths meet. Despite their varying starting points, stated ending points, and twists and turns along the way, seasoned travelers who have walked each of these paths seem to share qualities of inner peace and compassionate lives of service. This should make us highly skeptical of any claims to exclusivity within the spiritual life. It suggests that while some paths might be more appropriate for one person than another, ultimately the most important thing a path may do is to simply get us out into the wilderness. Or rather, to help us open to the wilderness we're already traversing.

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