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What We See Outside of Us Is Always Connected to What Is Happening Inside of Us: Teresa of
Avila and Buddhaghosa on No-Self Practice, Theology, and Oppression

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Abstract

What We See Outside of Us Is Always Connected to What Is Happening Inside of Us: Teresa of Avila and Buddhaghosa on No-Self Practice, Theology, and Oppression

By Ryan Kuratko

Contemplative practice promises to reshape our selves, our innermost and pre-reflective engagements with the world, in order to address intractable and systemic ethical problems. No-self practice offers a counter-intuitive approach to the reframing of ethics by advocating for the elimination of self, understood as any element that remains unaffected by the other dimensions of selfhood and experience. However, the connection between no-self contemplative practice and ethics remains difficult to trace in both its Christian and Buddhist lineages.

This dissertation examines the complex arguments that underlie no-self practice in Teresa of Avila and Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa and follows their effects in ethics. By engaging these diverse thinkers comparatively, this study explores the little recognized no-self theology in Teresa's *Interior Castle* and the hidden connections of Buddhaghosa's practical treatment of no-self with ethics in the *Visuddhimagga*. Their shared strategies for cultivating no-self clarify the apparent lacunae each other's writing. By phenomenological analysis, overwhelming and incompatible imagery, and an emphasis on rich depictions of personhood, Teresa and Buddhaghosa describe no-self practice as the allowing of no element of experience to oppress any other. This practice uncovers the connections between subtle, interiorly felt and exteriorly experienced oppression.

First, the argument begins with a close analysis of the final room of Teresa's *Interior Castle* and of mental constructions in the *Visuddhimagga*. These sections in each thinker's work describe the role of something beyond being that transforms the nature of perception, both toward God/Nibbāna and the oppressions that characterize experience. Second, the argument then places these ideas in conversation, leading to a clearer picture of no-self's portrayal of the relationship of desire and knowledge, and to a rereading of equanimity in Buddhaghosa's thought as an analogue for love in Teresa's. Third, the argument develops and analyzes the ethical dimensions of this transformation that enable a reshaped self, including no-self practice's emphasis on friendship and community, and on freedom as an earned rather than assumed attribute of agency.

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“I greatly love those who I see are more advanced and who are determined, detached, and courageous; and they are the ones with whom I would want to converse; it seems they help me.”

Teresa of Avila, Testimony 1

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Preface

Like all projects, this one began in a particular time and place. When I began writing, research, and language work, the United States had its first black president, had taken steps to dismantle the extra-judicial prison at Guantanamo Bay, and for the first time was developing genuine economic and social responses to the threat of climate change in partnership with the nations of the world. The culture and country were far from perfect—police brutality, racism, and mass incarceration dominated national, local, and my family’s conversations—but it did feel *hopeful*. As a white man who grew up in a de facto segregated town, the honest conversation felt refreshing. Segregation is, after all, the marriage of a fantasy to oppression, and the shift in focus and energy offered a distant glimpse of promise.

The context in which I am completing this project is quite different. The country and culture are ‘divided,’ as most news stories carefully term the present situation. Truth has become a commodity, or even accused of being a fantasy, rather than a shared purpose or good. White supremacy has gained not only a voice but a seat at the political table. Gun violence continues unabated. The rhetoric of nuclear war has returned to the highest levels of government. The realities of economic, racial, and ecological oppression have vanished beneath talking points, their hermeneutic anchored, at its center, with a simple will to power. In one sense, all of these problems are continuous with what has come before, but hope has largely been replaced by anxiety.

At a more personal level, both of my sons have been born in the process of researching and writing this project. What began for me as one way of thinking about the dimensions of Christian teaching and practice that I would pass on to my children, energized by the curiosity of coming to know them each day, has evolved into a desire to see them well armored to face a

world that looks much bleaker than it did only a few years ago. When I ask myself what aspects of my Christian tradition to emphasize and share, I find that I am thinking of the same teachings as before—only now, I am animated as much by fear for what they will face as hope for their futures.

I am certain it seems curious to begin with a preface that highlights the turn from hope to fear, but I can only point to the two sources of this project, Teresa of Avila and Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa. In my introductory chapter, I will lay out a case for a gentle, energized interest in the importance of no-self practice. Stylistically, both Teresa and Buddhaghosa lean heavily on humor, stories, and thought-provoking reflections to convey their arguments, and much of my argument here is inspired by and reflects their gentle but penetrating styles.

However, both thinkers describe two sides to the desire to learn what is meant by the absence of self, and the flipside to a warm and gentle curiosity for both thinkers is fear. Buddhaghosa comments that the etymology of the word ‘monk’ (*bhikkhu*) stems from one who sees fear (*bhayaṃ ikkhati*) in the round of rebirths.¹ In other words, laypeople seek ordination as monks because they are afraid—of suffering, of unreality, of a loss of control. Teresa, whose language waxes to rapturous heights in frequent digressions, pauses near the end of *Interior Castle* in the midst of one such aside to write, “For, in the end, people must always live with fear until [God] gives them true peace and brings them there where that peace will be unending.”² Fear, she comments, is part of the present reality that sends us inward, seeking freedom from fear in God. Given her own serious illnesses and her harassment by the Inquisition, Teresa does not seem to be speaking theoretically.

¹ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification : Visuddhimagga* (Colombo, Ceylon: Buddhist Publication Society, 2011), chaps. I, 7. Note that this type of ‘etymology’ is, in fact, more of a mini-commentary than a strict linguistic genealogy that reflects the way we use the term.

² Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, trans. Otilio Rodriguez and Kieran Kavanaugh, First Edition, The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Vol. 2 (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1980), bk. VII:3.13.

As Teresa and Buddhaghosa characterize it, the motivating force for engaging no-self practice may well be a desire to understand the world or ourselves, but it may also be fear. Both characterize the opposite of no-self practice not as selfishness, as we might normally use the term, but as *oppression*—controlled in ways that we only dimly recognize, mired in unreality. Buddhaghosa quotes the Buddha’s mass of fire sermon,³ in which the Buddha relates that we would be better off hugging giant, flaming masses of sticks to our chests than deceiving ourselves about the oppression of the world because we would, while on fire, at least no longer be deceived by hiding our heads in the sand. Fear, of the world and of who we have become, can unsettle us in a fruitful way.

As the world and national contexts have turned and changed, it seems important to preface this project with this other, fearful gateway to no-self. Much of this project takes a gentler tone, and I hope it is more interesting and persuasive for it. However, as Teresa and Buddhaghosa point out, we may find as much motivation in the horrors we face in the world as in a desire for something more.

³ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. I, 154.

Chapter 1: Going Out Like a Candle

“The first effect is a forgetfulness of self, for truly the soul, seemingly, no longer is....”¹

“In the ultimate sense all the truths should be understood as void because of the absence of (i) any experiencer, (ii) any doer, (iii) anyone who is extinguished, and (iv) any goer. Hence this is said:

For there is suffering, but none who suffers;
Doing exists although there is no doer.
Extinction is but no extinguished person;
Although there is a path, there is no goer.”²

“First, however, she waited for a few minutes to see if she was going to shrink any further: she felt a little nervous about this; “For it might end, you know,” said Alice to herself, “in my going out altogether, like a candle. I wonder what I should be like then?” And she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle is like after the candle is blown out, for she could not remember ever having seen such a thing.”³

Alice asks a good question, not only for anyone shrinking rapidly in a rabbit hole but also for anyone interested in contemplative practices. What would we be like if, by a process of perpetual shrinking or blowing out, our selves were extinguished? The metaphor of an extinguished flame is one of the primary images used in Buddhism for describing Nibbāna, the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path, a word that itself etymologically suggests blowing-out. If our selves are blown out, or if our selves truly seem (*verdaderamente parece*) to be gone, as Teresa of Avila writes, what would we be like? If we have never seen any such thing, as Alice wonders to herself, how should we know whether such extinguishing is good? What is so *good* about being blown out, about being gone? What does that disappearance have to do with being good, moral, compassionate, loving?

¹ Teresa of Avila, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Vol. 2*, trans. Otilio Rodriguez and Kieran Kavanaugh, First Edition edition (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1980), bk. VII.3.2.

² Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XVI, 90.

³ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland ; & Through the Looking-Glass* (New York; Toronto: Bantam, 1981), 6.

All questions emerge in specific contexts, and if Alice wonders what is so good about a shrinking self only after drinking from a strange bottle, the question arises for us in a different kind of crisis. Our issue stems less from our literal shrinking than from our sense of being too small to handle the problems that we have created. Denial about our responsibility for the degradation of the environment, hopelessness in the face of intractable racial, religious, and cultural conflicts, and a culture that naturalizes radical economic disparity all dominate headlines. The Dalai Lama reflects on the role of technology in these changes in his book on secular ethics, commenting, “Never before have we known so much, or been in such a position of control over so many aspects of our planet. This situation raises a very serious concern: Is it possible that our responsibilities are now growing too fast for our natural capacity for moral discernment to keep pace?”⁴ Much as Alice reflects in her adventures with changing sizes, the Dalai Lama wonders whether the proportion of our human crisis outstrips our human size. He wonders, too, about our resources. What kinds of insights and practices do we as human beings have for facing the larger problems that we continue to create for ourselves?

He responds to his own question with what he names as optimism. The issue, he writes, lies in an insufficiently developed aspect of ourselves. Reflecting on systemic moral issues of peace, justice, and ecology, the Dalai Lama writes, “It is clear that something is seriously lacking in the way we humans are going about things.”⁵ He then continues, “But what is it that we lack? The fundamental problem, I believe, is that at every level we are giving too much attention to the external, material aspects of life while neglecting moral ethics and inner values.”⁶ He argues that our world is awry, even self-destructive, in significant part because of our inner lives. Despite the

⁴ H.H. Dalai Lama and Alexander Norman, *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 85.

⁵ H.H. Dalai Lama and Norman, x.

⁶ H.H. Dalai Lama and Norman, x–xi.

quite excellent and sophisticated work being done in science and technology, what is ‘lacking,’ to adopt the Dalai Lama’s language, is connected to some dimension of personhood more ‘interior’ than our ever more sophisticated technology reaches.

These ethical challenges call for the cultivation of “mental discipline”⁷ in order to grow and transform our inner self-understanding. The Dalai Lama particularly focuses on meditation as a method for transforming our inner character.⁸ Meditation can support, foster, and cultivate the growth of our inner life, leading to the ability to approach external matters in a fresh way. He writes, “[E]thics consists less of rules to be obeyed than of principles for inner self-regulation to promote those aspects of our nature which we recognize as conducive to our own well-being and that of others.”⁹ The Dalai Lama argues that no matter how we may feel about religion in its manifestations or history, its contemplative practice offers a powerful tool for leading to a transformed ethics.

The Dalai Lama is clearly not alone in making the argument that “[w]hat we see outside of us is always connected to what is happening inside of us,”¹⁰ and he is also not alone in looking toward contemplative practices as a way to engage these crucial ethical issues. In the Christian context, Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury over the Anglican Communion, writes that

contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined

⁷ H.H. Dalai Lama and Norman, 155.

⁸ H.H. Dalai Lama and Norman, 156.

⁹ H.H. Dalai Lama and Norman, 18.

¹⁰ Edwin Friedman, *Friedman’s Fables: Discussion Questions* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1990), 8.

emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly.¹¹

Williams, too, describes the contemporary context as inhumane and sees contemplative practices as the key to restoring ethics to humanity. The theme also appears in the Roman Catholic Church. In his encyclical focused on ecological care and crisis, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis enjoins a “contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption.”¹² Francis, too, draws a strong connection between contemplative practice and an ethical stance that shifts human self-identity from consumption to care.

The interest in the ethical effects of contemplative practice is far-reaching, but it frequently centers on this capacity to transform an inner dimension of personhood, a transformation that invites a different kind of habitus to emerge. Alice’s situation, considered through a slightly different lens, again provides a helpful image. At this point in Carroll’s story, Alice struggles to fit through a door because of her size. She then experiments with various foods and drinks that resize her, resulting in being at first gigantic and then so tiny that she nearly drowns in her own tears. Only through careful discipline and attention to herself does she become the right size to confront her problem of the escaping through a door. Contemplative practice, as discussed by the Dalai Lama, Rowan Williams, and Pope Francis, works in a parallel way. Contemplative practice, thought of as interior transformation that resituates and invigorates ethics, resizes the self and allows for freedom from restrictive systems and creates the right self-awareness to reach solutions.

¹¹ Rowan Williams, “Archbishop’s Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome,” October 2012, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome>.

¹² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si -- On Care for Our Common Home* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015), secs. IV, 222.

These religious leaders are obviously not alone in looking to contemplative practices as a way to resize selfhood so as to gain solutions to intractable ethical problems. A quick browse through contemplative practices online or in the bookstore shows how widespread this interesting idea is. It exists in scientific formulations, like the research that undergirds and is pursued by Emory University's Cognitively Based Compassion Training. Here, the self under cultivation is grown to be "connected" rather than "isolated," better able to focus on other people through training based on Tibetan Buddhist practices.¹³

The idea that contemplative practice resizes selfhood and affects ethical life also exists in different kinds of Christian formulations. Richard Rohr, a popular contemporary writer on Christian contemplative practice, describes a True Self which needs to emerge from the false Self in order to gain "intimacy with everything," a shorthand for a different ethical way of being in the world.¹⁴ Cynthia Bourgeault, a Christian writer on centering prayer and nonduality, uses a scientific perspective as confirmation that the practice of centering prayer leads to physiological effects. She characterizes the shift as altered neurological responses that lead to the processing of information differently, meaning that problems become subject to parts of the brain associated with more "advanced" functions rather than simple, automatic responses.¹⁵ This physiological confirmation carries ethical freight by insinuating that the altered bodily self can face ethical problems with a rational rather than reflexive part of the brain.

Attempts to resize selfhood via contemplation for ethical purposes also exist in philosophical and aesthetic formulations. Iris Murdoch, the philosopher and novelist, describes

¹³ "The Scientific Basis of Compassion," accessed April 5, 2017, cognitively-based-compassion-training/history/index.html.

¹⁴ Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 1 edition (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 164.

¹⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2016), 35.

the connection in this way: “I would say (persuasive definition) that a mystic is a good person whose knowledge of the divine and practice of the selfless life has transcended the level of idols and images.”¹⁶ Murdoch continues, noting that silence that helps cultivate this transformation, even in small doses, and makes a difference. She writes, “Just sitting quiet will help. Teach it to children.”¹⁷ Murdoch argues that retreating to an interior quiet can relativize the images that occlude our vision of reality and other people, thereby equipping us for ethical life by enabling our encounter with other people rather than our ideas of them. So many versions of ‘contemplation leads to a stronger ethical life’ exist that categorizing their approaches, which appropriate different metaphysics, use various methods, and rely on different levels of sophistication, would require a lengthy project in its own right.

However, the kind (or size) of self cultivated in contemplative practice and its relationship to ethics is complex. Real differences emerge even in a cursory glance through the ways that contemplative practices are being imagined. Contemplative practices vary significantly not only in terms of the details of the practice (visualization, one-pointed concentration, nondual practices, and so on) but also in the self that each sees as essential for cultivation. Undoubtedly, this complexity in descriptions of human selfhood interweaves with particular metaphysical understandings of selfhood from different traditions. Some approaches understand the self as needing to vanish altogether, like Alice’s reflections on the candle; others see contemplative practice as the removal of a False Self in order for a True Self to emerge; still others argue for a nondual picture of the self’s relation to the world. Drawing loosely on traditional categories in Indian thought, we might recognize various contemplative paradigms, including dualism, non-dualism, and a pragmatic or therapeutic attempt to avoid both duality and non-duality, each of

¹⁶ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1993), 73.

¹⁷ Murdoch, 73.

which may think of the optimal size of self quite differently. Also, as may seem obvious but bears repeating, not every contemplative practice sees a development in ethics as desirable. Contemplation may be understood as a simple escape from being that rejoices in unity with the Divine and does not dovetail with ethics in any obvious way. In short, when we hear that contemplative practice equips us for ethical life, we ought first to ask *whom* the practice is cultivating and why.

Perhaps the strangest vision for resizing the self in some forms of contemplative practice is the one that insists we have no permanent, abiding self, either in some hidden core of identity or soul. This idea is quite counterintuitive (as it is intended to be, I think), so much so that its proponents frequently spend significant time reminding the reader that even one who has entirely eliminated her self continues to eat, sleep, and drink. Teresa of Avila, whom I will argue holds just such a no-self position, includes a section on the selfless life that reminds her audience of this exact point. Buddhaghosa, who holds a no-self perspective still more explicitly, reminds those who are about to leave the idea of self completely behind and obtain Nibbāna that this final, ultimate extinguishing is no reason to avoid eating and drinking and, as importantly, also offers no excuse for trying to avoid a student's duties to his teacher. Buddhaghosa's point is something more than a bid to maintain a conservative educational pattern; he is trying to point out that we may have the wrong idea about what becoming selfless looks like.

However, having no self seems not only odd but unattractive if we consider, as Alice invites us, some of the occasions which claim the name of selflessness. In talking with students, colleagues, friends, family, and the occasional total stranger about this project, I have been struck by the conflicting feelings many have expressed about whether selflessness accomplishes any good. We associate 'being selfless' with a lack of self-esteem or even self-loathing with its

attendant pathological psychologies, depression and suicide foremost among them. Some people have expressed to me the idea that being selfless is generally good—we could be more attentive and compassionate—but many others immediately point out that eliminating our selves sounds suspiciously making us into either slaves or codependents. Differentiating no-self practice from these more negative types of being selfless, like depression, slavery, and codependency, is vital for understanding how selflessness contributes to ethics.

The most thorough way to see how a contemplative selflessness differs from these negative types is to follow Teresa's and Buddhaghosa's descriptions, but some preliminary examination can assist in showing what these more negative formulations share in common. Having no self can, for example, sound suspiciously like what any empire wants of its colonies—productivity without protest or personhood. In our contemporary American context, for example, the idea that whiteness, with its attendant understandings of culture and rationality, is the neutral basis of human nature has served to exclude and oppress other of selfhood. Being selfless in this context means surrendering agency or self-understanding to fit in with white culture. The womanist theologian Emilie Townes, among many others, makes this point.¹⁸ From this perspective, to be selfless means to surrender or destroy one's own culture in favor of the 'universal,' which is in fact a Euro-centric patriarchal perspective. 'Selflessness,' in this sense, is a form of being oppressed, a forceful removal of both the rich diversity of identity together with the agency described within that identity.

Oppression also provides a way of understanding the negative selflessness that occurs with the malformed relationships that results in and from codependency. Although the term

¹⁸ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 2006 edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 59.

admits of too many definitions,^{19,20} those of us with intimate experience with addiction will recognize one of its hallmark results in unhealthy and unbalanced relationships, where one person derives too much of their self and meaning from the actions of another person. Spouses and children of addicts might, in other words, look remarkably selfless, even as the anxiety of managing another person's illness destroys them. To be codependent is to be oppressed by a mix of affection, desire, ideals, culture, and perhaps even the power of others within a family system, but the effect is similar in creating something else under the name of 'selflessness' that is, in essence, another name for being subjected to another's power.

What these negative formulations of selflessness have in common is some form of oppression. The mechanics of oppression move in inner and outer interconnected ways in each case. The oppression of empire and racism works through laws and norms as well as through violence and authority to root itself in thoughts, desires, and assumptions. Codependence works through interior desires, attachments, and the ideal roles that find reinforcement in culture and norms, or even laws. We might even think of oppression as a useful metaphor for aspects of psychological depression, recognizing a form of oppression determined by some combination of emotions, habits, and neurological chemicals. In each case, in spite of their differences, a variety of oppression characterizes negative selflessness.

Calling attention to the common pattern of oppression provides an entryway into how Buddhaghosa and Teresa think differently about no-self practice. Both describe one of selflessness's primary characteristics as the overcoming or escape from oppression.

Understanding why no-self practice accomplishes this shift requires engaging their works in

¹⁹ Robert Ackerman, *Perfect Daughters: Adult Daughters of Alcoholics*, Revised ed. edition (Deerfield Beach, Fla: HCI, 2002), 200.

²⁰ Melody Beattie, *Codependent No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself*, 1st edition (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1987), 33.

detail, but we can gain an early sense of this difference through the hope that the Dalai Lama and Rowan Williams invest in contemplative practice. Both describe it as an interior work that *frees*, rather than oppresses, individuals.

But how is no-self practice freeing if it is not simply the half-peace of oppression, and what good does selflessness accomplish? Alice's question proves a good one—how should we know whether any good can come from someone who has gone out like a candle?

In this first chapter, I am introducing the study of no-self practice from several perspectives. I first offer my reasoning for naming the object of study no-self practice; second, I outline the challenge of reading each thinker's complex text; third, I describe who might benefit from engaging in this analysis no-self practice; fourth, lay out the challenge and promise of engaging such different thinkers; fifth, I offer an overview of the method for this project; sixth, I present a brief biography of Teresa and Buddhaghosa. Finally, I include an overview of the argument for each of the chapters here.

No-Self, or Selflessness, or Ego, or What?

A natural difficulty in this project stems from naming its central concept—no-self, or selflessness, or egolessness. All of these have benefits and problems as names for the similar ideas and processes that Teresa and Buddhaghosa describe. Turning to Spanish or to Pāli, their respective languages, does not erase the difficulty. Teresa tends to use images rather than a single concept to describe the difference between the center room and the rest of the soul, writing evocatively of light, shadow, water, emptiness, and occasionally of forgetfulness, oblivion, and annihilation. Each of these symbols relies on the whole semantic web of images that she is describing in order to refine their meanings, and so no term renders directly into a single English concept. Emptiness, for example, is partially true of her main image, the interior crystalline

castle, but does not capture the fullness and company she finds in the central room. Teresa deliberately strains and breaks her images as often as she introduces new ones to bend them in new ways. Moreover, in a comparative project that addresses Buddhist thought, the term ‘emptiness’ carries a whole freight of meaning in the Buddhist studies context that originates outside of Buddhaghosa’s writing and so is something of a distraction.

Turning to the Pāli, Buddhaghosa uses the deceptively simple *anattā*, which renders rather woodenly as ‘no-self.’ In his book on the topic,²¹ Steven Collins points out that this term, too, depends upon a wide semantic and symbolic web for its meaning in Pāli, including everything from traditional visions of householder life in India to brahmanic sacrifice. Moreover, as we will see, Buddhaghosa uses the term as a heuristic for a process rather than a definitive conceptual picture, and again, his actual *use* of the term pushes in its own direction. He connects it directly to our sense of self-control and to oppression, and he argues for its importance for existential rather than epistemological reasons.

Terms in English carry their own misleading meanings. Selflessness sounds rather too much like a bad Sunday School lesson (Always put others first! Don’t consider your own needs! Don’t rock the boat!). Ego, as a term for what is unhooked or left behind in the process of unselfing, is sometimes used in Christian literature on the topic, but the term also carries heavy Freudian baggage, with the connected terms superego and id, that does not quite fit the topic.

Of course, part of the difficulty stems from the topic itself. Teresa and Buddhaghosa are not choosing complex terms simply to be ornery. Rather, they are attempting to dig under the seemingly normal ways that our thoughts and self-awareness appear to us. Their symbols and images are intentional disruptions of a way of being in the world that may seem utterly natural.

²¹ Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

No term is perfect, but one is needed here for ease of reference. I am choosing to use *no-self practice* as the primary term, although I sometimes also include the term ‘selflessness’ because of its more comfortable grammatical role as a noun. As a term, ‘no-self practice’ belongs wholly to neither thinker. ‘No-self’ has the benefit of looking odd in English, particularly in a Christian context, and that strange quality is useful for recognizing that Teresa is doing something distinctive. The term no-self also does echo her “*olvido de sí, que verdaderamente parece ya no es,*” which can be rendered as it is at the head of this chapter by her translator, or more intriguingly as “[The first effect is the] oblivion of the self, for truly it seems not to be.”²² However, a fuller understanding of what ‘no-self’ means is gained in chapters 2, 3 and 4, as we see what is present and absent in the center room and what mental constructions say about human experience and Nibbāna.

I am adding ‘practice’ onto the end of ‘no-self’ to emphasize the way that for both thinkers, no-self is not about a metaphysics, ontology, position, or view so much as a commitment and process. While the ambiguity of the term is useful for this project—not only beliefs, not only actions, not only a culture—a few preliminary words will clarify its role, too.

Ted Smith describes the contemporary study of practice in three overlapping approaches. Practice can connote the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to use knowledge, or a systematic way of thinking about goods and agency that sees their development as a mutual relationship within the narrative of a human life or community, or a formational structure that culturally defines the space of its agents (*habitus*).²³ No-self practice resonates with each of these understandings in different ways. It shares the mutuality implied by *phronesis* and the sense that *habitus* defines a

²² Santa Teresa De Jesus, *Obras Completas de Santa Teresa*, ed. Efrén de la Madre de Dios and Otger Steggink (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1977), bk. Las Moradas. Book VII: 3.2.

²³ Ted Smith, “Theories of Practice,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, 1 edition (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

heritable, determining cultural system. However, no-self practice differs from these characterizations, too. As is argued in chapter 5, knowledge, application, and awareness are further complicated by desire and its shaping effect on perception in a way not captured by *phronesis*. Also, no-self practice is concerned with learning to perceive around and through *habitus* rather than trace it.

Smith's middle example, which he draws from Alasdair MacIntyre's work, is the most revealing for my use of the word practice here. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre describes practices in this way:

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.²⁴

MacIntyre's very general definition is attempting, among other things, to loop together the way we think about complex games and activities with morality in order to show what they share in common and as a way to frame virtues as habitual patterns that are useful for the practice but also 'extend human powers.' Playing the mandolin, for example, requires patience for the needed frequent repetition in the process of learning to play. Patience emerges as a virtue from mandolin playing and is required for gaining the internal goods of playing music. That same patience is transformative for the goods involved in playing—accomplishing new pieces that once seemed out of reach, more richly enjoying music—and also for the person—their ability to tolerate picky repetition increases as a strength of character or habit.

This broad definition is useful for thinking about no-self as a practice because it points out several of its salient features. Primarily, the term practice avoids conflating no-self with a

²⁴ Alasdair C MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

conceptual paradigm and weaves together the way in which engaging a practice transforms both the practice and the agent. No-self practice is more akin to a school of practices than a single one, but this school or family of practices shares several things in common. MacIntyre's definition points out that no-self practice is socially established and cooperative (a point I will spell out in chapter 6). The goods internal to the practice, which include overcoming oppression, grow and become more complex over time and admit of no definite number, not unlike the practice of mandolin playing admits of endless particular works and performances of beauty. Whether we should think of the final ends of no-self practice as 'goods' at all is doubtful. Teresa and Buddhaghosa insist that the final end of no-self practice is God or Nibbāna, respectively, and both are adamant that the final end cannot be thought of even as something that participates in existence in a normal way. This is a place where no-self practice does not quite follow the standard definition that MacIntyre has laid out.

The definition also subtly points toward no-self practice's description of virtue. Over time, MacIntyre's work (in *Dependent Rational Animals*,²⁵ for example) has refined this very general definition of practice through the recognition that ethical practices may also run into determining, biological limits that are exterior to a practice. If we as human beings have certain goods or actions that are good for us as human beings, like growing from infancy into mature practical reasoners, then the most significant practices of human life must include a holistic look at the way that humans are necessarily vulnerable and thus in need of protection. Ethical practices need to be shaped by limits external to the practice, in other words, and so in applying practices to larger ethical or complex projects, we might need to recognize virtues that emerge in combination from these limits.

²⁵ Alasdair C MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 1999).

The word ‘virtue’ begins to appear a bit odd once practices are broadened to include the limits and characteristics of embodied life. A virtue, after all, is a strength, etymologically but also in the way that we conceive of it. MacIntyre begins to argue for “virtues of acknowledged dependence,”²⁶ but buried in this shift in terminology is the way that virtues relate to a context beyond the practice. A virtue in one stage of life may be deleterious in another. No-self practice is particularly concerned with the self-understandings that implicitly shape virtue, and this more complex thinking about the context of virtue beyond a practice is useful in understanding no-self’s connection to ethics.

Interior Castle, Path of Purification, and Hermeneutic Puzzles

This project examines the formulation of no-self practice in relationship to ethics as it appears in two thinkers, Teresa of Avila and Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa. I will argue that both offer versions of a no-self argument, and that by placing the two thinkers in conversation, the interweaving of their descriptions of no-self and ethics becomes clearer. Both Teresa and Buddhaghosa are deeply concerned with the interconnection of the extinguishing of self, what being selfless means for being good, and what it means to see this occur in other people in a community. For both of these thinkers, what we need in confronting systemic ethical problems is impossible to see because our ordinary consciousness and experience prevents us from seeing accurately (or at all) the profound roots of those problems. Rather like Alice needs to shrink to fit through a door, both argue that selflessness changes our perception of and ability to respond to ethical problems. Both Teresa and Buddhaghosa affirm the importance of regular moral life, albeit framed quite differently in their respective writings, and both writers devote many words to praising as ethically useful any turn to the kind of inner life akin to the turn the Dalai Lama hopes for in secular ethics. However, for both Teresa and Buddhaghosa, this more regular sense

²⁶ MacIntyre, 119.

of morality is subtly dependent on something else found through a process of more profound transformation that leads to the capacity to ‘see’ something altogether beyond being.

I will be focusing on Teresa’s *Interior Castle* and Buddhaghosa’s *Path of Purification*. Both Teresa and Buddhaghosa were prolific writers—Teresa of correspondence, devotional literature, and advice about prayer; and Buddhaghosa of commentaries on the Pāli Buddhist canon, including exegeses of stories of the Buddha’s life, the monastic manual, and philosophical analysis. In *Interior Castle* and *Path of Purification*, however, both thinkers attempt to synthesize the understanding and practices of their tradition, but they do so in an interesting way. Both synthesize their traditions as living practices rather than conceptual apparatuses. Both texts defy easy classification and incorporate diverse genres, and they share a concern with describing the transformation that enables the sight of the Signless, the Uncreated—God, in Teresa’s case, or Nibbāna in Buddhaghosa’s.

At the risk of overstating their similarities, it may help here at the outset to recognize the parallel processes in their texts. Both describe monastic communities committed to transformation. Both describe a process that results in ‘seeing’ something beyond being, and both believe that this encounter changes individuals so that they inhabit life differently. Both believe that the key to this process is to work through diverse strategies in order to detach from various misleading and limiting understandings of our human life that operate and determine our experience of the world at a very deep level. For all of their differences—Christian and Buddhist most obviously, as well as gender, language, and many other differences—this unity of no-self practice around detachment provides a strong bridge for seeing what we learn in reading each in the company of the other as well as about the value of no-self practice for ethics and even for theology.

Also, both *Interior Castle* and *Path of Purification* are puzzling texts, but they are puzzling for many reasons. Both texts describe something that exceeds language but, of course, do so in language; both insist that ethics has something to do with the very limits of human transformation, but the very understanding of being ‘human’ shifts. Given the history of the way that both of these texts have been read, it is helpful to lay out in a preliminary way the puzzle that lies at the end of each text.

Teresa describes the castle of *Interior Castle* both as a metaphor for the self at prayer and as a metaphor for God. The text is not the slow unpacking of a static analogy but rather an attempt to effect a process of transformation in the reader through the exploration of the interior of the soul, pictured as a crystalline castle. The process offers an architectural adventure, describing impossible spaces through a multitude of images. At the center of the castle, Teresa describes a room with no doors or windows which nonetheless provides the light for the whole castle. This room is simultaneously God’s alone and yet is also empty. It is heaven, God’s dwelling place, but soul itself marks this position through the empty space at its center. The soul is a hollow structure. At the culmination of the process of transformation, this hollow center becomes the key to a different kind of ethical life and to a more lasting union with God.

It is puzzling—what does Teresa mean that at the heart of the soul is not soul? While much is puzzling about the final section where Teresa uses this image, necessary for seeing the shape of this puzzle is to see that it is not exhausted by the puzzling factors that surround it. In a space explicitly at the edge of language and experience, the confusion that arises from complex ideas and their more complicated antecedents is expected. Language struggles to speak adequately because the nature of the topic calls into question the nature of language itself. However, while many interpreters of Teresa gesture only to the mysteries of the final section,

Teresa herself does not simply abandon language; she writes a final section to her text. Moreover, while the text does include her sighs and laughter about language's inadequacy for capturing the greatness of this central room, the section nonetheless also uses her standard strategies of communication, including metaphors, images, theological depictions of mental faculties, and descriptions of the experience. In other words, Teresa does not give up language in a fit of ecstatic ellipses or start drawing pictures (legitimate strategies that her contemporary and friend John of the Cross does, in fact, use). Conditioned by her warnings about the problems of language, Teresa uses language to say something consistent, thoughtful, and constructed about the highest spiritual state possible in this life. If a puzzle arises here, it is not enough simply to write it off as part of the ineffable. More needs to be said, a choice Teresa herself is making.

Another possible distraction to seeing the puzzle at the heart of her *Interior Castle* is the caution Teresa must show in order to protect her life, her teaching, and her communities. With the Inquisition watching her work and person so closely, Teresa has many reasons not to be forthright about her vision, her theology, and about her understanding of the relationship between human beings and God. She fears for herself and her sisters, and she undoubtedly uses the rhetoric of her texts to great effect by hiding in plain sight, appearing to accept the role the Inquisition is forcing on her as a woman.²⁷ However, she also manages to say a great deal not only about the politics of founding her community but also about God, human beings, and their relationship—theology, in other words. Her rhetoric accomplishes much more than masking its topic and writer; indeed, her rhetoric is frequently shaped to push her reader into the kinds of transformations that she describes. If Teresa is circumspect, she has reason to be, both because of the nature of the topic and because of the danger she faces.

²⁷ Alison Weber's excellent book *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* explores the complex tangle of authority and rhetoric in Teresa's writing. Weber argues that Teresa's rhetoric as mere or silly woman allows her the freedom to develop a critical voice in both politics and theology.

However, neither the inadequacy of language nor her defensive use of rhetoric entirely exhausts the theological puzzle that she presents. What does Teresa mean when she writes that at the center of the soul, at the heart of her metaphorical crystalline interior castle, there is only empty space? This is the space that is reserved for God. In the logic of her image as well as in her description, she describes this soul's center as empty. What does she mean that the center of the soul is empty? Does she mean that nothing was ever there, or that whatever was there existed only provisionally? What does she mean that when the soul realizes this emptiness, that only God remains? To state this puzzle most clearly: of what is the soul empty at the center of the interior castle?

This question receives surprisingly little treatment in the many texts devoted to Teresa. In part, this is because so many texts on Teresa either seek either to claim her person or her texts as proof of something. Much as many of her letters were cut into pieces and used for talismans and medicine, a fate shared with her body, Teresa has, for benign or less kind reasons, often been turned into other people's evidence. However, even among the better works on Teresa that engage her thought, this question of the empty soul receives surprisingly little treatment. Most frequently, it is swept under the rug of the generally puzzling nature of so spiritual a development—at such an advanced stage, everything becomes mysterious. Yet, this answer is not Teresa's; it is also not Buddhaghosa's.

Ironically, one set of critics quick to pick up on this theme was the Inquisition, who worried about the 'nothing' at the center of the soul. The stance of the Inquisition here makes it seem even more likely that Teresa's defenders, hoping to save her work, sisters, and writings from the fire, have often felt the need to make her thought conform to standards of orthodoxy. While Christian tradition has many writings that ask questions about the emptiness of the soul in

a variety of keys, this has, perhaps, seemed like an unsafe place for Teresa's work to delve. And so, her fairly frank descriptions of an empty room at the center of the castle go largely either written off or ignored.

Teresa describes the primary effects of encountering this empty room as absence of self and a sense of peace that radically transforms ethical life. While reflections on the interconnection of contemplative and active life are quite common in the Christian tradition, Teresa's examination of this particular dichotomy is more often evoked than explored. As Teresa actually describes the process, it is not simply the case that the active life never goes away; rather, the fullest active life only happens together with the fullest contemplative life. Virtuous actions, which she stipulates are still quite important, can no longer have the feature of shaping a particularly strong, virtuous self. What she means by virtue, then, must be something quite different. In order to understand what Teresa is up to in describing the soul in this way, I will be placing Teresa's work in conversation.

Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*) offers a comprehensive explanation of the path leading to Nibbāna, integrating diverse early Buddhist canonical writings into a single text centered on the metaphor of untangling the tangle of existence. All of Buddhaghosa's surviving texts are commentaries with the exception of the *Path of Purification*, which serves as the practical and comprehensive synthesis of the Buddha's teaching and the cornerstone of Buddhaghosa's commentarial project. It incorporates a diversity of genres within it, including poetry, commentary, metaphorical images, philosophy, meditation instructions, and social commentary.

Following one traditional way of dividing the eight-fold path taught by the Buddha into the higher trainings, Buddhaghosa divides the text into three sections—virtue, concentration, and

understanding (*sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*). The section on ethics comes first and concerns the habits of life that make possible further developments in concentration and understanding. The section on concentration details various meditation practices which change the way a mind engages experience in order, among other things, to maintain steady attention. The section on understanding explores the nature of experience before then explaining the way that all experience is transformed by the right level and kinds of understanding. Metaphorically, the meditator gains perspective on the tangle of existence by gaining distance on it through the practicing of virtue; the meditator develops concentration in order to be able to follow the very fine, subtle threads through their twisting within the tangle; and finally the meditator develops understanding in order to see the nature of each of the strands making up the knot. Fully equipped in these three ways, the practitioner can untangle the tangle, realizing its compound nature and the undoing of the existence in obtaining Nibbāna. Paradoxically, the process of reaching Nibbāna as an individual requires realizing selflessness. The tangle of existence becomes untangled to reveal that existence is *only* a tangle, and freedom from it undoes existence itself, leading to, as Buddhaghosa describes, the bliss, peace, and joy of Nibbāna.

Buddhaghosa's text contains its own puzzle. The section on virtue stands furthest from the section on Nibbāna, a distance seemingly measured not only in words but also in concepts. Ethics seems to serve an almost preliminary role in obtaining Nibbāna, serving to disentangle a person from the ongoing vacillations of things in the world long enough to see the causes of suffering. Moreover, the actual process of moving directly into Nibbāna seems to take ethics as only a minor, preliminary step. The fruits of strengthened concentration, together with the rich changes of having reached profound and subtle understanding, seem like the main keys to reaching Nibbāna. Ethics appears to become a merely conventional phenomenon, not strongly

pertaining to the ultimate, and Nibbāna is the end of the story in Theravāda thought. Beyond its preliminary function in clearing the ground for the transformation leading to Nibbāna, does ethics have anything to do with Nibbāna?

This distance in pages within the text plays into three misconceptions about the role of ethics in Buddhist thought. First, historical scholarship from the West on Buddhism has had trouble locating Buddhist ethics. In part, this difference emerges from the quite different texts that Buddhism has used for teaching ethics; narrative, for example,²⁸ frequently serves in this role (much as the way it may play a similar, less acknowledged role in the West). Recognizing the importance of diverse genres as having an ethical role or influence is crucial in reading the *Path of Purification* because of its complexity as a text and its inclusion of short narratives, stories, and images throughout the argument. Also, Buddhism presumes a quite different psychological makeup of personhood, as Maria Heim carefully points out in her work on Buddhaghosa,²⁹ and engaging Buddhist ethics means revisiting some of the common assumptions that much Western philosophy and religion have made about the nature of human faculties and, particularly, agency. Buddhist ethics will not, Heim suggests, be concerned with an all powerful will and the rightness of its choices. In other words, we should not accept the apparent distance at face value, especially if, as in Buddhaghosa's case, the transformation of the various psycho-physical constituents of human life shares parallel processes in the development of a meritorious life and in the path to Nibbāna.

Second, some Buddhist schools and traditions, including some texts and groups within the Mahāyāna tradition (*The Lotus Sutra*, for example), argue that obtaining Nibbāna as an

²⁸ Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen, "Narrative, Sub-Ethics, and the Moral Life : Some Evidence from Theravāda Buddhism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, no. 2 (September 1, 1996): 305–27. Hallisey and Hansen argue here for a much more expansive and thorough reading of the texts that count as being ethically important.

²⁹ Maria Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention, and Agency*, 2013, 220.

arahant, the name Buddhaghosa uses for the highest level of realization, is fundamentally selfish and neglects compassion for the rest of sentient beings who remain stuck within the experience of suffering. Buddhaghosa's text could be seen to give some support to this criticism. His treatment of compassion within the section on divine abidings, a topic to which we will later return at length, could be seen as merely a meditation practice for the developing of concentration that is nonetheless also self-limiting as a subject because, as Buddhaghosa notes, it does not grant access to the higher developments of meditation.³⁰

However, accepting at face value these criticisms leveled at by one branch of Buddhist teaching at another is akin, to take a Christian example, to accepting the criticisms made by Protestantism of Roman Catholicism *tout court*. While some critiques may have merit, others are likely to be rhetorical exaggerations. Buddhaghosa offers a surprising, if terse, defense of the connections between one who has reached Nibbāna and ethics, centered on the arahant 'with remainder,' someone who has obtained Nibbāna and yet remains in existence. This final section, on the fruits of a perfect understanding, includes fruits of *ethical* significance to the monastic community and the wider world.³¹ In addition to expanding our notions of literary genre and human agency, we need to attend to the language of the text itself to see how it addresses ethics in its own terms.

Third, a standard and important division in Buddhist ethical life is that between the lay Buddhist, who hopes to accrue merit for a more propitious rebirth from which to seek Nibbāna, and the ordained monk or nun, who more directly aims for Nibbāna in the present life. Buddhaghosa acknowledges this division, noting that his primary audience is likely monks. The complex developments in concentration and understanding seem to require highly skilled and

³⁰ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. IX, 119–121.

³¹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. 23, 54.

technical teachers, who may well be available only to monks. This division seems to leave ethics tacitly as the domain of the lay practitioner.

In a more thorough reading, however, we see the way that ethical actions in both those striving for a better rebirth and those striving for Nibbāna depend upon each other. Steven Collins argues that Nibbāna serves as a “felicity” for the Pāli imaginaire,³² a salvation and ending to the story of the endless round of rebirths that gives the story its shape and meaning. Pragmatically, this means that both lay and ordained Buddhists are on the same path over the (quite) long haul. For Buddhaghosa, arahants serve as the physical presence of the felicity that delimits everyone’s path. They serve as one of the most important avenues for seeing and understanding the Buddha’s teaching, which provides the clearest picture of the only way out of suffering. Moreover, the arahant not only exemplifies Nibbāna by showing its lived possibility but also serves as the catalyst, or perhaps midwife, of Nibbāna by accruing experience in following the Buddha’s teachings. Refraining from entangling actions is revealed, ultimately, to be a catalyst not only for an individual obtaining Nibbāna but also as potential hope for each successive sentient being. In other words, regardless of whether someone is a monk or nun, Nibbāna serves as the hope toward which existence bends.

As chapter 3 will explore through Buddhaghosa’s reflections, Nibbāna is not an existing thing (and so is freighted with problems as a word and concept), and yet it nonetheless has the power to bend, limit, and shape those who come within its field of influence. If the nature of ethics seems like a puzzle in Buddhaghosa’s text, this is because it is seen not directly in its nature but in its effects, rather like we infer gravity’s pull from its effect on both objects around stars and our tendency to stay connected to the ground. If the puzzle at the heart of Teresa’s text

³² Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 93.

is ‘of what is the center of the castle empty,’ then the puzzle of Buddhaghosa’s text is: how does the extinguishing of Nibbāna reshape the personhood and thereby ethics of those who come near it?

What Can Be Gained from a Resized Self?

I am writing this investigation of no-self practice as it relates to ethics with two primary audiences in mind. First, I have in mind those who are interested in why or whether contemplative practice leads to ethical transformation, and second, I have in mind those who are interested in what the teachings of no-self have to do with Christian theology. No-self practice, as a distinctive approach to transforming action and desire, promises to reconfigure the way we understand our being in the world gradually but, by its end, in a radical way. To take an example from Buddhaghosa’s work in the section on the divine abidings, we might truly feel compassion for our enemies, not in an abstract or theoretical way but in a visceral way; or, from Teresa, we might see ourselves as a dependent part of a whole interconnected network of existence rather than as masters of our own minds and fate. This shift leads to a transformed perception of systemic ethical problems.

If this type of transformation sounds like a tall order, it also seems to have growing importance and currency in our era. Social movements from Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter to #MeToo attempt to call attention to, and then call for reflection on, the deep-seated desires that create and buttress the systems of our lives that define what we see as good. The aim of these groups is not so much to pursue a single good or duty but rather to “intentionally build and nurture a beloved community that is bonded together through a beautiful struggle that is restorative, not depleting” and “embody and practice justice, liberation, and peace in our

engagements with one another.”³³ The language makes ethical claims at the level of revised personhood. The rise of the word ‘woke’ into conversation as a way to highlight people who have increased sensitivity to the shaping forces of systemic oppression highlights the sense that we need is richer perception for these more systemic problems. Strikingly, although perhaps unsurprisingly, misogynistic groups frequently use a similar metaphor—taking the red pill³⁴—as way to describe their own process of awakening to a revised personhood in culture.

Perceiving and transforming our cultural and political systems is returning as a self-conscious concern. Journalists have begun to focus on stories of these more profound attempts to work ethical transformation. The NPR podcast series *Invisibilia*’s 2017 season focuses on transformations of deeper levels of selfhood, exploring attempts to change our implicit bias around race through a twelve step model, our assumptions about violence in nature through practices of engagement, and the constitutive pre-reflective concepts that define our emotional life through cultural work and even hypnosis.³⁵

Each of these strategies avoids dealing directly with religion, but, as the Dalai Lama argues, religious practices offer even the most secularly inclined movement concrete wisdom about engaging these deep dimensions of personhood. Buddhaghosa and Teresa offer phenomenological analyses of the transformation of desire through no-self practice, and their experience and analysis is of use to anyone interested in gaining perspective into systemic ethical problems. Moreover, by examining their work comparatively and across traditions, we gain a sense of selflessness as a human phenomenon.

³³ “What We Believe,” *Black Lives Matter* (blog), accessed November 14, 2017, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/what-we-believe/>.

³⁴ Stephen Marche, “Swallowing the Red Pill: A Journey to the Heart of Modern Misogyny,” *The Guardian*, April 14, 2016, sec. Technology, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/14/the-red-pill-reddit-modern-misogyny-manosphere-men>.

³⁵ Hanna Rosen and Alix Spiegel, *Invisibilia*, accessed August 4, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510307/invisibilia>.

Also, I should note that for many people, science might seem like the more natural method for thinking about the efficacy of the transformation of desire. Without stepping too far afield, science does have valuable contributions to make toward these questions, and many neuroscientists are increasingly attempting to include insights from phenomenology. For example, Evan Thompson places phenomenology in conversation with the methods and assumptions of neuroscience in order to address more effectively the research questions of neuroscience and computational neuroscience.³⁶ Interpreting fMRI data is many steps removed from what contemplative practice is like for those engaged in it. Knowing the relationship between electrical patterns in the brain and meditation is a quite complex problem without the moral dimension of the question. The comparison is akin to the relationship between knowing how to repair an alternator and driving a car in the snow—one is vital knowledge for repairing a car, while the other is crucial for navigating a blizzard. Both kinds of knowledge are valuable within their context and inform each other, but knowing how to repair an alternator is no help in the snow.

Moreover, quite basic mental phenomena like emotions may be created as much by culture and education as by biology. Lisa Feldman Barrett argues this perspective in her research on emotions.³⁷ She argues that the way we experience the world is colored at a deep level by our past mental constructions, which create the emotions that we experience. Here, too, Buddhaghosa and Teresa add something vital to the conversation. Barrett aggregates some practices that various degrees of research suggest might be helpful in reshaping future emotional

³⁶ Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi, eds., *Self, No Self?: Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011); Evan Thompson and Stephen Batchelor, *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (Columbia University Press, 2014).

³⁷ Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

life, but Buddhaghosa and Teresa work in a far more fine-grained way at the patterns of self-perception that shape our experience.

In addition to the connection between no-self practice and ethical transformation, I have in mind a second audience whose interests overlap in sometimes surprising ways with this first audience. This second audience is theologically inclined, interested in what no-self has to do with the teachings of Christianity.

Theological anthropology is the locus most thoroughly developed here. I will be arguing that Teresa holds a no-self perspective, which reveals a little recognized strand of no-self theology within Christian tradition. The picture of the self in relation to God that it offers is partially familiar in that it describes a creation that radically depends on God without thereby making God one more element of creation, but it is distinctive in emphasizing not a metaphysical framework but one of phenomenology and contemplative practice. Some better known theological anthropologies reject reified human attributes in favor of an apophatic quality—what unites human beings is a need or vulnerability rather than a faculty. No-self theology expands more explicitly on what is vulnerable, what we lack, and what these apophatic qualities mean for ethics.

No-self theology has a first person perspective in a methodological sense. Most theology attempts to describe the relationship between God and human beings from a third person perspective, as if an observer could look and see the distinction from outside. To take only one example, Paul Tillich describes the relationship between beings and the “ground of being”³⁸ as a way to mark that God is not a being alongside or above other beings. This way of thinking about God serves for Tillich as something of a regulatory principle, a way of avoiding mistakes that theology sometimes makes. The principle itself attempts to rule out comparisons between God

³⁸ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1* (University Of Chicago Press, 1973), 235.

and human beings as a general rule, but the rule itself seems to offer the assurance of a third person spectator, one who can assure that beings and the ground of beings are radically different. Tillich insightfully draws out a number of experiential results from this perspective. He argues that God is thus phenomenologically experienced as “ultimate concern,”³⁹ the infinite answer to the question posed by finitude. All concerns, or even desires, find their fullest answer not in being but in the ground of all being. The existential import of Tillich’s description of God as the ground of being is what links particular human concerns with God.

While Tillich’s structuring of these theological questions is fascinating, my point in briefly drawing out two highlights from his complex systematic theology is simply to show that metaphysics serves a regulatory and guiding function for him. Like all good theology, it is much more complex than a map or archetype—it is not the picture of divinity but rather a way of avoiding pitfalls on the way to speech or action about God. Its general form as a principle, however, gives it the character of a third person analysis. Metaphysics serves as a guide.

Teresa (as well as Buddhaghosa) takes an entirely different approach to metaphysics. Both believe that metaphysical claims are, in themselves, both necessary and problematic because their use depends entirely on how they are received and deployed in particular contexts. Both assume that intense transformation requires *flexibility* toward metaphysical claims. Both worry that using metaphysics as a guide or principle ignores the way that the principle is used or received by particular people who are constituted by their own particular development, culture, and capacities. Theology, expressed in this way, takes a very different form. Although this approach is not unique to Teresa, its effects on theological anthropology are distinctive.

The strength of the first-person approach comes by linking analysis with existential concern. By keeping the doctrine in the first-person through an amalgamation of practices and

³⁹ Tillich, 211.

analyses, selflessness becomes not an idea or ideal so much as way to expand our attention to the world, including different ways of inhabiting ideas, commitments, and relationships.

In a concrete way, this first-person approach offers a fresh direction out of the general, and much discussed, impasse between Christian religion and spirituality. Cynthia Bourgeault, the scholar and teacher of Christian contemplative practice quoted earlier, reflects on this impasse by pointing out the rise of dynamic spiritual movements outside the institutional church. These groups—she refers to “psychotherapy, men’s work, AA, yoga, mindfulness for stress reduction, enneagram work, dream work, soul work, or a host of other modalities”⁴⁰—despite their different practices and beliefs, share in a common a turn toward inwardness in their basic purpose. Bourgeault compares these groups to the church, noting that the institutional church’s “biggest failure” has been its failure to connect “external observances to conscious interiority.”⁴¹ Spoken more plainly, the church has been better at hosting spiritual groups than being spiritual. To make the same point in the register of metaphysics, the church has been more interested in developing the right metaphysical, regulatory principles rather than emphasizing the inward shift supposedly attached to the principles.

My experience echoes Bourgeault’s comment, which may not be surprising given that I, too, am an Episcopal priest. Even with our difference in ages, I have grown up in the institutional church that she is criticizing here. My childhood and young adult years were spent in a church frantic and anxious over having the right kinds of actions and the right kinds of ideas. The impetus for these desires was good—the church wanted to be connected to a changing neighborhood. In many ways, as Bourgeault discusses elsewhere, this work has been very good for the church. Women are now ordained priests and bishops. I grew up believing that a woman

⁴⁰ Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, 173.

⁴¹ Bourgeault, 173.

being ordained was no big deal (something I had to unlearn somewhat as an adult—it turns out that, for some, it is a big deal). Same sex unions and LGBTQ+ people are increasingly welcome, and their gifts, from which the church has always benefited, are now more often being openly honored and blessed. The Episcopal Church has tried desperately to link religious practice to ‘mission,’ which has tended to mean causes that reflect social justice, outreach to people on the margins of society, and theoretically mutual relationships with church communities in other, poorer countries.

My point, together with Bougeault’s, is simply that this way of focusing on ideas and actions, rather than the relationships we develop and the kind of people that we become, has helped create the current climate where institutional religion seems to have no obvious link to inwardness, spirituality, or conscious interiority. A full diagnosis of this split is outside the purpose of this project, and would require a different kind of analysis. However, given the intertwining of practice with shifts in perception inherent the development of selflessness, this project does seek to address one way to begin a repair of that split. Precisely how this shift in attention to metaphysics works will become clearer in engaging Teresa’s and Buddhaghosa’s texts, but in short, selflessness is a way of thinking theological anthropology as the locus that connects action and transformation, and it would address our concerns about their distance.

Connecting and Disconnecting Languages

Placing Teresa in conversation with Buddhaghosa highlights these complex relationships between the extinguishing of the self into language-resistant ultimate reality, its connection to ethical life, and the importance of seeing individuals who have been extinguished in this way. For example, Teresa somewhat confusingly insists that the intellect inhibits the journey to the center room at several stages and must be set aside, and yet in the end, the intellect reappears as a

vital and useful tool, transformed in some way that she does not explain and with a different kind of knowledge. Buddhaghosa's description of the role of a changed understanding in regard to 'mental constructions' offers a helpful conversation partner for unpacking the role of the intellect in Teresa's inner room. His robust examination of the role of mental constructions provides a helpful way of unpacking role of the intellect in these final rooms, including the intellectual visions that Teresa describes. I will return to this comparison in chapter 4.

Thinking the comparison from the other direction, we see that Buddhaghosa's explication, too, benefits from an encounter with Teresa's thought. Teresa, aware of her need to remain in the good graces of ecclesial authorities for her own political work in creating monastic communities, emphasizes the role of ethics even at the highest level of transformation. Her descriptions invite a more drawn out examination of Buddhaghosa's succinct treatment of the topic, highlighting the importance of complex personhood, the need to foster and develop particular kinds of community, and of arahants to function for the community and world as a kind of embodied Nibbāna. Her more phenomenological account of divine marriage in relationship to ethics provides a helpful entryway into Buddhaghosa's fruits of a fully developed understanding as having ethics integrated within it. I will return to this point in chapter 6.

Teresa and Buddhaghosa are very different thinkers, from very different cultures, with very different languages, speaking from quite different traditions. It would, on one level of analysis, be hard to overstate the differences. Even when terminology seems to overlap in English, the conceptual distance remains important. Yet, even with that conceptual difference, strong parallels in their thought prove mutually illuminating precisely by remaining parallel and distinct.

A concrete example may help make clearer both the conceptual difference and also the grounds for reading such different thinkers together. Virtue, translated from *virtud* in Spanish and *sīla* in Pāli, offers a frequent and illuminating example. Not only do the words arrive freighted with their own context (including, we should note, ‘virtue’ in English, dripping with its Latin overtones of manliness, prim Victorian sensibilities about women and sex, and drier philosophical uses about the habits of people), but Teresa and Buddhaghosa also each develop the meaning of these terms for their own use. *Virtud*⁴² shares the Latin roots of the term in English, but as a word it comes closer to a capacity or faculty in Spanish than its connotations in English. Teresa takes up this term and describes the cultivation of virtue as something that never falls away in the process of spiritual transformation; at every stage, people benefit from the strength of habits that support good actions. Yet, the subject who is doing virtuous things or ‘having virtue’ changes dramatically in the course of her text. Virtue is most necessary in the beginning as individuals cultivate habits and habits of mind that lead to deeper engagement with God. At one stage of development (discussed in the third series of rooms in *Interior Castle*), being virtuous becomes something of a hindrance, not because virtue is bad but because the understanding of the self it cultivates is deeply misleading. *Virtud*, in Teresa’s usage, becomes a term for describing the continuity of good action throughout transformation but not of a continuous self-understanding or permanent faculty. Being virtuous is valuable for the saintliest individual, but someone advanced in prayer will no longer think of the self as the seat for managing mastery over the experienced world. In other words, despite the resonance of the term in Spanish, her actual use of the term deemphasizes its connection to a permanent capacity or faculty.

⁴² Real Academia Española and Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, *Diccionario de la lengua española*, Vigésimotercera edición, Edición del Tricentenario.. (Madrid] : Barcelona: Real Academia Española ; Espasa Libros, 2014), n. virtud.

For Buddhaghosa, *sīla* stands as one of the crucial works necessary for moving forward on the road to Nibbāna. In Pāli literature more broadly, while *sīla* can refer to a character, habit, or nature, more often the term is used to refer to the good habits cultivated by avoiding bad things.⁴³ Buddhaghosa follows this understanding closely in describing *sīla* in negative terms as refraining from bad actions, speech, and thoughts, the three main types of action or kamma. However, Buddhaghosa also systematizes *sīla* to make sense of its role within the process of development that he describes in the *Path of Purification*. Where *sīla* elsewhere can refer to the kinds of deeds which accrue good merit, which Buddhaghosa acknowledges, he nonetheless prefers to use the term as a more direct reference to the withholding that grants a person distance from the cravings and aversions of ongoing existence. To develop *sīla* is to develop a critical, existential distance from the most involving parts of experience in order to change the nature of experience *as* experienced. *Sīla*, in most of Buddhaghosa's usage, refers not to fixed habits of good practice but rather to the freedom gained with regard to the nature of experience by refraining from certain kinds of bad actions, speech, and thoughts. To be virtuous is to be less entangled in mind-reshaping attachments. It is necessary at every level of the path toward Nibbāna, but its negative rhetorical deployment flags its continuity with the transformation envisioned in reaching Nibbāna.

Quite obviously, *virtud* and *sīla* are different technical terms, emerging from different understandings of the good and human life, and calling both 'virtue' in English confuses the issue somewhat. However, the similar ways that Teresa and Buddhaghosa bend the terms to their needs is quite striking. Both are patterns of action that serve an early role in the process of transformation, preparing individuals for later work. Both *virtud* and *sīla* are necessary at every

⁴³ Pali Text Society, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English dictionary* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1999), 713–14, <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/pali/index.html>.

stage of development, and yet only at the end of development does the full understanding of ‘virtue’ emerge—virtue turns out in both cases not to be features of a permanent marker of identity in the self but rather a method for gaining critical distance from the most captivating kinds of experiences and seemingly obvious understandings of selfhood. Both of these senses of ‘virtue’ depend, ultimately, not on a cultural practice or biological imperative but on a process of transformation that leads to a perception of something quite different from ordinary reality—the Signless, the Uncreated. In other words, Teresa and Buddhaghosa define virtue as the patterns of actions useful to and ultimately informed by the process of transformation. In turn, this strong parallel in meaning further highlights the differences in the two thinkers. Buddhaghosa carefully systematizes *sīla* from the outset, striving to keep a definition of the term that remains accurate throughout his text; Teresa, by contrast, changes her definition of *virtud* in the course of her text as she praises and problematizes it. The parallel suggests the ways in which the two disparate thinkers make interesting partners in conversation.

One challenge, however, of placing these two thinkers into conversation is that much explication must come first. The two figures fall into such different traditions that a reader of one is quite unlikely to be a scholar of the other. For example, Teresa’s understanding of the soul as a historically-contingent construction bears a fascinating resemblance to the aggregates (the ‘heaps’ or collections of factors that constitute existence), and her discussion of the will has more than a passing resemblance to Buddhaghosa’s explanation of *cetanā*, the gathering volition of mental constructions. Entering this conversation requires some knowledge of both traditions, which takes some unpacking. Such patience does pay off in the opportunity to examine two quite complex depictions of the relationship of what is good to extinguishing the self.

Methodology: Comparative Theology

“It’s one of those things a person has to do; sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly.”⁴⁴

In Edward Albee’s play *The Zoo Story*, Jerry makes this point to Peter about the proper way to enter the zoo in Central Park in New York—exiting at the right subway stop to walk along Fifth Avenue until arriving—but he is also making the point about telling his own life story in connection with Peter’s. Jerry needs to tell his story in a certain way in order for it to be true, and even more importantly, for that story to be *made* true for Peter. Jerry must take a long, roundabout way to express the tragedy of how he has come to see his life in the changing culture.

This line offers wisdom for engaging comparative theology, the disciplined examination of another religious tradition in order to gain insight about Christian theology. Coming back a short distance correctly often requires taking the long way around, seeing things along the way that allow the destination to become its truth. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus balks at taking the short way to self-explanation as person after person misunderstands what Jesus means by messiahship. The terse structure of Mark assumes that the reader, too, misunderstands, and it demands re-reading in order to begin to understand the claim of its opening line, that the story is one of good news about the son of God. In Mark, only by taking the long way, through trial, crucifixion, and resurrection, can messiahship as Jesus understands it be made true for the reader.

The long distance journey of this project is part of the growing number of comparative theologies that see value in taking the long way in order to cultivate a deeper understanding of theology. By taking the long way to come back a short distance, the hope of comparative theology is to take both subtle and profound differences as invitations to deeper analysis rather than apologetic attacks.

⁴⁴ Edward Albee, *The Zoo Story* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1981).

The method for this project is comparative in that it engages two distinctive thinkers on their own terms. By taking conversation as a model, I believe we more easily avoid the pitfalls at either extreme of understanding, mistakenly assuming that they are so distinct within their respective traditions that they are unable to write about the same thing, or that they are describing exactly the same phenomena. The theologian Michael Barnes characterizes moving between these mistakes as one of the gifts of comparative theology. He writes, “[T]he very attempt to grapple with difference in a spirit of generous respect can be mutually supportive and illuminating.”⁴⁵ For this project, I will be adopting the image of a conversation as a helpful heuristic for thinking about this methodological approach. The image of a conversation is helpful methodologically because in a conversation, we are accustomed to the idea that we are speakers as well as listeners, that we share a common space with our interlocutor, and that we frequently inhabit more than once space or idea at time.

The theologian Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier offers a brief, beautiful picture of how inhabiting more than one space assists in thinking about comparative theology. Her understanding evolves from her family; she describes the effects of her “mixed” upbringing as the daughter of a converted Roman Catholic from a family many of whom remained Buddhist. She writes,

I grew up in multiple religious and ethnic worlds. My grandmother taught me about her (Buddhist/Shinto) family altar, and showed me how to feed and our ancestors and care for them. In return, our ancestors would care for us. The death of a favorite relative saddened me, but I was consoled by his presence truly felt in the stars and wind. This did not seem at all in contradiction with my Catholic experience. The Catholic world of Mary and the saints seemed just like my ancestors, offering comfort, protection, and friendship. I set up my own altar and offered toys and treats.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Michael Barnes, *Interreligious Learning : Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), xiv.

⁴⁶ Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, “Women’s Virtue, Church Leadership, and the Problem of Gender Complementarity,” in *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection*, ed. Michelle Voss Roberts, 1 edition (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016), 171.

Tiemeier describes this experience as “nourishing . . . , full of bridges and connections between worlds.”⁴⁷ Consciously being in more than one religious space enriched Tiemeier, even as she found herself drawn to becoming a strongly committed Roman Catholic.

Her choice of words, ‘full of bridges,’ is an awkward felicity—any space full of bridges sounds as though it should logically become the floor—and yet the existential quality of the comment is revealing. The ability to inhabit multiple religious spaces can be a strength. It offers connections rather than a simple floor.

In this way, comparative theology is more than a journey from one place to another, only to return home changed. This metaphor for either a pilgrimage (when comparative work is well deployed) or tourist excursion (when less well carried through) has value, as Michelle Voss Roberts notes,⁴⁸ but together with Tiemeier, we need also to acknowledge the multiple theological spaces that we already inhabit, the land full of bridges that link the various cultures, traditions, and worlds that inhabit. Engaging in disciplined comparative theology results in an ethical, attentive look at a different tradition, but it frequently begins in the complex muddle of practices and ideas where we already live.

First, then, comparative theology as a conversation is thus first and foremost an ethics, a way of sitting down with another tradition without dominating, totalizing, or failing to participate in the conversation. The ethics of comparative theology is a matter of hospitality, but it is also a pragmatic dimension of the exercise. If we enter a conversation sure of everything that needs to be said and fail to listen, we will have lectured rather than conversed. If we simply yell, we will have learned nothing.

⁴⁷ Tiemeier, 172.

⁴⁸ Michelle Voss Roberts, “Introduction: A Place for Comparative Theology in Christian Systematic Reflection,” in *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection*, ed. Michelle Voss Roberts, 1 edition (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016), 17.

In addition to being an ethic, comparative theology is thus also a way of attending to our own, taken-for-granted mental furniture. Like Tiemeier, we may be consciously nourished by a mixed life and upbringing, but we may also be less obvious mutts. An odd side effect of the phenomenon that Bourgeault discusses—that the institutional church has been better at hosting spiritual groups than doing spirituality—means that the church has frequently hosted quite different, even contradictory ways of thinking about and exploring interiority. I grew up an Episcopalian in a fundamentalist part of Texas, where the Episcopal Church serves as a refuge for those scared or scarred by the procrustean ministrations of angry Christians. I learned the five types of prayer catalogued in the *Book of Common Prayer*, but I also learned from the church to think about mental life not only as the redemption of a sinner but also as a process of detachment on the way to the full love of God. While detachment has a role in Christian thought (in Teresa, for example, as we will see), I was told at the time that we were learning and borrowing a Buddhist idea, and I was taught that attachment is what perpetuated our suffering, which casts suffering in a rather different light than its glorification in the surrounding fundamentalist community. The idea of detachment proved formatively helpful for me, then and now, but the idea as it exists in my practice is a bit of a mongrel, a half-digested Buddhist teaching filtered through various lenses. In my decade of experience visiting with people about their lives as an Episcopal priest, I have found that this genealogical mingling in our mental furniture is not unusual. I saw it as I grew up in the southwest, visiting Native American Episcopal communities where traditional religious ideas and practices are conscientiously integrated with overtly Anglican ones, and I have seen it in church members who have come to visit me to discuss why their gym yoga class has opened up their experience of prayer. I have met a surprising number of

church members who feel they need to sneak when they go to *vipassana* workshops, and who then describe it as the best thing to happen to their prayer life.

Comparative theology, then, is a practice, one which works ethically to recognize difference but also avoids the mistake of treating that difference as *utterly* other. It is also far more common than we normally allow in the Christian tradition as a whole, both in its theology and in the lives of Christian people.

Second, conversation as a model recognizes the mutuality of its participants. Teresa and Buddhaghosa both have voices here, as do I. In a conversation, interlocutors take turns as speaker and as audience. While all parties may gain something from the engagement, what is gained may be different in each case. Moreover, a good conversation is one in which an interlocutor has time to speak, even to go a long distance in order to speak a smaller truth. As such, the metaphor of conversation suggests the way in which each participant's perspective is given weight, one which in the case of texts can be felt by engagement in the original languages, through the close reading of the whole text, and through the resonant effects each text creates in its secondary body of literature.

Third, the metaphor of conversation also points to part of my role as the stager of the conversation. While conversation might seem a strange metaphor for texts rather than people, in practice it offers a helpful hermeneutic for engaging these writers. In working with these texts, my role is not that of ventriloquist, placing words in their mouths, but more akin to an actor in the theater, interpreting the concrete words of the script into something more present. It also suggests the way in which the theological engagement here is necessarily incomplete, much as a conversation has only a provisional rather than final end, which as Francis Clooney points out, is

a vital characteristic of healthy comparative theology.⁴⁹ The readings here of each of these characters are not the final word.

Fourth, conversation as a metaphor suggests the quite normal but complex way in which we manage to talk about things without completely understanding one another. In a conversation, people speak about something, but that ‘something’ that they speak about may be the same thing (my wife and I speak about our wedding) and yet at the same time about different things (her memories of the wedding and mine). In this case, both Buddhaghosa and Teresa are speaking about no-self practice and the ethics that emerges from it. They are speaking about the same thing, and at the same time, they are most definitely *not* speaking about the same thing. What is normal in conversation becomes complex in scholarship. Much of the analysis of this project tracks down the overlapping but different notion of both selflessness and ethics in these texts in order to examine its usefulness in theology and ethics.

However, because the notions of selflessness stand at odds to our habitual way of perceiving the world, reading these voices in engagement with each other is helpful in discovering the complexities of selflessness. For example, noting that Teresa and Buddhaghosa disagree about the nature of divinity is a simple point. More complex is the analysis that comes from a careful interpretation of Buddhaghosa’s rejection of divinity that sees it emerging in connection with his worry about the fundamental nature of suffering as characterized by oppression; then seeing whether Teresa’s understanding of divinity is subject to a similar critique; and discovering that no-self practice in both cases remains entangled with something that ‘exists’ altogether beyond being. Conversation, as an image, provides a rough and ready way

⁴⁹ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, 1 edition (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 66.

of holding together the sense in which Buddhaghosa and Teresa are, and are not, speaking about the same things.

Finally, I am mindful of a remark by a professor who once flatly told me, as he handed me an essay on comparative work in religious studies, that as difficult as it is to name the rules that govern a successful comparison, we all know insightful comparative work when we read it. My sense is that we know good comparative work because it manages to introduce us to something new and to ourselves in a new way, showing us something surprising or making something dimly seen approachable. That is what I attempt here.

A Short Introduction to Teresa and Buddhaghosa

Because very few readers will be familiar with both of these thinkers, I am including a very short introduction to them here. Although finding descriptions of them and their respective works is not difficult in our internet age, the aim here is to provide a working awareness of each of their contexts, lives, and thought that may make interpreting their work on no-self practice more approachable.

In the case of Teresa, brevity is the chief issue with introducing her or her work. Born in 1515 in Spain, she lived most of her life in monastic contexts, leaving her family (with whom she maintained close ties throughout her life) to become first a nun and later the founder of Carmelite communities that would eventually separate and become the Discalced Carmelite Order, an order for men and women who live in small, single gender communities and are dedicated to a life of prayer. Many of her later writings reflect her leadership and founding of these communities, which she came to see as a central purpose of her life. During her lifetime, she became a notable political and religious leader, much to the chagrin of the Inquisition and to the great praise of her friends, including the other most famous Spanish mystic of the century,

John of the Cross. By the time she died in 1582, many people were anxious to claim her legacy—the Inquisition as a threat, the monastic orders as a great leader, and many of her friends and compatriots as a saint due to her wisdom and the miracles she describes experiencing throughout her life. As a reader of her work, I often think of the way in which her body, ultimately cut into relics and sent all over Europe, mirrors the fate of her writings. In some sense, everyone wanted a piece of this theological and political leader.

Teresa has been the subject of numerous biographies, works of art (perhaps most famously Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*), hagiographies, defenses, and spiritual manuals. While many earlier interpretations of her work tend to shoehorn her work into controlled categories, contemporary scholarship has much improved by focusing on the performative dimensions of her writing, which is notable for being conversational, sometimes grammatically dubious, and frequently rambling. Her contemporary English translator, Kieran Kavanaugh, provides a description of her writing that reflects both earlier and contemporary readings of Teresa. He describes her style in this way:

Her style is thoroughly spontaneous, without the slightest trace of artificiality or sophistication. Writing the way she talked, she reflects the popular language of the Castilian people of her time: natural, direct, colorful, and incisive. As though her thoughts were jostling with each other for position, her sentences often become highly involved with parentheses and digressions, causing her sometimes to lose the thread—which never prevents her from leaping forward quickly and easily to a new thought.⁵⁰

His description of the thoughts on her mind is markedly on point. She describes her own experience of mental life this way within her texts, and her style reflects the energy of her mind.

Note, however, the way Kavanaugh (unintentionally, perhaps) suggests that while her content is sophisticated, her rhetoric is not. What more recent works on Teresa have helped

⁵⁰ Teresa of Avila, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Vol. 1*, trans. Otilio Rodriguez and Kieran Kavanaugh, 2nd edition (Washington: Ics Pubns, 1976), 48.

show, particularly Gillian Ahlgren's⁵¹ and Alison Weber's⁵² scholarly works, is that her unaffected style serves specific purposes. Rhetorically, her style works to effect something in the reader rather than affect a change of mind. As Peter Tyler describes it, "[T]he people who have really *understood* her works, or her mission, are those who have seen her task as that of someone who wants to show us *how to live* rather than *how we should think about life*."⁵³ By focusing on the work her texts accomplish—as a woman, as a political leader in a hostile environment, as someone committed to transformation—her works serve more as manuals or tools rather than descriptions.

We need to keep in mind, too, that her longer texts are meant chiefly for her sisters, members of the monastic groups that she founds in Spain. *Interior Castle* is one of these. They are designed to take the place of the prayer manuals being confiscated by the Inquisition but written in such a way, through her political savvy, so as to avoid destruction. Teresa's later works show artful dodges and carefully restated ideas in order to both be of use to her sisters and avoid censure.

Although many thematic moments in her life and writing could be seen as relevant for her writing about no-self practice, for the sake of this project which focuses more narrowly within her writing, two topics seem especially important. First, Teresa writes primarily in images rather than deductive or inductive arguments. She laments at various places in her writing the fact that, as a woman, she received too little formal education to analyze and develop the theological ideas that support what she experienced and describes. However, as her rhetoric indicates, her lack of education does not hinder her insights, and her preferred form of argument

⁵¹ Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁵² Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁵³ Peter Tyler, *Teresa of Avila: Doctor of the Soul* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 11.

takes place in the complexity of images—a butterfly, a castle, a fountain, and so on. I will return to the way that these images play a variety of strategic roles in her text, but it may be helpful to recognize at the outset that this witty, sometimes humorous writer is deploying images in a manner more sophisticated than the folksy imagery indicates.

Second, a few words about prayer may help introduce Teresa. While Teresa's theological writing has implications for a number of traditional systematic categories, from Christology to sacramental theology, prayer is her most central theme and concern. Rather than seeing prayer as a practice that falls out of a fixed belief structure, Teresa sees prayer as the way into Christian life—in the case of the *Interior Castle*, prayer is the literal entrance to the castle.

If we think of prayer as a wish list for a genie or as formal apologies to an overlord, we will miss what Teresa is after in the term. Her understanding of prayer matters in this context because prayer *is* the path to selflessness; prayer is the way and process of transformation as well as a series of practices. Her writings and thoughts about prayer develop over time, in significant part because she herself discovers at one point in her life a new way to pray. This new way to pray has a more contemplative form, influenced by the writings of Francisco de Osuna and Bernardino de Laredo, and emphasizes not sequential, analytic thought but rather a conscious attention and receptivity. Teresa finds great relief and transformation in this new way to pray, and many of her writings come about because, as the Inquisition begins to hunt down and destroy the source texts that proved so helpful to her, she hopes to convey her own wisdom on this method of prayer to her sisters.

In the *Way of Perfection*, she carefully addresses the distinction between vocal and mental prayer, and seeing this distinction is helpful for understanding the term 'prayer' in the context of this project. Vocal prayer represents both the institutionally approved form of prayer

(speech means thoughts that can be evaluated, checked, and approved by the church), but also, for Teresa, vocal prayer corresponded to that form of analytic, sequential prayer that had proved so unhelpful for her. In reply, she defends mental prayer as the only part of vocal prayer that is truly *prayer*. Speech should lead us into a receptive, transforming state of mind, she notes, but surely speech without attention is worst kind of hypocrisy. In order to make her point, she devotes the last portion of the book to an impassioned (and quite interesting) exegesis of the Lord's Prayer that draws out its powerful implications for transformation and attention. Prayer, then, is about an open, attentive state of awareness toward God that leads to transformation.

A brief introduction to Buddhaghosa offers an entirely different set of issues. As Ñāṇamoli, his most current English translator notes, "The works of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa fill more than thirty volumes in the Pāli Text Society's Latin-script edition; but what is known of the writer himself is meager enough for a page or two to contain the bare facts."⁵⁴ We should first note the prolific amount of writing attributed to Buddhaghosa. Some critics argue that parts of those attributed texts may well have originated in his students, or even be falsely attributed to him, but as a figure, we should note the long shadow cast by his scholarship. Nearly all of those writings take the form of translation by Buddhaghosa of Sinhalese commentaries on the Pāli canonical texts into Pāli. (Note that Pāli is the language of the earliest surviving Buddhist canonical texts.)

What we know is that, in the early 400s CE, Buddhaghosa left India to go to Sri Lanka in order to translate and write commentaries on the Pāli canon. Very little else is known reliably. Instructively (and perhaps amusingly), the tradition offers two different reasons for this journey.

⁵⁴ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, xxvii.

The first, found in the 5th century's *Mahāvamsa*,⁵⁵ is that he journeyed to Sri Lanka as a well-recognized and learned scholar after having earned the name 'Buddhaghosa,' meaning the voice of the Buddha, because, the tradition states, his voice was deep like the Buddha's, which is presumably a pun on its tone as well his profundity.⁵⁶ Having arrived in Sri Lanka, the monks there wanted to test his knowledge. In response, in a single sitting, Buddhaghosa summarized all of the Tripiṭakas (the three baskets, or divisions, that make up the entire Pāli canon) by writing and reciting the *Path of Purification*, the text under consideration in this project, which is over 700 pages in English translation. Over time, the tradition continues, he was seen to have an authority as great as that of the texts that he translated, and he returned to India only when it was time for him die. The other version of his life, written in *Buddhaghosuppatti*, a 'novel' from 15th century Myanmar,⁵⁷ relates that Buddhaghosa is sent to Sri Lanka by his teacher to make amends for Buddhaghosa's prideful behavior (the prideful streak, I should note, is also evident albeit less pronounced in the earlier biography). The translation work in Sri Lanka serves as punishment and atonement, and Buddhaghosa returns to India once it is completed in order to reconnect with his teacher and family. The text goes on to assure the reader of Buddhaghosa's excellent rebirth in heaven and connection to the future Buddha of the next age.

Although the two stories differ in countless particulars and no doubt reflect the concerns of context in which they were written, they do provide the rather humorous and useful insight that such a long scholarly work could be seen at once as a mark of genius and as a punishment. I relate this ambiguous parallel because it strikes me as a helpful way to gain a purchase on this complex thinker. On the one hand, Ñāṇamoli rightly points out that Buddhaghosa's writing "is

⁵⁵ Kristin Scheible, *Reading the Mahāvamsa: The Literary Aims of a Theravada Buddhist History* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 2.

⁵⁶ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, xxxviii.

⁵⁷ Buddhaghosa, xli.

characterized by relentless accuracy, consistency, and fluency of erudition, and much dominated by formalism,”⁵⁸ and simply opening the 757 page *Path of Purification* at nearly any moment will reveal as much. Buddhaghosa defines terms in a fine-grained way, drawing on etymology, grammar, and tradition, and he often divides subjects into a set number of bullet points before steadily explaining each one. Yet, at the same time, he shows a startling sensitivity to human life that, once noticed, begins to show through the formalism of the text. His section on the faults of bad monasteries reads like an account of someone who has spent time in these very human settings. He often relies on animal metaphors and domestic images in order to argue his points. His benediction to those who reach certain modest achievements in concentration, rather than the heights of supernormal powers, does not appear to be *pro forma*—it is, after all, unnecessary in the categorization of meditation techniques, and it stands out through its repetition, which Buddhaghosa prefers to avoid. Altogether, the formalism of his text provides the background texture for organizing a rich reflection of a living method of practice. Engaging Buddhaghosa’s lengthy text reflects both traditions of its composition, at once a penance and test of wisdom.

As the *Mahāvamsa* indicates, Buddhaghosa’s texts hold authority and influence within Theravāda Buddhism. The content of Buddhaghosa’s text reinforces this authority, too, in that, as Ñāṇamoli points out, Buddhaghosa describes himself as a conservative transmitter of tradition rather than innovator.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, as the tradition also recognizes, even if Buddhaghosa takes steps to efface his own contributions in his text, he demonstrates, as contemporary scholar Maria Heim suggests, his own “creative genius,” particularly in the *Path of Purification*.⁶⁰

The original audience of *Path of Purification* is certainly intended to be monastic. In a Buddhist context, monks and nuns are those who ‘go forth from home to homelessness,’

⁵⁸ Buddhaghosa, xxxvii.

⁵⁹ Buddhaghosa, xxxvi.

⁶⁰ Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things*, 2013, 7.

surrendering the regular economic life of being a householder in favor of joining the community of those who are more directly pursuing Nibbāna. The various developments and implications of this shift are at least as complicated in the Buddhist context as they are in the Christian one, but for the purposes of understanding Buddhaghosa, both his relatively late biographies and more importantly his text itself seem to think of joining monastic life as becoming one part of a large network of semi-related institutions. A rough analogy might be the Middle Ages in Europe, when Christian monasteries became huge and sometimes interreligious sites of learning. These Buddhist institutions were of great economic and cultural as well as spiritual importance, and judging from Buddhaghosa's tone, not all of these communities were particularly helpful to someone with genuine spiritual intention. His text is aimed more directly at the practices associated with obtaining Nibbāna, and its comprehensive nature suggests that it would be of more direct use to teachers than students. Indeed, its emphasis on pedagogy, including how to diagnose temperaments in students and provide appropriate guidance accordingly, strongly suggests a use by monastic preceptors. It remains, however, a description of a living practice, a point to which I will return in chapter 3.

Two other primary terms that are central to Buddhist discourse are helpful to define in a very general way here at the outset for non-specialists who may be interested. *Kamma*, which is the Pāli form of the Sanskrit *karma*, has a rich and specific meaning in its context. More literally, kamma simply means a doing or an action—for example, Buddhaghosa concludes each section of the *Path of Purification* with a coda that notes the section is done being 'made' (*kata*) using a past participial form of the same word. Within Indian literature, however, the term kamma gains special meaning as an ethical term, particularly as kamma connects to intention (*cetanā*).⁶¹ Much

⁶¹ Maria Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention, and Agency*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

traditional Indian philosophy attempts to categorize kamma—intentional and unintentional acts; the difference and similarities among thoughts, speech, and actions, and their causal relationship on one another; actions which bear good or bad fruit; deeds which accrue merit or demerit in their aftermath; whether actions are good based on intention or on the result; and so on. In general, good kamma leads to a better rebirth—that we are all reborn is a shared metaphysical assumption in most Indian thought, although the details of that process vary—and bad kamma leads to a worse rebirth.

Woven together with the ethical dimension of kamma is the importance of causality. Good actions lead to good results because of the (often hidden) causal connections between them. In the Buddhist context, the full complexities of kamma make rough and ready identification of good and bad identifiable, but a full explanation of every cause and effect of any particular act is impossible without having perfect vision of the whole causal nexus of the world (which seems to be available only to the Buddha). This ambiguity within particular actions, together with our own unskillfulness, is the reason that what look like good actions to us may turn out bad. We may have been insufficiently skillful, or our kamma from previous rebirths may be paying out its bad fruit. Generally, however, all people benefit from doing good actions, building up the number of good results in this and future rebirths. Developing good kamma is a necessary part of the Eight-fold path, the way that Buddha teaches that leads out of suffering.⁶²

The regular round of rebirths that we all experience is the second term that is helpful to define, namely, *saṃsāra*. Often written without diacritical marks that signify the different letters used in the Pāli and Sanskrit, samsara refers to the constantly changing factors, including the kamma of actions and deeds, that makes up our world. In the Buddhist context, the word is particularly associated with *dukkha*, suffering. Samsara stands opposite Nibbāna, the

⁶² Rupert Gettin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1998), 101.

extinguishing that is liberation. The Buddha teaches the Eight-fold path as a way to leave samsara and suffering by obtaining Nibbāna. However, note that Nibbāna and samsara are not simple opposites, much as ‘created’ and ‘uncreated’ in a Christian context refer more directly to the finite world and the one that transcends the created world rather than its literal opposite. Neither Nibbāna nor samsara is a place, although language which treats them as such is easy to find.

A general awareness of kamma’s role in Indian thought is helpful because it sets the background for Buddhaghosa’s treatment of the interweaving causal chains that define the nature of experience. Recognizing samsara as the name for the world of kamma is useful for seeing its comparison to Nibbāna. To think about kamma is at once to think about the nature of the world, ourselves, and our interaction with it.

Chapter Summary

This first chapter introduces and frames the interconnection between no-self and ethics. Chapter 2 offers a close reading of Teresa’s *Interior Castle*, particularly the concluding sections that describe the fruit of the practice. Her use of imagery is one of her primary means of argumentation, and by following Michel de Certeau’s examination of the logic of that imagery, her more radical claims about human beings and God become clearer. *Interior Castle* is a practice text centered on detachment. Her use of an empty room at the center of the soul suggests no-self practice as a way to remain open to the possibilities of human life and experience; detachment, her primary method, is type of no-self practice. I argue that no-self practice also somewhat literally leaves space for God, that is, uses the radical practice of detachment as a way of not conflating God with any particular created thing. The effect is a way that God is treated

more like something perceived, seen and felt, and in its most developed form, Teresa's experience of God is a transformed, constant awareness that has the quality of peace.

Chapter 3 also anchors its argument in a close reading of primary text. It begins with an analysis of Buddhaghosa's method of argumentation. Because *Path of Purification* is often read either as reference text or meditation manual, I begin by arguing that it needs to be read as a more complex practice text. The logic of its mingled metaphors and analysis is concerned, I argue, not with metaphysics or ontology but with a transformative practice. I then trace one important aspect of the transformation, the understanding, and make explicit Buddhaghosa's arguments about the problem with mental constructions and the shift required in regards to them. I argue that this moment is the lynchpin of practice being described by Buddhaghosa, and I draw out Buddhaghosa's distinctive treatment of no-self practice as a response to oppression.

Chapter 4 offers some further reflections on the gains of reading these disparate voices in conversation. Teresa's description of the intellect finds support and a comparable articulation in Buddhaghosa, and the way that Teresa describes ethics as the testing ground of the practice provides a clue to the role of ethics in *Path of Purification*. I then argue for an understanding of no-self, as it is expressed in these thinkers, as a practice of allowing no element of experience to oppress another. Buddhaghosa's weaving of oppression together with mental constructions provides a helpful way to understand Teresa's commitment to detachment. I further argue that Teresa's treatment of the will thus requires the practice of a no-self context in order to make sense, rather than our more contemporary assumptions about the relationship of the will to autonomy. Finally, I develop the link between oppression and suffering as a fruitful way to engage Teresa's often contradictory comments about the role of suffering in Christian life.

Chapter 5 draws out two important themes in no-self practice, the role of metaphysics and the importance of sustaining energy. First, metaphysics plays a special role in no-self theology, both generating the practice but also being transformed by it. Buddhaghosa compares this to a fruit bat, and his metaphor becomes a guide for examining the role of knowledge. Second, if oppression characterizes not only institutions but also our experience, energy is needed both for dealing with the existential pain brought up in no-self practice and also for continuing its careful work. In both Teresa and Buddhaghosa's thought, love serves in this role, and love becomes a useful way into analyzing how no-self practice functions.

Chapter 6 explicitly turns to ethics. Drawing on the work of Maria Heim and Iris Murdoch, I argue that beyond a richer description of human life, no-self practice interrogates the ways that we frame ethical questions and our current understanding of autonomy. I return to the imagery of the first chapter, Alice's changing size, and to Edwin Friedman's systems theory as ways to flesh out how freedom links interior and exterior oppression. The focus on ethics also suggests the importance of something beyond being for no-self. Finally, I explore at length the fuller vision of ethical life that Buddhaghosa offers at the conclusion of the *Path of Purification* as a way to show what greater attention to the framing elements of ethical problems might look like.

The conclusion both points toward the importance of no-self practice beyond this project and also some of the usefulness of no-self practice for theology.

Chapter 2: Teresa and the Empty Room

“For it is very certain that in emptying ourselves of all that is creature and detaching ourselves from it for the love of God, the same Lord will fill us with Himself.”¹

Alonso de la Fuente, an early critic of Teresa’s *Interior Castle* who hoped to raise the attention of the Inquisition against her work, writes that in her final section, “in effect, the soul is not there.”² His criticisms of Teresa frequently reflect his personal vendetta against the *alumbrados*³ rather than offer compelling readings of Teresa’s work; indeed, Alonso de la Fuente continues in this same remark to conflate Teresa’s work with that of John Tauler, a German contemporary of Meister Eckhart whose writings Teresa likely never saw. Yet, in this comment, Alonso de la Fuente, perhaps accidentally, approaches one of the most distinctive parts of Teresa’s theology. In Teresa’s writing, particularly in the seventh section of the *Interior Castle* that provides the context for Alonso de la Fuente’s comment, the soul does not seem to be there.

Alonso de la Fuente writes that nothing seems to be there because, as he reads Teresa’s text, nothing, not even the soul, is in the center of the soul. The soul stands empty, like a castle with a walled-off room of glowing light at the center. If, as he sarcastically notes, we were looking for God according to Teresa’s account, we would do better to look for God in a “tree or a stone or the trunk of an elephant,” where God at least can appear in “essence and presence and power”⁴ rather than in the empty soul. Alonso de la Fuente finds Teresa faintly ridiculous as well as heretical on this point. Because no thing is in the center of the soul, as if all of creation were

¹ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. VII:2.7.

² Enrique Llamas Martínez, *Santa Teresa de Jesús y La Inquisición Española* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1972), 405. “[alma...] que en efecto no le ay.”

³ A group of mystically inclined Christians in Spain in the 15th and 16th century. The group varied significantly in terms of specific beliefs and practices, but some advocated for the position that the church was superfluous and direct perfection with God possible. This earned anyone called by the name the ire of the Inquisition, who made the *alumbrados* one of its early targets.

⁴ Llamas Martínez, *Santa Teresa de Jesús y La Inquisición Española*, 405. “... porque por la mesma razon se podría buscar en el árbol y en la piedra y en la trompa del elefante, donde Dios está por esencia y por presencia y potencia”

utterly absent, Alonso de la Fuente worries that Teresa's description undermines both the nature of human beings and God's power. Again, strangely, Alonso de la Fuente seems half right.

Teresa does describe the soul as empty at its center, a feature of her theology that is frequently glossed over. However, she describes the gradual realization of that empty room not as an escape from God's power but as a space for divine intimacy, and the absence of any created thing as the source of peace and compassion toward other people. In other words, Alonso de la Fuente is right that the room is empty, but he does not understand *of what* the room is empty.

This chapter focuses on the way that Teresa describes the empty soul, particularly in the seventh section of rooms in the *Interior Castle*, in order to answer the question far more clearly. Of what is the center of the soul empty in Teresa's thought?

A Crystal and a Castle: Metaphor and Structure of the Castle as Pattern of Transformation

Teresa represents her theme through a specific image, that of a crystalline castle. Stating the image so simply belies its complexity, which draws on the semantic connotative range of crystals and castles but also serves as a description of a dynamic process rather than a static picture. In order to trace Teresa's claims about the emptiness at the center of the soul, we need first to understand its wider geographical layout, including all of the ways that the crystalline castle does not follow the recognized rules of physics. Her complex metaphor serves as more than a means of organization, and much of her text unpacks the many facets (no pun intended) of her theology initiated in her image. Examining the aspects of the crystalline castle reveals the role that emptiness places at the center.

Teresa writes that we should "consider our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are

many dwelling places.”⁵ At the center of this crystalline castle of many rooms, a walled-off room emits a glow that, if the interior walls are sufficiently clean, refracts in varying degrees of brightness throughout the whole building as well as outside. While some interpreters debate whether the image comes to Teresa through a specific divine revelation, the source of its inspiration is only one part of its importance. The image’s more important work is Teresa’s explication of it. The crystalline castle grants her the ability to interweave several main themes throughout the text.

We should pause, too, at assuming that we know what Teresa is up to using the term ‘soul’ (*alma*). If we think immediately of an eternal entity that bears our identity, her description of the journey inside an endless, glowing, and changing soul makes no sense. She is undoubtedly drawing her meaning of the term ‘soul’ from several places, including Bernardino de Laredo, whose spatial language she adopts or echoes. He uses paradoxical language to describe his experience of advanced prayer, writing that the soul “soar[s] above itself”⁶ and enters “into itself,”⁷ spatial terms and even images that Teresa adopts later in her text. A castle is an object in space, admitting of prepositions (above, behind, within), and so it is amenable to Laredo’s spatial metaphors. However, Teresa develops this language about the soul in a somewhat different direction from Laredo’s imagery.

As an image, a castle mingles living spaces with solidity—literally, walls that demarcate sections and rooms within the whole. A castle is also grand, even royal, and apt to serve as a military garrison or palace, depending on the need. The image of the castle serves to reflect the many possibilities inherent in the soul, and how we see its solid structures depends upon the

⁵ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. I:1.1.

⁶ Bernardino de Laredo, *The Ascent of Mount Sion : Being the Third Book of the Treatise of That Name*, Classics of the Contemplative Life (London: Faber & Faber, 1952), 256.

⁷ Laredo, 261.

actions of the inhabitants. A wall can be a barrier or mark out a home; a door can open onto a rough wilderness or a tended garden. For Teresa, a just soul reflects the character of its inhabitant, even as, at least in romantic imagination,⁸ the state of a castle reflects the character of its king. At its best, Teresa writes, “we realize that the soul of the just person is nothing but a paradise where the Lord says He finds His delight.”⁹ Accompanying its solidity, a castle serves as a powerful metaphor for transformation. Castles fall apart and are reconstructed; they can be repaired, cleaned, or put to better use. Whether a castle functions as a solitary fortress or heavenly palace depends upon the design of its construction, condition of its renovation, and on the identity of its noble inhabitant. As a metaphor, a castle provides a mix of solidity, development, and history made concrete, and Teresa plays on all of these aspects.

Moreover, the image of the castle incorporates spaces within it, and here, Teresa begins to press the image beyond what we think of as a castle. Real castles are finite, with fixed numbers of rooms. Teresa presses the metaphor to include the idea that the castle contains limitless rooms, or dwelling places, within it;¹⁰ indeed, inasmuch as the soul images God, the soul may have countless rooms “below and above and to the sides, with lovely gardens and fountains and labyrinths....”¹¹ This castle, in other words, not only incorporates space—it is able to incorporate an endless amount of space as rooms are discovered, cleared, and cleaned. Teresa is playing on the language of John’s gospel,¹² where Jesus assures the disciples that his Father’s house has many rooms, and that the Father dwells fully in Jesus. In adopting the image of a dwelling place from John’s gospel, Teresa subtly hints at the more radical claims that she is

⁸ Teresa writes in her autobiography of her enjoying, and later regretting, her passion for reading “libros de cavallerias” (*Vida* 2.1), books of chivalry like those which also proved influential on Don Quixote in Cervantes’s novel. Nonetheless, she often draws on images of chivalry while also changing their valence.

⁹ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. I:1.1.

¹⁰ Teresa of Avila, bk. I:1.3.

¹¹ Teresa of Avila, bk. Epilogue.7.

¹² John 14.2-10

making, those which Alonso de la Fuente finds objectionable. As the image of ‘many dwelling places’ applies in John’s gospel to the Father’s house, by refurbishing that image into the soul of a person, she is suggesting that the ruling inhabitant is God and not an immortal soul. Unlike exterior castles, this interior castle’s relationship to God grants it countless rooms and a different kind of ruler.

Teresa further stretches the image of the castle in depicting its crystalline walls. Like a crystal or diamond, the soul is partially transparent to a light shining at the center. Combined with the capacity of castle to change slowly over time through disuse, architectural update, or general exploration, Teresa is invoking a well-worn metaphor for souls as crystals or mirrors, able to refract or reflect light depending on their evenness and cleanliness. As a person comes to explore deeper and richer rooms within the castle of the soul, those rooms can be cleaned to refract the light at the center more clearly. The soul can, with the right shaping, reflect and be transparent to the divine inhabitant and ruler whose room emits the light from the center. Teresa writes that she can find nothing “comparable to the magnificent beauty of the soul and its marvelous capacity.”¹³ This transparency to divine light makes the castle literally incomparable, echoing in a different register the apophatic quality suggested by the soul’s countless rooms.

The soul as crystalline castle thus appears as a ‘likeness’ of God both through the countless quantity of its rooms, which serve as the wandering places of the mind, faculties, and imagination, and also through its capacity to shine with the divine light housed at the center. These two apophatic dimensions each make the soul incomprehensible by the intellect—rooms that cannot be counted, and crystalline walls that, when clean, become inseparable from the light they share and scatter. However, these dual apophatic qualities, spatial and illuminating, are also distinct and offer parallel processes that occur as a sister begins the process of transformation.

¹³ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. I:1.1.

Becoming more familiar with the interior of the castle's endless rooms and moving closer to the center of the light both result from the same process, but the effects of each apophatic quality are different. One effect is to grant increasing facility with the endlessly complex faculties; the other is to provide an altogether different kind of seeing through a clearer kind of light.

This image of a crystalline castle thus strains against itself in two directions. On the one hand, the soul reflects its historical construction and the materials of its construction. Human beings are biological, material, cultural, and changing. To enter into the soul, which Teresa describes as the act of prayer, is to engage the full complexity of personhood. For Teresa, discovering our interior workings may mean dealing with a wandering mind, painful attachments that she compares to vermin and venomous lizards who wander in from outside and bite, and the various faculties of intellect, imagination, memory, and will that make up human life. To adventure deeper into the soul is to gain richer and more complex understandings and experiences of human life.

On the other hand, the soul maintains an empty space at the center that illuminates the soul. At its center, the soul has the capacity (*capacidad*) to house, however paradoxically, God. The human soul is the dwelling place, the aspects of human life are housed there, but the inhabitant of the soul is God. Within the center of the soul is an illuminating space that is not itself the soul.

Within the logic of this strained image, Teresa describes the process of prayer, of coming to know the soul, as one that simultaneously explores the features of personhood and yet also comes to see the soul as empty. Prayer uncovers the different layers and dimensions of the soul. The whole text acts as a pattern for transformation, but much as the image of the crystalline

castle pulls against itself, following the strategy as a whole through its twists and turns is challenging.

A useful guide to the way the metaphor works comes in Michel de Certeau's final collection of work. Certeau, the social scientist and theorist, offers a helpful window into Teresa's method in his careful investigation of Teresa's writing and language in the *Interior Castle*. He addresses her writing in the context of his longer project exploring the relationship of mysticism and writing. In Certeau's text, Teresa is significant for representing the moment in history when culture begins to move away from the idea that God spoke the whole of reality into being simultaneously, both the world and its subjects.¹⁴ Certeau argues that she responds to this turn by focusing on the act of speaking itself as a divine encounter, a shift that makes the writer responsible not only for the creation of a subject within a space defined by tradition but also the space itself.

Commenting on her style and method, Certeau thus describes the writing of *Interior Castle* as the creation of a structure that simultaneously invents a person and her inhabited space, both "figuration" and "illocutionary space."¹⁵ Certeau argues that because Teresa's context lacks the previous era's sense that the world exists because God speaks it, and because the world has become like speech separated from its speaker, faith in God can no longer derive from a 'hearing' of the world. Faith may instead give voice to the "inaudible"¹⁶ voice of the divine, revealing at once the nature of the speaker (figuration) within the discourse of faith and the logic of the silence (illocutionary space) within which she finds herself. *Interior Castle* takes this approach in a paradigmatic way for Certeau. He argues that Teresa creates through the text itself

¹⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 188.

¹⁵ Certeau, 188.

¹⁶ Certeau, 188.

the identity of a discoursing subject, together with both the ground of silence that surrounds the subject's language and the operations of the language that serve as the space of creation.¹⁷

According to Certeau, the genius of the *Interior Castle* is that it effectively enacts through its own creation the transformation that Teresa herself describes.

While the translation of Teresa's method into the categories of language (figuration and illocutionary space) loses the more radical claims that she makes about the emptiness at the center of the soul, Certeau's translation of her metaphor suggests a very helpful picture of the inner dynamics the crystalline castle. In Certeau's treatment of the metaphor, by working within the culture, grammar, and logic of language, Teresa approaches the silence of the center through the creation of the speaking, writing, dialoging subject. Writing her speech, which Certeau reminds us sounds a great deal more like speech than formal writing, Teresa acts out the transformation of creating a subject who comes to know the nature of speech and its grounding, answering silence. By working within the culture, history, and faculties of the soul, the sister approaches that space that God occupies through the creation of a changing subject. The soul serves as a *space* for transformation, a stage for the change of identity of the writing and speaking subject. The soul is the location of the narrative; the speaker is the protagonist; and the goal of the journey into the soul is union with the illuminating silence, with God, at the center.

This reflection of Teresa's own method has the great virtue of highlighting the role of the soul as the space, stage, and locus of transformation. Certeau writes that within his space, Teresa can pursue the question, "Who else lives inside of you?"¹⁸ To speak and to listen creates the possibility of coming to understand the rules and actions of language at the same time that it makes the speaker more aware of the silence that frames language and from which language

¹⁷ Certeau, 189.

¹⁸ Certeau, 195.

emerges. The subject is reducible to neither historically-shaped castle nor eternal crystal, and the need to both articulate the structure while not identifying entirely with either castle or crystal drives the text forward.

This logic provides a structure to the messy, sometimes salty, frequently conversational, rambling, even humorous rhetoric of Teresa's style. Teresa's strained image of the crystalline castle is a frame for asking the question, 'Who else lives inside of you?' and adjusting the architecture as different answers emerge. Within the stage of the soul, Teresa can draw out the various levels of awareness that lead to more profound answers to the question; moreover, she can use the image to act out this changing awareness in ways that attempt to affect her reader.

The Journey Through the Castle: A Brief Tour

Teresa is less interested in providing an architectural blueprint than acting as a guide for the interested adventurer. Certeau comments on the comedic, failed attempts to represent *Interior Castle* through sculpture or blueprint.¹⁹ Depicting a castle with limitless rooms and translucent rooms is no easy task, but more to the point, most works of art would, in their concreteness, occlude the two apophatic aspects of the soul that Teresa hopes to not only gesture toward but push her sisters to explore. Teresa cajoles, laments, laughs, sighs, and offers commentary intended to push the sister forward through the spaces of the soul toward the center.

The text's action takes place through the practitioner's journey through seven collections of dwelling places. These stages mark qualities of awareness along the path to discovering the details of the identity of the one who prays, and the silence from which that speech emerges. In each section, Teresa discusses the progressively deeper ways that the sisters must cease identifying themselves with some particular part of the soul in order to move to the silent space at the center. To identify with one particular *thing* is to surrender the quest. In Certeau's

¹⁹ Certeau, 199.

language, it is to cease asking the question ‘who.’ At each stage, she thus uses a metaphor that highlights the change in awareness needed by the sister to progress. The metaphors share in common the attempt to encourage the sister to cease identifying with a particular aspect of the soul. By detaching, the sister is able to advance. In the logic of the image, attachments prevent both exploration of the dimensions of the soul and the source of light, due to a lack of courage and a misplaced desire to find certainty where none exists.

Teresa characterizes the first series of rooms as the initial inward turn, where the sister no longer identifies herself with her desires for external objects, like wealth or property. Teresa memorably describes these desires as poisonous vermin that bite, pain, and distract the sister from the journey, and these vermin can follow and injure the sister through the first several collections of dwelling places. Unless her sisters realize that their identity consists in something other than the kind of food they can afford, the honor that they earn, or the pleasure that they experience, Teresa notes that transformation can never occur and compares them to static pillars of salt, like Lot’s wife, always acted upon but unable act.²⁰

The second series of rooms is characterized by the image of dirt, a metaphorical description of the habits of will and mind which occlude the crystalline light at the center. Through the development of virtues, which practitioners learn particularly through the study of scripture and ecclesial life, a person comes to see and navigate the castle more clearly. Even as the sister must learn that she is more than desires for external goods in the first series of rooms, in the second series, the sister learns that she is more than her habits by changing them into virtues.

Teresa characterizes the third series of rooms as a place of confusion. In the process of cultivating virtue, the sister may, perhaps even likely will, develop the notion of her self as a

²⁰ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. I:1.6.

master of objects, habits, and crucially the *self* itself. This habit of self-mastery stands in the way of discovering the emptiness at the center of the self, particularly as it “canonizes”²¹ certain pleasant or holy thoughts and feelings, taking those to be the purpose of virtue and the true identity of the soul. Detachment from those feelings, not the worship or admiration of them, is required to proceed, and so Teresa names humility, realizing self-mastery as an untruth, as the key to moving past the third section. The fourth section of rooms is often thought of as the pivotal moment of the text, but what makes it a pivotal moment is what is left behind in this third section of rooms, namely, the paradigm of self-mastery.

The fourth series of rooms marks the change of the practitioner from self-focused, concerned with the shaping of a self as a more effective master, to a more open paradigm of self-understanding that leaves the sister open to God’s presence. This shift opens the sister to the first occurrence of true “supernatural experiences,”²² which Teresa compares to earlier spiritual experiences through metaphors of well-digging and pipe-building. Where spiritual experience previously worked like building a long pipe to a far off water source and experiencing the pleasure of having succeeded by piping it back, the well finds itself full of water through no action of its own. The sister is not the master of the supernatural experience, and so the sister begins to be more acutely aware of a divide in the soul between the divinity at the center and the soul.²³ Having become detached, the sister becomes open to exploring the deeper rooms of the castle.

Teresa describes the fifth series of rooms as the beginning of divine union, where for brief periods of time the sister experiences something distinct from sensory or intellectual

²¹ Teresa of Avila, bk. III:2.3.

²² Teresa of Avila, bk. IV:I.1.

²³ Teresa of Avila, bk. IV:1.8.

experience.²⁴ For brief periods, the identity of sister comes into a union with God. However, because the divine union only begins here, the sister begins to feel more acutely the painful difference between the full illumination God's and her distance from it, and this distinction can lead to subtle attachments to special thoughts, habits, or feelings, as the sister mistakes these for the cause of the divine union. Most dangerous for the continuing development of the sister is the possibility that she can now identify herself with these experiences of union. Teresa introduces the image of the silkworm to signal the radical change that increased awareness from this point requires. Like a silkworm spins a cocoon where it can 'die' in order to undergo metamorphosis, the sister needs to "be quick to do this work and weave this little cocoon by getting rid of our self-love and self-will, our attachment to any earthly thing Let it die; let this silkworm die, as it does in completing what it was created to do! And you will see how we see God, as well as ourselves placed inside His greatness, as is this little silkworm within its cocoon."²⁵ This image, taking in material in order to create a space before dying, echoes the structure of the castle as increased familiarity with its construction grants the sister more intimate knowledge of its emptiness.

The sixth series of rooms, which takes up a third of the text and reflects material that Teresa feels is important and too little discussed, offers her analysis of spiritual visions, locutions (hearing voices), and experiences that characterize the 'betrothal' beyond the union. Having died in the cocoon of the fifth section, Teresa here describes the sister as coming to life as a winged moth or butterfly. Detachment is still the key strategy here. By not identifying herself with the experience of the divine union, the sixth series of rooms shows the acclimation of the sister to a selfless reality. This transformation can result in the visions, locutions, and raptures that Teresa

²⁴ Teresa of Avila, bk. V:1.9.

²⁵ Teresa of Avila, bk. V:2.6.

discusses, or, as she writes, it may not, but in either case, Teresa advises her sisters not to attach to these experiences²⁶ or confuse them with God.

In the seventh series of rooms, which I will explore at length below, the sister has become acclimated and begins the ‘divine marriage’ beyond the union of the fifth series of rooms and the betrothal of the sixth. Here, the sister comes to realize and to see the paradox of the empty room at the center of the soul which enables divine closeness. Having extinguished herself, she finds herself at home. Detachment does not vanish as an approach and strategy but becomes utterly natural.

Having expanded on the logic of the image that drives the text through the process of detachment and acclimation in the seven series of rooms, we can turn now to the general qualities of the soul in order to clarify what the soul is empty at the center.

Structures: The Concreteness, Faculties, and Apophatic Qualities of the Soul

As the logic of Teresa’s metaphor suggests, she depicts the soul as a structure, a stage of transformation that itself changes along with the story. In her descriptions, its history and culture mark it; faculties roam its halls but are also themselves part of the structure; and its endless rooms reflect an apophatic quality as the likeness of God, infinity imaged into finite being, both great possibility (no catalogue of the rooms is ever finished) and also finitude (none of the rooms is more than a room). Certeau’s careful analysis of the logic of the text again provides a path for tracing Teresa’s treatment of the structural soul.

First, Certeau highlights concreteness as one of the defining characteristics of Teresa’s depiction of the soul. Building on his language metaphor for Teresa’s text, Certeau describes the soul as the concrete reality that appears through the tension of the eternal and the historical, symbolized through the crystal and the castle. He writes that the “comparison oscillates between

²⁶ Teresa of Avila, bk. VI:9.15-16.

the untouched and the historical,”²⁷ resulting in a “framework capable of representing ... the dialogical speech from which the believing subject (the *conversar*) springs forth....”²⁸ The structure of the soul is, in other words, the place that bears the marks of concreteness as the evolving stage of the subject in the mode of creation. It bears the marks and shaping of culture and ethos, as well as the particular shaping events of a human life and habit. In language closer to Teresa’s, every soul bears the marks of the story of God’s encounter with creation. Each soul is a particular narrative of that encounter, and that encounter is composed in the medium of the world and at the direction of numerous factors, including the growing subjectivity of the individual sister.

As Certeau suggests, this narrative is possible only if, as Teresa insists, we maintain focus on both the crystal and the castle as distinct and vital parts of the metaphor. Certeau describes this dialectical tension as the generative force of the text; Teresa, more concerned with her sisters than the text, sees this tension as the generative force of her sisters’ religious lives. The text and the transformation depend on having something that transcends regular concreteness—something luminous in Teresa’s language—at the center of the castle. Out of this tension, the text emerges, but also out of the tension, the soul emerges.²⁹ Looking ahead to the conversation with Buddhaghosa’s work, the presence of the eternal crystalline castle as the fruition and end of the narrative serves as a kind of felicity, a conclusion that gives the rest of the narrative shape. Teresa’s point is that the soul is not a fixed structure of personhood, a static architecture of a fixed nature, but is rather the changing bearer of its story and history. Certeau’s reading highlights the emptiness at the center as a necessary moving force for the work and not a strange contradiction or aberration in her thought. The emptiness is part of what generates the

²⁷ Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Volume One*, 197.

²⁸ Certeau, 188.

²⁹ Certeau, 199.

text as well as part of what generates the soul. Subject and stage are created together through their interrelationships with each other and with the timeless, empty center.

At the same time, Certeau's analysis highlights the way in which the center of the room lacks these marks of concreteness. Certeau tends to write of the emptiness, silence, or perfection in the text as a regulatory principle for the text; but for Teresa, the place where the sister meets that perfection has a specific location, namely, in the center room. This room lacks all marks of concreteness, including a door for entry.

Second, the faculties that make up the human psyche are the denizens of the structure of the soul.³⁰ They are part of that structure as household servants, able to leave and connect with objects in the world but also part of the wider framework. Note that as part of the stage, the faculties themselves are subject to being changed. Teresa worries that her lack of education shows when trying to work on the fine points of the faculties. She writes, for example, when characterizing the differences between the faculties at work in imaginative and intellectual visions, "Since I have no learning, I don't know how in my dullness to explain anything."³¹ While her self-described "dullness" is, as discussed in the introduction, a deference that serves as a defense at least much of the time, it may also reflect her desire for a much richer education. She is never entirely precise in enumerating every human faculty. She writes most frequently of capacities or powers that she terms the intellect, the senses, the imagination, the will, and occasionally memory, without offering technical explanations of their functions. In this respect, she could not be a more different thinker from Buddhaghosa, whose enumerations of specific volitional, bodily, and mental functions form a significant part of *The Path of Purification*.

³⁰ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. IV:3.1.

³¹ Teresa of Avila, bk. VI:4.9.

However, Teresa does describe two important features of the faculties: their interior and exterior functioning, and their democratic interdependence. First, the faculties have two kinds of functioning, interior and exterior.³² For Teresa, the exterior functioning of the faculties is anything that involves the five senses, including memories of sensations or the imagining of a new one. Within her metaphorical image, the faculties roam outside the castle when in use. When the eye connects with a tree, the will steers the direction of the eye and the intellect comes into genuine contact with that perception outside the soul. Their encounters within the soul are about the reshaping of the stage of the soul, akin to what Buddhaghosa will describe as changing the most profound levels of systemic understanding. Certain kinds of prayer, like the prayer of recollection, summon the faculties back into the soul and hold them in a kind of stasis, leaving them unable to exterior awareness. Interior functioning is reserved for the quite different interactions involving union in the center room, for ‘seeing God,’ an interaction to which I will return below in a closer examination of the center room.

Second, no faculty belongs to the center room as its central authority. They are transformed by their encounters there, but the faculties belong to the structural soul rather than the empty center. Teresa’s personification of the faculties serves a purpose beyond simply accommodating them to the image. She understands them as both interrelated and semi-autonomous, and she describes how they interact, run in conjunction, and compete. Indeed, being a human with faculties as Teresa describes it sounds like herding cats. The intellect jumps from concept to concept, memories crop up at unexpected times, and the will takes effort to keep on topic; but the central room is not the grand authority or master. Teresa claims that this sense of dispersion only becomes more acute in prayer.

³² Edward Howells, *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 74 and following. Howells offers an excellent analysis of Teresa’s developing understanding of the faculties throughout her works.

Rather than controlled by a central authority, the faculties exist interdependently. Teresa faced criticism and possible censure for her defense of mental, as opposed to vocal, prayer, and this criticism causes Teresa to defend her position by reflecting on the ways that speaking and internal attention can go in two different directions at once.³³ She notes that a sister might recite a prayer vocally while thinking of something else entirely. The implication is partly that good vocal prayer entails a connection to mental prayer, but the more important conclusion for the faculties is that they appear to be related and also semi-autonomous. Elsewhere in her texts, Teresa, again thinking of prayer, describes the intellect grinding away at its thoughts in one direction while the will works to stay open to ‘seeing’ God.³⁴ The faculties not only work semi-independently; they are also not altogether under the control of the soul, of whom they are parts.

The faculties are not, in short, present in the center of the soul. While God can summon them together elsewhere in the soul (for the prayer of recollection, for example), they are part of the structure of the soul, not its rulers. They are subject to forces and objects not entirely within their control. Progressing toward the center of the castle entails a transformation of the faculties, but that transformation does not come in the form of self-mastery.

The third structural quality of the soul important for understanding what is present and what is absent in the center of the soul is the soul’s apophatic qualities, and a criticism of Certeau’s reading of *Interior Castle* will help clarify this dimension. In Certeau’s sophisticated examination, Teresa’s writing plays a role in seeing the interior of persons as a mysterious place in mystical writing, a process which he argues continues through psychoanalysis. Certeau argues that, in *Interior Castle*, a soul cannot be known except by “its *discurso* (a succession of events)

³³ Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, trans. Otilio Rodriguez and Kieran Kavanaugh, First Edition, The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Vol. 2 (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1980), chap. 22.

³⁴ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. IV:1.13.

and as discourse.”³⁵ The work of the text happens in the same way as the creation of souls, and Certeau understands this as the underlying reason that Teresa can equally affirm that the book or the soul is the castle, or that God or she is the author.³⁶ Certeau sees the dialectical process of writing, guided by the historical castle and eternal crystal, as a process for expressing the unending beauty of pleasure, a continual finding of new delight in a text or soul.³⁷ This expressed delight exists as the text and as embodied text, which is the soul. By bringing the delight to expression, the text becomes itself a delight in an ongoing process of beauty and pleasure.

Despite Certeau’s attention to the details of the way the text works, his reading here misses some crucial portions of the text. Teresa does indeed write a great deal about pleasure (Certeau memorably refers to the “gourmandise” with which she describes various types of delight, which is a lovely turn of phrase and true to her writing),³⁸ but as Certeau describes pleasure as the fruition of ongoing discourse and soul, his quotations come increasingly to be those of Teresa’s autobiography, the *Life*, rather than *Interior Castle*, despite his claims to be analyzing *Interior Castle*. By the time of her writing *Interior Castle*, which she finished a decade or more after the *Life*, Teresa has come to describe the final stage of spiritual life quite differently, emphasizing peace, for example, over delight. Teresa sees pleasure as an untapped spiritual resource and does not hesitate to categorize it for the purposes of using it to forward transformation. Pleasure, too, can provide detachment when engaged in the right way—a vision carries us out of a dreary context, or a glorious experience relativizes ongoing anxieties.

However, the text does not end in ecstasy, metaphorical or otherwise. Certeau’s reading generally seems to focus on the themes of the penultimate fifth and sixth series of rooms, what

³⁵ Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Volume One*, 200.

³⁶ Certeau, 200.

³⁷ Certeau, 198.

³⁸ Certeau, 198.

Teresa terms divine union and betrothal, rather than the divine marriage of the seventh room, where the text ends with a nearly domestic return to life lived with the trinity, a return characterized by attending to other people and by peace. Delight flavors the final stage, but in a way quite different than Certeau seems to imagine. Teresa describes the transformation not as ever increasing paroxysms of ecstasy but as peace, as freedom to attend to other people, and as involvement in the world.

The disparity appears clearly on the question of pleasure, but its roots lie deeper in Certeau's interpretation. Certeau sees the endless dance of dialectic as the final identity of the soul in the text, but Teresa describes a transformed relationship to something that 'exists' beyond being, to God. The final room does not offer stasis, but it does offer peace, a rootedness that Certeau's dialectical language does not reflect. The cause of this difference stems from alternate understandings of the infinite. In essence, Certeau sees the text as a dialectic between two non-overlapping realities, the eternal idea of perfection and contingent historical reality. Teresa's understanding of the infinite's relation to historical reality is more complex. The two are not identical, but they interpenetrate. She sees the infinite's likeness in human reality through its endless possibilities, the rooms that exist on every side. Certeau's analysis is well-suited for this spatial, apophatic dimension of the soul. However, she also describes the infinite as a light that illuminates the whole soul and which can, in the right circumstances, not only illuminate but become united with the subject. Understanding this relationship more thoroughly is the subject of the next section. What the center room lacks, however, is precisely the kind of endless dialectic that Certeau attributes to the end of *Interior Castle*.

What Is Not in the Center Room?

If we are wondering what this emptiness might mean or even what it might be like—with faculties that exist only exterior to it, unmarked by history, non-conceptual, the place where detachment leads—Teresa seems to be aware of her readers’ curiosity. In response to these concerns, she directly addresses the puzzle of the center room in the seventh section of the *Interior Castle*. In speaking of the space in the soul that is not the natural home of the faculties and of language, Teresa acknowledges that language strains to uncover what happens at the center. Because of this difficulty, Teresa relies on her way of thinking and arguing by using images and metaphors. She describes what is missing partly through domestic metaphors, thinking about the coming and going of people from a room, and also in terms that emphasize the difference between creation and the uncreated, history and the infinite. She then adopts terms which describe the room more positively, characterizing the center room as peace and heaven.

Teresa begins the seventh section by acknowledging that her sisters might be surprised to discover a section beyond the sixth. In the fifth series of rooms, the sister came to “see” God for the first time, like a fiancée might first meet a future spouse during courting.³⁹ In the sixth series of rooms, Teresa writes at great length about the intimacy with God afforded within its rooms, which she compares to a betrothal to God that exceeds the union experience of the fifth collection of rooms, rather like, as her images suggest, a committed betrothal exceeds a courtship in intimacy. The sixth, betrothal section concerns the ecstatic experiences for which Teresa is famous, and in the section, she cautions her sisters that such experiences are useful only insofar as these experiences, too, become an encouragement toward detaching their identity from everything, including these experiences. She concludes the sixth series of rooms with a description of the butterfly, the symbol of the reborn spiritual sister who has crossed not only into the mysterious interior beyond conceptual thought but also has found new life after death

³⁹ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. V:4.4.

within the cocoon, simultaneously delighted at the beautiful heights experienced as a flying butterfly who sees, hears, and experiences raptures from God, and also longing for the complete union available with God only in death. The sixth series of rooms provides the climax that her sisters, and many other interpreters (perhaps including Certeau), expected.

However, throughout the sixth section, Teresa also highlights the various “obstacles”⁴⁰ to coming to the divine marriage, which is one metaphor that she uses for the final and seventh series of rooms. She describes, in the sixth section, how the growing intensity of desire for God magnifies the sufferings of not having yet arrived at the divine marriage. Interwoven with her description of religious experiences and sufferings, she describes the nature of the obstacles that remain. The butterfly or moth, for all its beauty and joy after its transformation, has no permanent union⁴¹ with its beloved light, even if it can now fly close to it. The powerful experiences “wound [the soul] in the most exquisite way,” such that soul longs never to be cured.⁴² In other words, the soul longs for a more complete union, but the moth remains in its own way. It cannot become the light it circles. Connected to this need for further detachment, Teresa notes that a second obstacle to moving beyond is a lack of courage.⁴³ Everything has become unsatisfactory, suffering, and weariness for the soul,⁴⁴ but the final detachment requires a further, bold step. Mingled with the advice for discerning the way through supportive and painful visions, experiences, and locutions, Teresa identifies the main obstacle to progress as the soul itself, including its lack of courage and spurred onward by its weariness of the world.

Introducing her section on the seventh room, Teresa comments that many of her sisters might be surprised to see space for development beyond the higher and higher flights of the moth

⁴⁰ Teresa of Avila, bk. VI:1.1.

⁴¹ Teresa of Avila, bk. VI:2.1.

⁴² Teresa of Avila, bk. VI:2.2.

⁴³ Teresa of Avila, bk. VI:4.2.

⁴⁴ Teresa of Avila, bk. VI:6.1.

into rapturous visions. Yet, Teresa continues, more needs to be said, though even talking about the inner room itself proves difficult. Teresa also remarks that she feels conflicted writing about this most interior room. On the one hand, she feels shame speaking about something so exquisite and lovely; on the other hand, Teresa sees not discussing it as its own “temptation and weakness.”⁴⁵

Teresa’s introduction serves a variety of purposes which readers have commented on—political defense, a claiming of authority as a woman in spite of resistance, a demonstration of humility—but it also serves to warn her audience about the sheer difficulty of talking about this deepest portion of the soul. The difficulty is not only that Teresa claims something too wonderful for belief; it is also that, at the center of the soul, many apparently self-evident facets of human life no longer apply in the same way. The faculties do not reach here, and the dweller in the center room is not the sister. Language frays, not holding onto its object as it normally does. The structure of the metaphor itself has indicated the way in which the center room’s difference defies the kinds of description germane elsewhere in the soul.

Having called attention to the special nature of language regarding the center room, Teresa begins her description by evolving the metaphor of union in a new direction. Having described the courtship and betrothal, she turns to unconsummated marriage as the next stage of the metaphor. She writes, “When our Lord is pleased to have pity on this soul that He has already taken spiritually as His spouse because of what it suffers and has suffered through its desires, He brings it, before the spiritual marriage is consummated, into His dwelling place which is the seventh.”⁴⁶ This sentence is quintessential Teresa in its style—rambling, simple in its vocabulary, and almost casually drawing on other metaphors from the text. Through her

⁴⁵ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:1.2.

⁴⁶ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:1.3.

conversational tone, Teresa is introducing and repeating several key factors. First, entry to this central room requires God's agency. Teresa has reiterated this idea at various points throughout her text, beginning particularly in the fourth series of rooms, but here Teresa highlights God's agency because, while other stages of prayer require God's action, this shift into the central room requires something more. Because the soul is absent from the structures of experience at the center, the soul cannot simply move into the center. The soul sees itself illuminated by the center room, but the illumination itself has remained opaque to the questing sense of awareness. To unify with that illumination requires an agency other than the sister's.

Second, Teresa is prolonging the betrothal metaphor with the addition of unconsummated marriage. At the end of the sixth series of rooms, where betrothal structures her imagery, Teresa hints that death seems the likeliest way forward into marriage. However, with the seventh section, Teresa inserts what she foresees is an unexpected stage, with the butterfly dead and marriage fulfilled, but the sister's death not yet having occurred. The empty room stands at a pivotal moment where death both has and has not occurred.

Third, Teresa begins to explore the reasons that this central room is empty, and the reason she introduces here is that it is a dwelling place for God. Alonso de la Fuentes objects to this point in his *Memoriales* and insists that God is to be found throughout the soul, a point with which Teresa quite obviously agrees. God has not been absent elsewhere in the soul's castle, and Teresa reminds the reader of God's presence throughout the soul by recovering her image of the soul as something that emits light. Returning to the guiding image of the whole text, the light for the whole crystal castle emerges from this center room. She calls this central dwelling place "empyrean,"⁴⁷ a source of light that continues throughout the soul. The transparency of the walls has allowed the central space to illuminate the whole castle. Yet, despite the light which flows

⁴⁷ Teresa of Avila, bk. VI:4.8; VII:2.9.

freely out of the room, the walls nonetheless maintain separation. In reaching the center, the nature of God's action and dwelling are different than elsewhere throughout the soul.

To come to the innermost room is also arrive at a wall. Teresa describes this central room as having no door.⁴⁸ Although light travels through the crystalline walls, illuminating the whole, the very center room remains locked off, and the pilgrim sister cannot simply enter the center. The empyreal heaven, even the dwelling place of God, sits in the center of the soul, but the soul has no access to it. The soul has gained great facility with all of the different kinds of rooms in the soul, but at best, this sophisticated self-awareness has made clear the space that cannot belong to the soul. The image seems to be of a sister pacing the exterior dimensions of the room, illuminated by its light, but unable to find a way into the doorless room.

Teresa accentuates the distinct quality of the center room, its separation from the rest of the castle, through the image of traffic. Whereas the rest of the soul enjoys varying degrees of traffic from the faculties, desires, and experiences from the senses, the center stands apart as a place without traffic, without even a door. Throughout the rest of the castle, everything moves. Poisonous and selfish desires slither and crawl; the sisters build a cocoon; the intellect clacks like a mill. Teresa describes her text as an attempt to free her sisters for movement, granting them an interior geography for exploration regardless of how inhibited their movements might be by authority, vow, or circumstance.⁴⁹

Reaching the center room, is to reach a place not only without motion but also without the possibility of motion. Teresa differentiates this walled-off, glowing room from the stillness of the earlier rooms. Because the innermost room does not belong to the soul, it is empty of anything that belongs to the soul—the faculties, the marks of concreteness, ideas, the motions of

⁴⁸ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:2.3.

⁴⁹ Teresa of Avila, bk. Epilogue.1.

desires and memories. To the rest of the soul, the innermost room is a luminous, unreachable empty space, a wall without a door.

Emptiness might seem a surprising metaphor for God's dwelling place in Christian thought—or perhaps not. One thinks of the space between the cherubim on the ark; Moses, who sees from the lip of the cave only the trail of where God had been; the sheer silence that summons Elijah from the cave; or the missing body in Mark's resurrection account. Emptiness is not a ubiquitous metaphor for God's space, but it is also not uncommon. Teresa's friend and compatriot John of the Cross shows, in the illustration at the beginning of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the “*nada*,” the nothing, that characterizes the richest closeness to God.⁵⁰ The inner room is empty *because* it is God's dwelling place. It is empty, in other words, of what is not God, of every created thing. It is able to be ‘seen’ in the process of prayer—it even illuminates—but it simply is not part of creation. The center room is empty, as Alonso de la Fuentes only partially understood, of creation. The soul is a created, changing structure, illuminated by the emptiness at its center.

The idea that human beings find definition from desire for something that we lack is not without precedent in Christian theology. For example, Kathryn Tanner, the Anglican theologian, traces the idea in the early Christian thinkers Cyril of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa.⁵¹ According to Tanner, being created in God's image is to be created with this lack, which serves as the foundation of necessary relationality, and grants to human nature a flexible and fluid structure. Teresa shares something of this idea in the countless rooms of the soul, where human nature can build out in endless styles and directions. Although Teresa likely never read Cyril or Gregory, her theology does share an affinity with them. However, Teresa is distinct in her

⁵⁰ Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Revised edition (Washington, D.C: ICS Publications, 1991), 110.

⁵¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 1 edition (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

description of God's presence in the center room and in other, more metaphysical ways that become clearer in conversation with Buddhaghosa's work. Through the metaphor of the empty room, Teresa is describing both emptiness where we would expect a relational self, and God where we would expect a relationship.

The fullest form of human life is the "deepest silence" in this center room, a silence that can accompany and underlie any speech.⁵² Teresa is describing human souls as collections of faculties, habits, powers, and personalities, and all of these are lacking in the center room. Alonso de la Fuente is right in noting that soul is not there—but for Teresa, this is an insight, not a criticism. The soul includes inside itself a space where it is not, and this is the closeness of God that Teresa discovers in prayer. Teresa is claiming that the soul is not a totalized being, a world unto itself, a castle alone against the world. The soul is not even, as she describes it, an autonomous, choosing being, with some aspect of the soul set to govern all of the others. Rather, it is a set of factors that depend upon each other, gathered around a space that is not defined by those factors. The soul depends upon this empty room. The logic of the arrangement is that the empty room does not eliminate or deconstruct all of the other rooms. Indeed, in her metaphor, it literally illuminates them and makes them habitable.

To carry forward this insight in the language of this project, Teresa is working with a no-self practice of detachment. No single image or element is adequate to capture the 'no self', which is not a shifting of the 'self' but something else entirely, and so each existentially enthralling depiction must be set aside. Resizing the self is more than a *relative* shift in size when considered as a total process; rather, it is a radical consideration of what we mean by being human. To think of human beings as being in this no-self perspective is at once to recognize their great complexity, composed of faculties, habits, history, culture, and so on, and yet to see that no

⁵² Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. VII:3.11.

one or collection of these defines human life. Indeed, only by detaching from these aspects of identity, which Teresa describes as a lengthy and complicated transformation, can an inner, deeper silence be seen. What is distinctive about her description is that no heuristic, conceptual framework captures the complex process of disentangling from the various dimensions of human life. Rather, she offers impossible architecture as a way to twist concepts past their breaking point.

What Is in the Empty Room?

Despite all that this center room is empty of, it is not empty as a pure absence or void. Rather, it opens to a reality that is not the soul but that also permeates the soul. Teresa describes this reality through two primary and connected images, peace and an ‘intellectual vision’ of the trinity.

If other parts of the castle have characteristic themes—the ecstasy and danger of union in the sixth section, the failure of existential frameworks of self-mastery in the third, the expansion of the heart in the fourth—peace is the primary theme of the seventh section. Characterizing this peace accurately is a challenge for Teresa. She differentiates it from certainty.⁵³ This peace is not the conformity of an unchallenged or totalizing idea, a surety of salvation that purposely or inadvertently implies an independence from God. As the logic of the empty room has suggested, Teresa takes the sense that the world depends on God in an entirely personal and person-centric way. The structures of the soul find illumination only in their reliance on God. Peace, therefore, cannot be a sure and certain idea about one’s own soul, independent from the center room; rather, the peace associated with entering the center room comes from a radical dependence.

⁵³ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:2.9.

Favors, Teresa's general term for the positive experiences of divine union, "fortify" this weakness, this dependence.⁵⁴

Also, the peace is not the absent peace of death. It is not the languor of self-importance (a theme Teresa opposes throughout her text), nor is it a heroic and ascetic destruction of desire. Teresa specifically takes care to mention that those who enter the innermost room continue to eat, drink, and live a normal bodily life.⁵⁵ While she is comfortable describing this peace as having the characteristic of "forgetfulness of self," she immediately goes on to describe how this frees up the person to take on the desires of others with greater compassion.⁵⁶ Moreover, even while the soul's invitation into the center room creates a sense of peace, Teresa is clear that the other dwelling places of the soul continue in various degrees of "war, trial, and fatigue."⁵⁷ Entering the center room reflects a detachment from desires, not their elimination.⁵⁸ The peace of the center room is neither the comfort of certainty nor the constancy of an entirely unchanging or eliminated person. This peace eliminates neither the conflicts of experience nor social strife.

Instead, Teresa describes peace as creating a dual character in experience. Peace is present in the center room in a way separate from the rest of the soul—indeed, a metaphorical wall divides them—that points to one of Teresa's primary claims about the divided nature of the soul. Yet, Teresa continues in her image, peace is present in the same way a king remains present in his castle. Many things may happen throughout the country. Daily life occurs among the people, even wars and dramatic events that affect part or the whole of the nation may happen. Yet, the king governs the country while remaining still within the capital.⁵⁹ The king's kingship

⁵⁴ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:4.4.

⁵⁵ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:3.3.

⁵⁶ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:3.2.

⁵⁷ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:2.10.

⁵⁸ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:3.8.

⁵⁹ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:2.11.

is not threatened by the lack of peace elsewhere in the kingdom; the king is simply still king. She also discusses a metaphor of the body, writing, “Our entire body may ache; but if the head is sound, the head will not ache just because the body aches.”⁶⁰ Teresa is describing a division in experience. The center room of the soul remains in peace, even as the soul continues fully engaging in life. Much as the light illuminates the entire castle, peace conditions the whole of the experience, but it does not displace the regular functioning of life, including eating, drinking, caring for other people. The constancy of that peace depends on both the center room’s division from the rest of the soul and its relationship to it.

This division of the soul into two parts is evident throughout Teresa’s general metaphor in *Interior Castle*. For example, a person is both the castle and the one journeying through the castle. In this final section of rooms, however, the division becomes most pronounced. She describes it as the difference between soul and spirit in one place in her text;⁶¹ she notes that the soul consists of all the things outside the center room, while the spirit is something subtly different and also “delicate.”⁶² Elsewhere, she refers to both sides of the division as a ‘soul.’⁶³ In either case, she writes that when “[T]he Lord puts the soul in this dwelling of His ... in the center of the soul itself,”⁶⁴ peace extends throughout the whole person. Peace is present in the center room, a peace that is, to use Teresa’s terms, not creaturely. Its effect, however, is felt throughout the whole person. As much as peace is in the center room, and as much as the peace is experienced by those who enter it, the peace also permeates the whole soul. In other words, peace accepts the structural conditionality of the soul and the need to remain detached with respect to the soul. Peace results from the encounter with the center room, radiating outward.

⁶⁰ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:2.11.

⁶¹ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:1.11.

⁶² Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:1.11.

⁶³ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:2.9.

⁶⁴ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:2.9.

The ability of peace to permeate the soul helps explain the way that the center room is an experience of anything at all. After all, Teresa has carefully pointed out that nothing created is within the center room, which should make it impossible to experience anything. Instead, she uses the language of invitation to explain the way that what is created moves temporarily through the wall and into the center room. She describes what happens within the room as a type of ‘intellectual vision,’ a term to which I will return in a moment, but the experience of having entered the center room has a lasting effect throughout the rest of the soul. It grants, to use Teresa’s metaphorical language, a degree of transparency to the wall that divides the center room from the rest of the castle. This transparency provides a kind of constant awareness, in an ongoing and profound sense, of God’s presence in the center. This awareness is the source of peace, and the experience of the center room is, at the level of peace, an awareness of the soul more brightly enlightened by the center room. The light of peace conditions everything else occurring throughout the soul.

Entering the center room also causes another kind of knowledge in the form of a special intellectual vision. Teresa describes entering the center room as a very different experience from other spiritual delights. She describes it as having “great force,” as different in the content of the experience, and “also because in the interior of her soul where He represented Himself to her, she had not seen other visions....”⁶⁵ She continues, addressing the question at the level of metaphor and experience, how the soul can enter through a wall with no door and how the center room can be an experience of anything when all of the receivers of experience in the soul remain outside. She writes,

I say there is no need of any door because everything that has been said up until now seems to take place by means of the senses and faculties, and this appearance of the humanity of the Lord must also [in a visual vision accompanying the entrance to the

⁶⁵ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:2.2.

center room]. But that which comes to pass in the union of the spiritual marriage is very different. The Lord appears in this center of the soul, not in an imaginative vision but in an intellectual one, although more delicate than those mentioned, as He appeared to the apostles without entering through the door when He said to them *pax vobis*.⁶⁶

Teresa adopts this language of the ‘intellectual vision’ (*intelectual*) as a way to differentiate it from the imagination (*imaginaria*), which involves the use of the faculties and senses. What occurs in the center is not, thus, a seeing of something in the imagination or knowing of ideas that happens with the standard functioning of the intellect as a faculty (*potencia*), but something she describes as both subtle and sublime.

What occurs in the seventh room is not connected to the faculties and yet involves some kind of understanding. Teresa writes,

[O]ur good God now desires to remove the scales from the soul’s eyes and let it see and understand, although in a strange way, something of the favor He grants it. When the soul is brought into that dwelling place, the Most Blessed Trinity, all three Persons, through an intellectual vision, is revealed to it through a certain representation of the truth.⁶⁷

Teresa is here wrestling with the failure of language. She describes the experience as both the truth and removal of scales from the eyes, but she also describes it as a certain representation and occurring in a strange way. Her hesitancy and difficulty in speaking about this experience remind us of the difficulty in speaking about an intellectual vision that does not involve the faculties or senses.

Teresa continues to explain her intellectual vision in this way. She writes, “First there comes an enkindling in the spirit in the manner of a cloud of [great illumination.]”⁶⁸ Here, Teresa is again using paradoxical language to convey the intertwining of something beyond the

⁶⁶ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:2.3.

⁶⁷ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:1.6.

⁶⁸ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:1.6. My choice of ‘great illumination’ is a significant departure from Kavanaugh’s choice of “magnificent splendor” for *grandísima claridad*. While ‘splendor’ carries the light-carrying qualities of *claridad*, it lacks the sense of making things clear that the word implies and Teresa intends. She appears to be drawing a paradox by describing a cloud that clarifies with light, rather than obscuring with fog, and ‘splendor’, it seems to me, has stronger connotations in English of an aesthetic beauty rather than literal light.

faculties, like a cloud, with something simultaneously illuminating. She continues, noting that the soul receives a ‘worthy report’ (*noticia admirable*) that these three of the trinity are one substance, power, and knowledge.⁶⁹ The soul knows this, she writes, not by “faith” but by “sight,” “although the sight is not with the bodily eyes nor with the eyes of the soul, because we are not dealing with an imaginative vision.”⁷⁰ In this intellectual vision, “all three Persons communicate themselves to it, speak to it, and explain those words of the Lord in the Gospel: that He and the Father and the Holy Spirit will come to dwell with the soul that loves Him and keeps His commandments.”⁷¹ Primarily, the content of the intellectual visit is an existential awareness that the center room is inhabited by God distinctly and personally, as trinity.

Two Selves or None?

Edwards Howells, a contemporary scholar of Teresa, persuasively argues that Teresa, in referring to this experience as an intellectual vision, is referencing a hierarchy of visions common since Augustine.⁷² Bodily visions appear to bodily eyes; imaginative visions appear to the eyes of the soul but involve bodily images; but intellectual visions “use no senses, either bodily or spiritual, and no images, but are ‘engraved’ (*esculpido*) on the soul directly...”⁷³ Teresa does utilize this typological language, differentiating the intellectual vision, with its sense of engraving, from imaginative vision, with its sense of being imprinted or impressed.⁷⁴ Imaginative visions leave an impression in the soul; intellectual visions reshape the soul itself. Because the definition of an intellectual vision is primarily negative—without senses, without images, the soul changes—she is able to use the term for an experience known by its

⁶⁹ Santa Teresa De Jesus, *Obras Completas de Santa Teresa*, 569. 7.7.

⁷⁰ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. VII:1.6.

⁷¹ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:1.6.

⁷² Howells, *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila*, 110.

⁷³ Howells, 90.

⁷⁴ Howells, 90.

transformation, where the faculties remain outside. In being brought into the room, the faculties do not ‘see’ so much as emerge changed. Teresa describes this as a type of awareness a sculpting or engraving of the soul.

The image of sculpting or engraving of the self is a very apt and useful one to which I will return throughout this examination of no-self. If the soul lacks any irreducible component that is its pure identity or unique governor, then the deepest transformations of a person are experienced not at as coming in contact with the core of identity but rather as a sculpting of awareness and perception. God is experienced not as solid foundation but as a newly lighted vision, or as Teresa describes, as a consciousness akin to our awareness that someone is in a room even when the lights are off.

Howells also argues that the intellectual vision of the trinity in the center room connects two major themes in Teresa’s thought. First, in the fruition of a long-evolving line of thought, Teresa develops the theology that all human beings possess two natures like Christ, with God in the center room and humanity outside. Second, also like Christ or together with Christ, human beings participate directly in the life of the trinity in the center room.⁷⁵ Howells calls these two aspects the structural and dynamic aspects of the soul, respectively.⁷⁶ The intellectual vision stands at the linking of these two aspects of the soul, as the structure of the soul is transformed by the overflow of its dynamic interior.

Examining Howells on this point is helpful for showing where Buddhaghosa’s work makes a fruitful partner in dialogue. Howells works out the division that Teresa describes in the soul, as well as the relationship of the inner room to the rest of the soul, as the difference between two different selves, a structural and a mystic/dynamic self. Howells traces Teresa’s

⁷⁵ Howells, 114.

⁷⁶ Howells, 125.

experience of the division in the self between the structural and the dynamic, which parallels closely Teresa's own metaphor of the castle and the inner room. He chooses the more general terms, structural and dynamic, both so that he can trace Teresa's development of the ideas over time and so that he can compare the parallels in her thought to similar notions in John of the Cross's writing. The division, as Teresa develops it in her mature writings, is ultimately between the structural self and the mystical self, according to Howells. That mystical self, the self contained within the inner room, Howells describes this way— "a human trinitarian intentional structure possessing God's inner dynamism."⁷⁷ With this collection of modifiers, Howells is attempting to highlight the radical difference of the self that belongs to inner room.

This dynamic or mystical self is, like the structural or natural self, "constituted by relationality, only now by the immediate relation with God rather than relations with objects in the world."⁷⁸ The soul has become "divine" in exactly this sense, that "*everything* that the soul does is itself an act of relations to God within the mutuality of the Trinity."⁷⁹ In working out the nature of the division from the natural self, the mystical self is thus, according to Howells, a second and special kind of self. The soul knows God and itself at once through "two distinct, symmetrical patterns of cognitive acts"⁸⁰ in each of the selves. Only when "the self is brought to the source of creation in the Trinity, in union, [can] the two kinds of knowing be reconciled: the subject-object structure of ordinary knowing is then *included within* the intersubjective structure of knowing in the Trinity."⁸¹ In attaining the spiritual marriage, "[i]n mystical knowing, we do not become aware of the self-God relation in our own categories of selfhood and self-awareness,

⁷⁷ Howells, 126.

⁷⁸ Howells, 126.

⁷⁹ Howells, 126.

⁸⁰ Howells, 126.

⁸¹ Howells, 127.

but only by being transformed into God's own self-relation...."⁸² According to Howells, this is the reason that Teresa can speak of annihilation, and, more biblically, of dying to self. He writes, "The continuity of selfhood lies in the self-God relation rather than in the self as presently conceived."⁸³ The ultimate union of the two selves, and the transformation of the structural self by the dynamic self, is the fruit of spiritual marriage.

While Howells's analysis of the transformation and its results is excellent, his conclusion that a second self with parallel cognitive acts is what is linked in the center room runs opposite Teresa's metaphors. Teresa, as I have shown by carefully following the logic her metaphors, resists characterizing the inner room as a self. As heaven, or as the dwelling place for God, the inner room possesses a stronger apophatic quality, resistant to the categories of being, than any kind of self however qualified. To enter the center room is not to clarify a relational self but rather to have the conditioned, structural soul engraved and sculpted by God. What is housed in the castle of the self is not a hidden or true self but God, like the center of a spider web is home to the air which surrounds, stirs, and lifts it. Moreover, Teresa ascribes to God's actions in the center room a kind of intention or agency—the one in the center room invites the soul inside—but it is *not* the soul's agency. The soul's agency emerges with the wandering faculties of the soul and is itself conditioned. Howells describes well the way in which identity becomes characterized, for Teresa, by God's self-relation; but for Teresa, God is a not a 'self' or community of selves. God exceeds, or lies beyond, that kind of categorization.

Howells's reading of Teresa tries to resolve the tension in her thought by taking a step that she does not—to ascribe a self to the inner room—which seems so natural in our contemporary context. Howells's reading also places Teresa more neatly into the tradition of

⁸² Howells, 127.

⁸³ Howells, 127.

thinking about the soul as the ultimate bearer of agency and identity. Changing Teresa's companion in conversation to Buddhaghosa opens up the possibility of following the language and implications of her metaphors more closely. Howells's description of the transformation, the radical change in categories brought about in the natural self, captures something of the beauty and difficulty of understanding how to speak about the self on the other side of the transformation. Yet, Teresa's language pushes somewhere more distinctive and different. She chooses the language of annihilation, comparing it to the death (not metamorphosis) of the little butterfly, as well as the more familiar metaphor of a raindrop entering a river.⁸⁴ The traveling spirit of the text vanishes, is extinguished, or dies. Attachments removed, love increased, desire expanded, what remains is what was, in a sense, present all along: God, with a human being no longer under the illusion that they are unconditioned at any level, who can see or see by the Unconditioned God at the root.

Although Buddhaghosa's account of the transformation leading to Nibbāna intersects with Teresa's at a number of points, this moment in Teresa's text is particularly transformed by being read together with Buddhaghosa. Reading Teresa within a genealogy of Augustinian theology suggests the image of multiple levels of selves, even though this language runs counter to Teresa's own language and metaphor. Buddhaghosa, however, has a sophisticated way of speaking about the extinguishing of a being into something which is Signless and Uncreated, and he does not share the view that a proliferation of selves is a more natural solution than thinking through the implications of no-self practice. Buddhaghosa also characterizes this transformation as a way of learning to 'see' through understanding itself, rather than the imagination of the senses, in another striking parallel to Teresa's thought. Teresa depicts quite different content revealed by this kind of seeing than what Buddhaghosa describes, but Buddhaghosa also outlines

⁸⁴ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. VII:2.4.

the types of knowledge that become known without the normal conditioning factors of experience in learning to see Nibbāna, much as Teresa speaks of encountering the trinity as a kind of knowledge without the senses or imagination. Buddhaghosa also explains the transformation of the structural soul that occurs through this final encounter.

Despite their differences in describing the Signless and the knowledge obtained by ‘seeing’ with it, and indeed even if these differences are fundamental and irreconcilable, placing Buddhaghosa’s work in conversation with Teresa’s highlights what is distinctive about her thought. She is describing not the unifying of two human selves with parallel cognitive acts but the profound transformation is a realization of no-self, like a raindrop into a river. If we find it strange to think about human existence without thinking of an unchanging, single bearer of our identity, Teresa and Buddhaghosa acknowledge as much. Much more remains to be said about how Buddhaghosa’s thought interplays with ideas similar to Teresa’s, but much of that work benefits from a more robust explication of Buddhaghosa’s thought, which is the topic of the next chapter.

Teresa also describes a quality of awareness in her consciousness that also marks the experience of having entered the center room. The initial entrance results in feelings of great intensity, but the changes brought about by having entered the room bring an additional awareness, a consistently felt presence.⁸⁵ A sister might, she writes, think that entering the center room would make a person so absorbed that she could not think.⁸⁶ Instead, she compares it to a type of ongoing awareness. She describes it in this way.

Let’s say that the experience resembles that of a person who after being in a bright room with others finds himself, once the shutters are closed, in darkness. The light by which he could see them is taken away. Until it returns he doesn’t see them, but not for that reason does he stop knowing they are present. It might be asked whether the soul can see them

⁸⁵ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:1.9.

⁸⁶ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:1.8.

when it so desires and the light returns. To see them does not lie in its power, but depends on when our Lord desires that the window of the intellect be opened.⁸⁷

This awareness, which is like being in the room with the trinity with the lights off, offers Teresa's clearest picture of what is positive within the center room. The structural soul seems to have been so sculpted as to maintain a far richer awareness of God.

Her example draws on the subtle ways in which our awareness of someone in our space shapes our actions and beliefs. Even if I cannot see my sleeping children at the moment, I accommodate my presence in my home to their needs. Or, consider the surprise we feel upon discovering someone unexpected in our space, like in the case of a surprise party. The way we inhabit our space changes entirely on realizing that we are not alone. In a similar way, Teresa describes the soul inhabiting life differently, in a way characterized by peace but defined by this present awareness of God, by finding that the answer to Certeau's summary of her question, 'Who else lives inside me?', admits of an infinite and endless answer.

For Teresa, the intellectual vision of the trinity is not a sign of an actualizing second self but rather a shifted degree of awareness. While empty of every created thing, the center room is God's space. The intellectual vision is a pronounced sculpting that opens a permanent awareness to God without recourse to any particular thing in being. Because the shift is one of awareness, Teresa insists that the best way to know of its occurrence is to see its results in the actions and life of the person who has experienced it. For Teresa, this is the place of fullest account of ethical life—only after the transformation wrought by the intellection vision. Only after this transformation is a person truly free to engage in action, particularly "with everything pertaining

⁸⁷ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:1.9.

to the service of God; and once its duties are over it remains with that enjoyable company.”⁸⁸
 Accompanying the action and in rest, the person experiences a different kind of awareness.

To summarize, Teresa offers an account of the transformation and marriage of the soul to God through metaphors and language that resist thinking about the experience as a unity of selves. She characterizes this no-self practice as resulting in seeing a type of knowledge that originates neither in the imagination nor the senses; in an awareness of God that is constant and transforms experience into something more peaceful; and in a freeing up of desire for ethical life that allows full devotion to another cause or person.

A No-Self Theology

Naming a theology, philosophy, view, or position as no-self is, of course, a primarily negative definition that relies on some understanding of selfhood. In the Buddhist context, as Steven Collins carefully traces, selflessness or no-self invokes a whole a variety of metaphors⁸⁹ which differentiate Buddhist thought from its Indian philosophical neighbors. To jump briefly ahead to the argument in the next chapter, Buddhaghosa’s investment in describing experience without recourse to an independent ‘self’ is connected to a concern about suffering. In our deepest analysis of experience, Buddhaghosa argues, we discover a powerlessness that reveals why we are subject to suffering, and this powerlessness suggests that our apparent ‘selves’ consist of a matrix of contingent, causally related factors rather than an independent, choice-making self. The absence of a self also makes reaching Nibbāna possible—the very finitude of the factors of experience means that they can be ended. I will explore the role of the self as an overlord (as Buddhaghosa terms it) much more in the next two chapters.

⁸⁸ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:1.8.

⁸⁹ Collins, *Selfless Persons*.

These themes stand in interesting parallel to Teresa's thinking, and they provide a case for recognizing her thought as type of no-self theology. Alonso de la Fuente's frustration that God is present in the center of the soul without essence or presence or power is a half-right reading. God's effects in the center of the soul originate outside of being (without essence); they are experienced as an illuminating awareness (rather than an object to be observed); and the power comes from its effects on the person rather than a miraculous lightning bolt. While de la Fuente's description sounds as frustrated as it is accusatory, it also hints at the difficult claim that Teresa is making. Human beings have the capacity, she is arguing, to gain a transforming awareness of God that is shaped by God's life beyond being rather than in creation. Moreover, human beings have this capacity precisely because they are selfless. If human nature could be properly identified by any of its capacities and attachments, then those capacities and attachments would not be finite. Precisely human finitude is what allows for the capacity to see God—its plasticity reshaped by illuminating indwelling. No-self practice is about the steady disentangling of existential entanglements in order to be more fully available to God.

No-self theology, in this case, is a rejection of any kind of 'overlord' dimension of human agency (to borrow Buddhaghosa's language) or life that would abrogate the awareness of God experienced in her description of the 'trinity with the lights off.' While other Christian theologians also emphasize the difference between the finitude of creation and God's transcendent reality, Teresa is keen to parse this difference at a far more radically existential level. As a pattern of Christian theology, her rendering of no-self theology is concerned, to return to Peter Tyler's point, with *living* out that theology rather than creating a compelling metaphysical picture. Drawing compelling rational insights from a metaphysical image of infinite qualitative difference between creation and God is, in Teresa's view, inadequate because

this metaphysical picture can also serve as an attachment. It can, in other words, reify a deep-seated sense of having an overlord self.

For Teresa, the first reason to avoid any overlord-style of self is in its effects for someone interested in prayer. She is not painting a compelling picture that invites a change of thought; rather, she is writing theology as a lever to displace attachment to limited notions of self that inhibit a fuller union with God. No-self practice is as much a method directed at disrupting our attachment to desires and fears as it is an idea. The second reason has to do with relationship of attachments to oppression, but this connection becomes clearer after engaging Buddhaghosa's thought.

Chapter 3: Buddhaghosa and the Land-Finding Crow

“When traders board a ship, it seems, they take with them what is called a land-finding crow. When the ship gets blown off its course by gales and goes adrift with no land in sight, then they release the land-finding crow. It takes off from the mast-head, and after exploring all the quarters, if it sees land, it flies straight in the direction of it; if not, it returns and alights on the mast-head. So too, if knowledge of equanimity about mental constructions [*sāṅkhāra*] sees Nibbāna, the state of peace, as peaceful, it rejects the occurrence of all mental constructions and enters only into Nibbāna. If it does not see it, it occurs again and again with mental constructions as its object.¹”

Writing about the realization of Nibbāna is both the purpose of the *Path of Purification* and its primary challenge. While the process and practices that lead up to Nibbāna are extremely complex, Nibbāna itself is inherently difficult to discuss in a way quite different from the difficulty of realizing it. Nibbāna offers freedom for the arahant, the fully realized individual who has completely entered into Nibbāna (although they may have a remainder of fruits from previous kamma which need to wind down—and thus they are sometimes said to enter Nibbāna-with-remainder). Nibbāna is freedom from endless the churning dissatisfaction and pain of samsara precisely because it is not like samsara. It is not a place or a thing, but metaphors of place and fire offer fruitful ways to point toward it. To go forth from home to homelessness is the symbolic and real first step to becoming a *bhikkhu*, a monk, but the step also metaphorically suggests the placelessness of Nibbāna.² Or, to take up the metaphor central to its etymology, to obtain Nibbāna is to be extinguished like a flame. The metaphor points toward the way in which flames neither die, nor go somewhere else,³ but rather simply cease to burn. Nibbāna is what remains of the fire of a being when the perpetuating fuels of existence have run out. In

¹ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XXI, 65. As I discuss below, I have replaced Ñānamoli’s rendering of *sāṅkhāra* as formations with mental constructions.

² Collins, *Selfless Persons*, 167ff.

³ Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 216.

synthesizing the diverse literatures of Pāli scripture, the *Path of Purification* describes the encounter between the concrete practices of ethics, meditation, and epistemology with Nibbāna.

Tangled

The *Path of Purification*, or *Visuddhimagga*, is unique among Buddhaghosa's writings as the only non-commentarial text attributed to him. As discussed in the introduction, given how infrequently Buddhaghosa claims to offer his own opinion on a problem rather than refer to other parts of the Pāli canon, Buddhaghosa sees himself as a conservative in the traditional meaning of term, conserving and passing along the tradition he has received on the Buddha's teaching. The *Path of Purification* thus seems to synthesize but not improvise, at least as Buddhaghosa describes it.

However, his apparently conservative approach belies the complexities of his arguments. Although the book is now framed primarily as a reference text,⁴ or as a good meditation manual (as the Dalai Lama blurbs the book in its current printed edition),⁵ the quite long text (747 pages in translation) is structured around the solving of a complex problem, which he characterizes as the untangling of experience. The text is also remarkably intertextual, drawing upon all three of the baskets or subdivisions of the Pāli canon, as well as (presumably) his commentaries on these three divisions—the *Sutta* stories of the Buddha's life and teachings; the *Vinaya*, the monastic rule of life and commentaries on it; and the *Abhidhamma*, the systematic philosophical explication of the Buddha's teachings. Following the thread of a single analysis requires a closer reading than simply quoting chapter and verse.

⁴ Wilhelm Geiger, *Pali Literature and Language* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher, 1996), 25–34; K. R. Norman, *Pāli Literature: Including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of All the Hīnayāna Schools of Buddhism*, *History of Indian Literature*; v. 7 (Wiesbaden: OHarrassowitz, 1983), 120.

⁵ Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga*, trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli (Seattle, WA: Pariyatti Publishing, 2003).

Unpacking Buddhaghosa's opening of the text offers an instructive perspective into the complexities of the *Path of Purification* as well as an overview that helps position the narrowed focus of this chapter. Buddhaghosa takes two verses from the *Samyutta Nikāya*, one of the *sutta* collections of sayings by the Buddha, as the catalyst for the whole project. He writes,

When a wise man, established well in virtue,
Develops consciousness and understanding,
Then as a bhikkhu ardent and sagacious
He succeeds in disentangling this tangle.⁶

As discussed in the introduction, one of his biographies attests that the whole *Path of Purification* is a commentary on these verses. Interestingly, then, from an exegetical perspective Buddhaghosa immediately contextualizes the quotation (apparently, verses require context, which would speak against thinking of this as a reference book akin to a dictionary), and he uses the occasion of relating the verse's origin to further his own project. This verse, Buddhaghosa comments, comes about as an answer from the Buddha to the following question.

The inner tangle and the outer tangle—
This generation is entangled in a tangle.
And so I ask of Gotama this question:
Who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?⁷

This question is what the initial verses seek to answer, and so Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification*, if taken as a commentary on the initial verses, is answering exactly this question: who succeeds in disentangling this tangle? The problem he seeks to address is first of all the nature of the 'tangle' and the Buddha's response to it, but it is also a 'who' question. That question could refer to the Buddha, as in 'what teacher succeeds,' or it could refer more broadly to the question of the identity of the people who manage to become disentangled. Buddhaghosa addresses both angles.

⁶ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chap. I,1.

⁷ Buddhaghosa, chaps. I, 1.

Although Buddhaghosa jumps to the heart of the arguments of the *Path of Purification* by naming the tangle as the craving that characterizes experience, two contextual resonances of the term ‘tangle’ (*jaṭā*) hover around the verses and assist in making Buddhaghosa’s structure clearer. First, the term *jaṭā* relates etymologically to tangled or matted hair, particularly in brahmanical writing. The implication is not only that existence is tangled by craving but also that the tangle can be made worse by those who show an outer tangle of hair, as do ascetics in some Indian traditions. In other words, Buddhaghosa is differentiating Gotama’s (the Buddha’s) teaching from other Indian religious ideas that may, he is implying, make the tangle worse (note as well that the *bhikkhu* has a shaven head). This resonance is helpful not only for a reminder of the context of this literature, which often spars with other schools of Indian thought, but also because Buddhaghosa is already subtly suggesting that apparent religious wisdom may secretly bear its own problems. This theme returns throughout the text, and it has a parallel in Teresa’s worries that religious experiences can become their own obstacle to transformation.

Second, the term *jaṭā* also subtly resonates with *sutta*, the term used for the collection of the teachings and stories of the Buddha. These are ‘stories’ in much the same way that Plato’s dialogues or the gospels of Jesus use a narrative format to add interpretive depth to their teachings by offering a particular context for the teaching. While *sutta*’s full etymology as a term for the stories of the Buddha is (usefully) ambiguous, it does literally connote a thread or a string. The *suttas* themselves, of which there are 38 volumes in Pāli, form something of a tangle through their numerous narrative threads. These many narrative threads about the Buddha are further snarled when read together with the other parts of the canon, the monastic rule with its own narrative framings and the systematic philosophy. The actual practice of the Buddha, the actual path that he teaches, is thus also in need of untangling. Like with the resonance with the

wise ascetic's tangled hair, Buddhaghosa is linking untangling with a practical, unified approach within the tradition rather than the confusion of becoming lost in the many threads of the Buddha's teaching.

Inflected by these resonances of the term 'untangled,' Buddhaghosa's description of craving becomes clearer. By clarifying the Buddha's teaching and practice, the full knot of the situation is better seen. Becoming untangled is simultaneously a reflection on craving, on the distinctive nature of the Buddha's teaching, and the method for carrying that teaching out in effective way.

Buddhaghosa also interprets the verse as referencing the three higher trainings (as they are termed) that in turn structure the whole text—virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and understanding (*paññā*). Each of these characteristics becomes a heading for the three main sections of the book and the primary loci of reflection. Buddhaghosa then proceeds to describe how these three trainings relate to the metaphor of untangling. He writes that a monk, grown fearful of this tangle,

[S]tanding on the ground of virtue and taking up with the hand of protective-understanding exerted by the power of energy the knife of insight-understanding well-sharpened on the stone of concentration, might disentangle, cut away and demolish all the tangle of craving that had overgrown his own life's continuity. But it is at the moment of the path that he is said to be disentangling that tangle; at the moment of fruition he has disentangled the tangle and is worthy of the highest offerings in the world with its deities.⁸

I quote this remarkably complex sentence because it serves as the thesis statement for the text.

Buddhaghosa is describing a path, as the title of the texts suggests, that leads to Nibbāna, which he writes is what he means by "purification."⁹ Proceeding along the path requires virtue,

⁸ Buddhaghosa, chaps. I, 8.

⁹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. I, 5.

concentration, and understanding, and Buddhaghosa refines each of these terms throughout his text.

The central metaphor revolves around disentangling. In order to untangle a knot, the monk needs the right distance from the knot in order to be able to see its threads (‘standing on virtue’ becomes the repeated visual metaphor for this distance). In order to follow each individual thread, the monk needs concentration to see each thread and to sharpen his understanding. To pick out each thread with a knife, or perhaps to slice through the whole mess, the monk needs a protective and insight-powered understanding that can reach, recognize, and rend each individual thread. Crucially, the monk needs energy to carry out this process; ‘energy,’ which seems like an unnecessary word here, is a central theme for Buddhaghosa, as we will see. Once disentangled, Buddhaghosa emphasizes that the monk has succeeded. This process that entails the development of virtue, concentration, and understanding is neither an eternal journey nor a non-starter—it is a path that *arrives*, as long as we understand that arriving at Nibbāna entails something quite different than arriving in a place. We should note the stress that Buddhaghosa is placing on the reality of transformation wrought by following the path. Nibbāna is not a seeming, an illusion, or (to borrow a Christian phrase that is useful here) an eschatological already-but-not-yet.

Practically, this introduction suggests that the *Visuddhimagga* is more than a reference text or meditation manual. It instead describes a method and its methodology at once. It attempts to synthesize the Buddha’s teaching into a whole around the metaphor of disentangling, and it is clear from the outset that its preference is for holistic practice that makes the best sense of the Buddha’s teaching. Interpreting Buddhaghosa is not, therefore, a matter of finding the right page number, and we should be wary of assuming that Buddhaghosa’s heavy reliance on interpreting

suttas as a way to argue is a form of simple proof-texting. Maria Heim makes this point as well through her careful engagement with the multiple genres of literature that Buddhaghosa interprets in order to parse out the many dimensions of intention (*cetanā*). Engaging his text requires the same care any sufficiently complex phenomenological text requires.

Also, seeing the whole text as a description of a holistic but complex process with many steps and stages suggests that the text does not describe a strict linear progression from monastic ordination to Nibbāna. Buddhaghosa's long reflections and elucidations on the importance of temperament and character for the choice of meditation subjects ought to provide at least one level of caution against assuming the system here is a straightforward march. Rather, the text is drawn out as a linear progression for the sake of its teaching, meaning that the text is organized according to an order of teaching (an idea Buddhaghosa makes use of in describing the process of perception by the eye and other senses)¹⁰ rather than the order that some particular student follows because different students may progress in different areas at different rates. Reading the text as structured by an order of teaching rather than a necessary order suggests that while virtue (*sīla*) happens first in the text, it happens simultaneously with concentration and understanding in the living practice. Although Buddhaghosa (and other Buddhist thinkers) have sometimes been read as placing ethics far from meditation practice, living experience suggests a far more intertwined experience. After all, why should someone ethically disengage from the network of craving without gaining even a dim awareness of the nature of craving that is the development of understanding? How can the understanding be changed without some small strength of concentration? Buddhaghosa seems aware of the misunderstanding that arises from separating out virtue as the first topic, and his choice to include anecdotes of those who obtain Nibbāna

¹⁰ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XIV, 213.

within the very first chapter on virtue¹¹ seems to offer a rebuttal to the idea that virtue functions like the raft over the river—useful at first but discarded at later stages. (One wonders if the anecdotes were needed because this confusion around virtue might have belonged to some practitioners at the time as well.) Virtue is needed, and is affected by the developments, throughout the practice.

Note, too, that in what I have termed his thesis statement, Buddhaghosa describes the one who has disentangled the tangled as worthy to receive gifts and offerings. His claim here is about more than the status, authority, honor, or general amazingness that should accrue to one who travels the path that Buddhaghosa is describing. The words that Buddhaghosa uses here connect directly other parts of the text which are of primarily ethical import. Those who have and are fully untangled have a vital role to play in *worldly* ethics, and I return to these words at length in chapter 6. The moment, as Buddhaghosa writes, that a monk has accomplished this, the world benefits, and the monk gains a new responsibility to teach not from obligation but from freedom.

In order to engage Teresa's no-self presentation in the *Interior Castle*, this chapter focuses on the changing relationship of the person to mental constructions. Buddhaghosa highlights this transformed relationship as the shift within the practice that is the hallmark of the transition between being bound to samsara and being headed for Nibbāna, the shift that simultaneously allows a person to 'see' Nibbāna for the first time. In the untangling metaphor, this moment of seeing Nibbāna happens only with virtue providing sufficient distance, concentration providing the strength to attend to the threads, and sufficiently energized understanding. Focusing on this transition, which Buddhaghosa describes as gaining penetration understanding of mental constructions in order to open up the capacity to see Nibbāna, highlights the role of no-self practice in marking the transition from the realm of samsara to Nibbāna. This

¹¹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. I, 138, for example.

parallel is useful in illuminating Teresa's work marking the shift from the outer rooms to the inner empty room.

This chapter begins with a methodological introduction to Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification*, including an orientation to the section on understanding where Buddhaghosa most directly addresses the shift from seeing only samsara to seeing Nibbāna for the first time. The chapter continues with a section on the difficulties in speaking about Nibbāna and how Buddhaghosa addresses these challenges. The chapter then considers the transformation of understanding and particularly mental constructions as the site of transformation in shifting to being able to see Nibbāna.

Method: Conventional and Ultimate, Abhidhammic Analysis, and Divorce

The crossroads between practice and Nibbāna rests at the intersection of conventional and ultimate truth, two terms which also assist in orienting the reader to Buddhaghosa's work. These terms, 'conventional' and 'ultimate,' however, have a distinctive character in the Pāli texts different from its wider and better known use in the Mahayana tradition as well as its from its adoption by sources outside Buddhism altogether, like in Christian theology.¹² For Buddhaghosa's work, conventional truth is, as Maria Heim writes, "a colloquial idiom on those subjects and to whom it was appropriate," or in other words, everyday speech as utilized by the Buddha.¹³

Conventional truth can thus be quite complex and deep, but it reflects a less philosophically rigorous language. It reflects on the deep-seated beliefs that underlie our regular, everyday life in the language of everyday life. For example, we take subjects and objects to have

¹² See, for example, Joseph Stephen O'Leary, *Conventional and Ultimate Truth: A Key for Fundamental Theology*, 1st Edition edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

¹³ Maria Heim, "Buddhaghosa on the Phenomenology of Love and Compassion," ed. Jonardon Ganeri, *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, 2014.

a degree of permanence and stability independent of perception.¹⁴ If I feel hungry, I have an identity that remains stable enough to eat an apple, which I recognize as the same fruit that I have eaten many times before, and I am the same ‘I’ who feels satiated after eating. I reform my habit of eating cookies in order to be healthier, and so over time I enjoy the change in habit and (hopefully) weigh a few pounds less. I, meaning *me*, this body, mind, and personality, could also even eventually decide to be done with endless rounds of suffering and go forth from home to homeless, becoming a monk. Buddhaghosa alludes to this in interpreting the central verse on untangling by noting that it allows that a ‘man’ actually can become wise through virtue, concentration, and understanding. Conventional truth is not simple or naïve, as its name might suggest, but rather emerges in connection with our everyday experience and gives shape to our ethical lives. I experience happiness, and so I try to discern which of my actions led me to it. I suffer, and so I hope to avoid it in the future.

According to Buddhaghosa, however, in order to escape suffering, the monk likely needs philosophical tools, developing the perspective of ultimate truth, to work from a different angle at the same time. Strictly speaking, the only ultimate truth is what remains undistorted by the changing matrix of reality, namely, Nibbāna. (I will turn to Buddhaghosa’s reflections on the troubles of even speaking about Nibbāna in a moment.) Ultimate truth more broadly is the view from Nibbāna, or even better, a view from those who have nirvanized. It offers a technical analysis of the causal factors that make up experience and reality.¹⁵

Ultimate truth troubles the conventional by pointing out that it is a convention, a selection of agreed upon realities that make navigating life simpler but are, nonetheless, illusory.

Conventional truth rests on a polite fiction, namely, our sense of permanence as subjects as well

¹⁴ Collins, *Selfless Persons*, 150ff.

¹⁵ Heim, “Buddhaghosa on the Phenomenology of Love and Compassion.”

as the permanence or universality of objects in the world. In the feeling of hunger, the 'I' is only implied, never directly experienced; more accurately, a feeling of hunger comes about that emerges shaped from numerous other factors, like pain and habit.

Apples may provide a convenient and less contentious example than our feelings of hunger. Apples have a reality that is partly material and partly cultural, but it is not fixed. What I call an apple did not exist as a sweet fruit two hundred years ago—sweet apples are a relatively new, cultivated phenomenon, genetically related to the previous fruit but carefully cultivated through genetic chance and tree cuttings. Previous apples and contemporary apples are not the same—if handed a sour apple of centuries ago when I asked for an apple, I would tell the giver that a mistake had been made. Even now, everything that I term an apple is related genetically but is not absolutely identical. Trying to come up with a name for every individual, differentiated 'apple' would be impractical at the level of the impossible; the reason to call these things 'apples' is so that we do not have to invent QR codes for every individual fruit that has ever existed. This is why an 'apple' has conventional reality. Many factors go into determining what makes an apple, and so it is conventional truth that a particular fruit is an apple. However, on other occasions, we may want to determine its precise genetic code, or unique role in history (should 'to the fairest' be written on it, for example). For the practice of ultimate truth, picking apart convention also changes our skillfulness with this kind of ultimate analysis. Buddhaghosa coaches the analytic techniques of ultimate truth as a highly intense and focused enumeration of the desires, culture, language, atoms, and more that go into making each 'apple' distinct. Ultimate truth picks apart our experience, privileging not regular language but rather the highest and most careful kind of phenomenological analysis.

Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification* thus needs to incorporate both conventional and ultimate perspectives in order to offer a holistic picture of the practice. It bears repeating that ultimate truth is not *better than* conventional truth; indeed, Buddhaghosa uses both and is particularly concerned with where they overlap. Note that the *sutta* verses that provide the form for the text, as well as Buddhaghosa's analysis of their metaphor, take place in the language of conventional truth. Not accidentally, the structure of the whole practice has a conventional shape in order to, as Heim suggests, be appropriate to those who read it, even if the practice also adopts strategies of ultimate truth analysis.

Within the text, the conventional narrative of a monk's individual life meets the ultimate in Nibbāna. Both truths have a role to play in the process. If a monk believed he was not the same monk who could reach Nibbāna, why bother to start on the arduous process at all? If a monk believed in no reality outside of suffering, why not make the best of a bad world? Buddhaghosa needs to speak from both conventional and ultimate perspectives throughout his description of practices. Moreover, Buddhaghosa does not begin with conventional truth and end with ultimate. Rather, he frequently offers complex philosophical analysis paired with folksy metaphors and stories, a method of argumentation that allows him to draw on both conventional and ultimate perspectives on reality.¹⁶

Ñāṇamoli, translator of the *Path of Purification*, suggests "metaphorical"¹⁷ as a gloss for Buddhaghosa's use of the term conventional (*sammuti*), which offers an insight into Buddhaghosa's deploying of the term. While one frequent use of 'conventional' in Buddhist studies evokes the way in which conventional truth reflects everyday actions and language,¹⁸ Buddhaghosa's understanding of 'convention' has as much to do with metaphor as common

¹⁶ Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things*, 2013, 182.

¹⁷ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. VIII, 1.

¹⁸ Pali Text Society, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English dictionary*, 696.

consent. Conventional truth is metaphorical truth, to act *as if* something were the case. I treat all the things that I call ‘apples’ in a similar way *as if* they were all identical. In this sense, an ‘apple’ is a metaphor with a whole collection of factors behind it (material, cultural, and so on).

Ultimate truth is the practice of disentangling conventional truth’s useful metaphors into their underlying factors (which also need disentangling—as we will see, ultimate truth has the character of a method or practice rather than foundation). Ultimate truth is (or attempts to be) non-metaphorical truth, an analysis that offers direct knowledge of the factors of experience rather than a representation. Language, as a representational medium, remains conventional, and as previously noted, ultimate truth can be found in a strict sense only outside language, namely, with Nibbāna.¹⁹ The process of developing sensitivity to an ultimate perspective changes our understanding of the world and, Buddhaghosa argues, opens up the capacity to see Nibbāna.

Seeing conventional truth as metaphorical helps make sense, too, of the way that the text of the *Path of Purification* does not offer a clear, linear progression from a stage where a practitioner needs conventional truth to a stage where ultimate truth supplants it. No moment arrives in the course of training where conventional/metaphorical truth ceases and ultimate truth becomes the preferred perspective because both truths, understood rightly, have a role to play at each level of transformation. Buddhaghosa’s habit of mingling narrative with analysis at each level along the path reveals it as a tactic rather than quirk, and he turns to metaphor, image, and simile *more* frequently when describing Nibbāna because it offers particular problems and perils for misunderstanding as something that is not, properly speaking, a ‘thing’ or something that shares in existence at all; something that is obviously a metaphor, like an extinguished fire or homelessness, has an advantage over something that purports to explain Nibbāna in language with perfect precision. The discourse of ultimate truth analysis may better transform the

¹⁹ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chap. XVI,65.

understanding for perceiving Nibbāna, but a self-reflective conventional truth discourse is less likely to paint mistaken pictures of Nibbāna. I take one purpose of Buddhaghosa's tactic of working through both truths to be that together, the truths provide a clarified metaphor or a self-aware picture.

Seeing the value of each level of truth is helpful for the argument here. The focus of this chapter will turn to the pivotal moment in realization that enables a monk's 'seeing' of Nibbāna for the first time, but this turn should not be understood as an abandoning of convention or metaphor. Even Buddhaghosa's preferred metaphor for what changes in proceeding to Nibbāna, the visual metaphor of changed perception and coming to see it, suggested as well by the land-finding crow epigraph that heads this chapter, occurs in the language of conventional truth. Buddhaghosa relies on metaphors all the way to the end, and so the shift to Nibbāna is not, for Buddhaghosa, the flatfooted rejection of the world that we might imagine.

In the section on understanding (*paññā*), where Buddhaghosa describes the shift required to see Nibbāna, Buddhaghosa analyzes the basic factors of reality as they appear to us. His arguments read in our context like a phenomenological analysis of experience. Buddhaghosa offers an analysis of what makes up every part of our experience, including every discrete causal factor and their interactions, by drawing on and following the style of the Abhidhamma. The Abhidhamma is the third 'basket' of Pāli canonical scripture, the genre of philosophical analysis that accompanies the Sutta narratives and Vinaya's monastic rule of life. This style of analysis breaks down every aspect of experience into its smallest component parts and categorizes them. Material reality (1), its impingement on sense organs to create perception (2), the feeling of that sense data as filtered by desire and concept (3), the thoughts that accompany and underlie the sense data (4), and the construction of all of these factors at each moment into something

recognized as experience (5), form the basic five groupings (or *khandā* in Pāli, often translated into English as the unpoetic ‘aggregate’) of experience. By analyzing experience in this way, the Abhidhamma provides a philosophical complement to the Suttas and the Vinaya. Naming the whole situation of existence ‘experience’ is not, then, to assume an ‘experiencer,’ but rather a way of highlighting the degree of re-understanding that Abhidhammic analysis hopes to accomplish.

However, whether the Abhidhamma’s method ultimately serves as an ontology of the basic building blocks of being, or strictly a phenomenological method untied to a specific ontology, depends on how we read Buddhaghosa; both opinions are present in the tradition. Following Maria Heim’s careful reading of Buddhaghosa’s analysis of the Abhidhamma, I see Buddhaghosa’s work as a commitment to the phenomenological method offered in the Abhidhamma rather than a specific ontology.²⁰ In making her argument, Heim skillfully points out that Buddhaghosa relates the tradition that the Abhidhamma is what emerges from the *jātaka* tales, the stories that tell many of the innumerable previous lives of the Buddha as he prepared for his final rebirth. This seemingly minor point is enormously telling in determining how to read this style of analysis. The *jātaka* tales explore an incredible variety of human, animal, demonic, and divine experiences, as the Buddha was also reborn in a wide variety of forms before coming to his last rebirth. If the Abhidhamma emerges as a reflection on the diverse experiences of sentience, including animals as well as supernatural beings, the data set for that reflection is remarkably diverse and always open to new elements. Understood this way, the Abhidhamma offers neither a finalized ontology nor an ontologized rejection of ontology, but a style of analysis that finds both content and critique from the diverse exigencies of experience. Although

²⁰ Heim, “Buddhaghosa on the Phenomenology of Love and Compassion.”

other Buddhist thinkers may approach the Abhidhamma differently, Buddhaghosa sees it as a powerful method for reshaping the mind through the analysis of experience.

As a method of phenomenology and analysis of experience, the work of obtaining a view of ultimate truth is never completed in the text. As Heim points out, Buddhaghosa is less interested in the exact number of factors that constitute experience (a number that might even vary from person to person and context to context²¹) than he is in the effect that analyzing experience into discrete categories has on the mind. This places Buddhaghosa in the position of being deeply but not ultimately committed to his particular analysis of experience. The method itself is the point,²² which is not a way to avoid Buddhaghosa's arguments but rather to understand their intended target. Buddhaghosa terms his text a *magga*, a path, suggesting its methodological character. Buddhaghosa's method, then, is one which prepares the monk to work with conventional truths as what they are, metaphor, and prepare the mind to see reality through the sophisticated practice of attempting to atomize each aspect of experience.

The lynchpin of experience that this analysis seeks to transform comes in the role of mental constructions (*sāṅkhāra*), the gathering factor of experience that is present in each moment that was mentioned above as aggregate (4). Much of this chapter concerns the moment that a monk changes the way that he inhabits mental constructions, the moment in the path that opens the capacity to perceive Nibbāna for the first time. However, an overview of Buddhaghosa's description of this shift provides an orientation to the movement away from mental constructions as well as providing a helpful concrete example of his method.

After offering an Abhidhammic analysis of the three particular problems common to all mental constructions, and after describing the process of the meditator as he becomes

²¹ Maria Heim and Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, "In a Double Way: Nāma-Rūpa in Buddhaghosa's Phenomenology," n.d., 9.

²² Heim and Ram-Prasad, 31.

disenchanted with experience and sees it as “void,” the monk then adopts a “neutral” stance toward it.²³ Buddhaghosa immediately turns to a story to describe this shift from the subtle, poisoned happiness of mental constructions to gaining equanimity toward them. Buddhaghosa provides this metaphor of the experience.

Suppose a man were married to a lovely, desirable, charming wife and so deeply in love with her as to be unable to bear separation from her for a moment. He would be disturbed and displeased to see her standing or sitting or talking or laughing with another man, and would be very unhappy; but later, when he had found out the woman’s faults, and wanting to get free, had divorced her, he would no more take her as “mine”; and thereafter, even though he saw her doing whatever it might be with whomsoever it might be, he would not be disturbed or displeased, but would on the contrary be indifferent and neutral. So too this [meditator], wanting to get free from all mental constructions, discerns mental constructions by the contemplation of reflection; then, seeing nothing to be taken as “I” or “mine,” he abandons both terror and delight and becomes indifferent and neutral towards all formations. When he knows and sees thus, his heart retreats, retracts and recoils from the three kinds of becoming ...; his heart no longer goes out to them. Either equanimity or repulsiveness is established. Just as water drops retreat, retract and recoil on a lotus leaf that slopes a little and do not spread out, so too his heart ... And just as a fowl’s feather or a shred of sinew thrown on a fire retreats, retracts and recoils, and does not spread out, so too his heart retreats, retracts and recoils from the three kinds of becoming ... Either equanimity or repulsiveness is established.²⁴

Despite Buddhaghosa’s emotionally simplistic description of the dissolution of a marriage, the metaphor offers a poignant picture of the shift required of the monk through metaphor, at the level of conventional truth. The monk must fall out of love mental constructions. At first, the relationship between monk and mental construction seemed to be a fruitful, generative, pleasurable one. However, the relationship itself is also the cause of incredible suffering, which is made more complex through the unwillingness to see the mental constructions for what they are. After a divorce, the pain caused in a person in the dissolution of the marriage takes years to work out. However, in the same way that through time and work a person might see even a former beloved with equanimity, a monk comes to see mental constructions differently. This,

²³ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XXI, 61.

²⁴ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXI, 62–63.

Buddhaghosa writes, is what gaining equanimity toward mental constructions entails, and this precise shift is exactly what opens the capacity to see Nibbāna for the first time.

Buddhaghosa then continues. “But if this [knowledge] sees Nibbāna, the state of peace, as peaceful, it rejects the occurrence of all mental constructions and enters only into Nibbāna. If it does not see Nibbāna as peaceful, it occurs again and again with mental constructions as its object, like the sailors’ crow.”²⁵ The very process of becoming divorced from mental constructions has trained the mind to see Nibbāna as itself, Nibbāna as peaceful.²⁶ Buddhaghosa again draws on an image, the one that serves as an epigraph to this chapter, to show the way that the appropriately trained mind looks again and again until it finds Nibbāna itself, like a crow searching for land from a ship.

The pair of stories, divorce and the land-finding crow, offer a roadmap for the tipping point between gaining distance from mental constructions and the capacity to recognize Nibbāna. By investigating the terms invoked in the examples—Nibbāna, the ‘understanding’ which shifts to see Nibbāna, and mental constructions themselves—Buddhaghosa’s argument on the relationship between no-self practice and obtaining Nibbāna becomes clear, and can then in turn be related to his understanding of ethics.

Also, these two stories offer an example of Buddhaghosa’s method at work. Woven through the stories are the terms at which he has levelled an Abhidhammic style of analysis (Nibbāna, understanding, equanimity, mental constructions). These terms, made precise through analysis from an ultimate perspective, finesse Buddhaghosa’s point. Nibbāna is neither a void

²⁵ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXI, 64.

²⁶ Buddhaghosa does not thoroughly parse this ‘as,’ but its implications are interesting. The ‘as’ suggests that Nibbāna may in fact *always* appear to the understanding in the tangle of experience, but it does not appear *as* itself, as peaceful. This implies that Nibbāna is already a most subtle part of the tangle of all experience, one which remains lost in the knot due to the nature of the tangle itself. At the least, this implication places Buddhaghosa much closer to Nāgārjuna’s thought in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* than is traditionally thought, although significant differences still mark their thought.

nor an object; understanding is not cognitive mastery but the shape of our pre-reflective perceived existence in the world; equanimity describes a state that is neither for nor against a particular occurrence; and mental constructions are desire-inflected gatherings that make up our perception of the world. However, at the same time, Buddhaghosa is offering a description of conventional/metaphorical truth. These images depend on apparently lasting images of personhood, including a husband and a ship, that experience the process of change. They provide an imaginable framework for the way that disenchantment from mental constructions can occur, going so far as to evoke particular emotions (through divorce and being lost at sea) in order to emphasize the importance of the shift.

Note, too, that these images mingle the conventional and ultimate perspectives rather than treat them as parallel. The conventional/ultimate distinction in Buddhaghosa's thought is a useful heuristic for studying his analysis but not an exhaustive picture. In the same way that we should not imagine that the conventional ceases at a certain point in the development of a monk as he turns to the ultimate, we also should not imagine that the argument occurs on two planes, conventional and ultimate, that never interconnect. Buddhaghosa is not carrying out two simultaneous descriptions but rather working with two related forms of analysis. The terms, fine-tuned through an ultimate-style of analysis, serve in the conventional narrative; the conventional narrative more easily serves as a metaphor to point to the ultimate. The risk of conventional truth is that it is taken too literally; the risk of ultimate truth is that its analysis into parts and categories removes context.

Talking about Nibbāna

Nibbāna presents particular difficulties when talking or writing about it. It is described, for example, as both an utter extinguishing and as bliss, as well as neither existing nor not

existing. Buddhaghosa's language grows so circumspect when speaking of Nibbāna that, combined with his compassionate attitude toward anyone who remains within the round of rebirths to accrue merit, a few modern commentators have doubted that Buddhaghosa seriously believed that obtaining Nibbāna was possible.²⁷ While the structure of the *Path of Purification* reflects the tripartite aspects necessary for pursuing Nibbāna, and the stated intent is to provide a synthesis of Pāli texts and practice into a path for obtaining Nibbāna, the actual content of the text also reflects on the difficulties of saying anything about it.

As Steven Collins has very helpfully pointed out, language itself twists away from Nibbāna. Practitioners do not 'obtain' Nibbāna, either as we might obtain something from a store or as we might obtain a reward for something done well. No one reaches Nibbāna, as if it were place to be traveled. Collins coins the unpleasant sounding verbal form of 'nirvanize'²⁸ in English, in part because 'nirvanize' frequently appears as the verb in the Pāli but also to indicate the sense that Nibbāna is more like a thing done than a state achieved, reflecting the actual role of Nibbāna for a monk. Verbalizing the term offers its own pitfalls—much as Nibbāna is not a state we can visit, it is also not something we can do on a Saturday—but it more naturally captures the actual role that Nibbāna plays. The *Path of Purification* describes the method that prepares and equips a monk to nirvanize.

Buddhaghosa is forthright and reflective about these difficulties. He directly addresses them in an excursus on Nibbāna in the third section of the text devoted to understanding. The excursus occurs during Buddhaghosa's treatment of the Four Noble Truths (the traditional summary of the Buddha's teaching ascribed to the Buddha) because, importantly, Nibbāna is one of those truths. The first truth, the truth of suffering, receives an extended treatment by looking

²⁷ Shrivasti Dhammika, *The Broken Buddha: Critical Reflections on Theravada and a Plea for a New Buddhism* (Singapore: Nimmala Group, 2006).

²⁸ Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, 2006, 193.

backward through the elements, bases, aggregates, and faculties—the traditional categories of Abhidhammic analysis that constitute experience—and showing that what characterizes each part of the matrix of factors is suffering. This analysis of suffering offers the culminating moment for this exploration of the factors of experience. The second truth, the origin of suffering, receives a cursory explanation under the heading of the Fourth Noble Truths because the chapters following this one deal with dependent origination, which is explained to be the origin of suffering, in greater deal.

The third of the truths, the truth of the cessation of suffering which is Nibbāna, receives a different type of extended analysis. At first, Buddhaghosa offers the same explanation that each truth receives. He clarifies the language used in various verses of the Pāli canon in order to synthesize their teachings together, and he offers an analysis of why the Buddha’s method for leaving suffering behind works where others do not. Suffering is interwoven with and so inflects all experience, a point he reiterates by discussing the grammar of the second truth’s phrasing in Pāli.²⁹ Buddhaghosa praises the Buddha’s approach to suffering because it addresses its subtle origin and not simply the experiences of suffering that derive from that origin.³⁰

However, Buddhaghosa pauses his explanation of the truths because the verses in the Pāli canon that address Nibbāna suggest a problem particular to the third truth. Like some other primary concepts, Nibbāna has a number of synonyms in the canon, like “fading away, cessation, . . . relinquishing it, letting it go, not relying on it.”³¹ He continues with the classic analysis that he often gives to pivotal and complex terms. He writes, “[Nibbāna under these many names] has peace as its characteristic. Its function is not to die; or its function is to comfort. It is manifested

²⁹ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XIV, 61.

³⁰ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 62–63.

³¹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 65.

as the signless; or it is manifested as nondiversification.”³² As with many of Buddhaghosa’s terse analyses, many interesting arguments appear in a short space (the equating of not dying with comfort, for example) but the crucial question for the excursus hinges on the term ‘nondiversification’ (or *nippapañca*).

The translator Ñāṇamoli offers a helpful Pāli *sutta* (M.I.111) for understanding what is stake in the term. He quotes,

Friends, due to eye and to a visible object, eye-consciousness arises. The coincidence of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What a man feels, that he perceives. What he perceives, he thinks about. What he thinks about, he diversifies (*papañceti*). Owing to his having diversified, the evaluation of diversifying perceptions besets a man with respect to past, future, and present visible objects...³³

To diversify, then, argues Ñāṇamoli, is to create an object or representation of something, as we necessarily do in language. Nibbāna is the cessation of precisely that work of representation, but this poses a problem because speaking or words of any kind entail representation. Further, the more practical problem is that not everyone has perceived Nibbāna. How can Buddhaghosa talk about it without utterly betraying it?

This question leads Buddhaghosa to shift genres in order to deal with this question. He moves from his standard exposition to the question and answer format common in other Buddhist philosophical texts but unusual within the *Path of Purification*. The shift is highly significant for at least two reasons. First, by adopting the question and answer format, Buddhaghosa deliberately shows language as well as writes it. By becoming a dialogue, Buddhaghosa reminds the reader that we can only wonder about the role of diversifying, of language, by ‘diversifying’ language. We have no magic way to step outside of language, but we

³² Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 66.

³³ Buddhaghosa, 520, n. 17.

can become self-conscious of its work. Buddhaghosa makes language's role obvious by stepping into the genre of conversation, of question and answer.

Second, the shift in genre highlights the most significant subtext of the whole of the *Path of Purification*, namely, the vital importance of teaching. In order to speak directly to the issues, he invites an imaginary student into the text to play our role and ask tough questions. This shifts the success or failure of the excursus not onto whether the words and analysis are right, which is something Buddhaghosa goes to great lengths to do well throughout the rest of the text, but onto whether the teaching comes across and is understood. By foregrounding language, he invites the reader to consider what language does not accomplish; by writing about teaching, he hints that he is interested in describing something that cannot be subject to the kinds of analysis evident throughout the text.

Buddhaghosa begins the Q&A by directly addressing whether Nibbāna exists. He writes, “[Question 1] Is Nibbāna non-existent because it is unapprehendable, like the hare's horn?³⁴”, and then offers two answers. First, Nibbāna is not non-existent because it is “apprehendable by the [right] means.”³⁵ Nibbāna can be seen with the right method, and that method, writes Buddhaghosa, is what is being explained in the *Path of Purification* through the sections on virtue, concentration, and understanding. Like a trained baker sees bread differently because she understands its composition in a trained way, Buddhaghosa claims that Nibbāna is not non-existent because anyone can see it by following the method that he lays out in the text. Second, Buddhaghosa argues that if Nibbāna is non-existent, then the Buddha's “way would be futile.”³⁶ This second point seems to acknowledge that the practices that cultivate the ability to ‘see’ Nibbāna are quite lengthy and hard, but that we know they are not futile because, presumably,

³⁴ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 67.

³⁵ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 67.

³⁶ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 68.

his reader can see those who have been obviously shaped by their encounter with Nibbāna.

While this point has a faint echo of the Indian philosophical debate around *pramāṇa*, trustworthy means of awareness, in choosing direct experience with a correctly trained mind above an authority, Buddhaghosa's point aims, as we will see later, more directly at ethics. The role of the selfless, the arahant, as well as those who have advanced far along that path, includes evidencing the non-futility of the Buddha's path as a sign of hope.

The language of the question is quite technical in pointing out that Nibbāna is 'not non-existent.' Nibbāna does not exist like an object in the world, subject to the various difficulties that attend upon normal experience. However, it is also not purely imaginary and never encountered, like horns on a rabbit.³⁷ The problem here is one of language, and that is an important and not ancillary problem. To say that Nibbāna exists is right insofar as it can be perceived and is real, but wrong insofar as it is not subject to the conditions of existence (like suffering). To claim that Nibbāna does not exist is also right inasmuch as its reality originates outside existence but wrong insofar as it gives the impression that it is unreal or purely imaginary, like unicorns or horned rabbits. In either case, language conveys the wrong idea about Nibbāna because, as a representation or diversification, it entails an *idea* and not the perception itself. The issue here parallels the problem with conventional or metaphorical language, where the issue is not with the language itself but our tendency to hear its metaphorical representation as the thing itself.

³⁷ Note that this is one of the frequent and standard examples in Indian thought for something that does not exist in reality, much like we sometimes speak about unicorns. I will confess to being confused by this example upon first encountering it. Growing up in Texas, one frequently sees in shops a stuffed jackalope, a jackrabbit with antlers attached, and so the idea of a horned rabbit did not strike me as immediately absurd as it must in Buddhaghosa's context. While obviously not a real living entity, they are real in a sense. Buddhaghosa, unfamiliar with this later tradition, is using the example as something that *obviously* does not exist.

Buddhaghosa's guiding principle for solving this problem is a pedagogical one. By saying that Nibbāna does not exist, he fears to be more misleading than by saying it exists. To say Nibbāna does not exist gives the wrong idea to potential students and suffering people, who, as Buddhaghosa has pointed out a few lines above, may be desperate for the comfort of Nibbāna. Thus, although speaking and writing about Nibbāna entails the potential for misunderstanding at every moment, the risk is necessary.

Buddhaghosa then turns from the concern that Nibbāna may be confused with existence to the confusion of Nibbāna with sheer absence or void. If it were only the absence of the aggregates, the many causal factors that make up the world and experience, it would not be perceivable. Moreover, in many circumstances, Nibbāna and the aggregates coexist for a time, namely, in arahants, those who have not only glimpsed Nibbāna but also have nirvanized.³⁸ It is also more than the absence of defilements (the desire-shaped habits that in turn shape experience) because the 'seeing' of Nibbāna entails seeing a reality beyond the absence of experience shaped by suffering.³⁹ Nibbāna cannot be merely a form of destruction at all because Nibbāna "would be temporary, have the characteristic of being formed, and be obtainable regardless of right effort; and precisely because of its having formed characteristics it would be included in the formed, and it would be burning with the fires of greed, etc., and because of its burning it would follow that it was suffering."⁴⁰ Destruction, rather, is a "metaphor" for Nibbāna,⁴¹ a conventional language shorthand for the removal of defilements that occurs along the path of developing virtue, concentration, and understanding. Buddhaghosa prefers the

³⁸ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XVI, 68.

³⁹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 16.

⁴⁰ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 69.

⁴¹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 70.

shorthand phrase, ‘Nibbāna is not non-existent,’ intending a sensitivity to rhetoric beyond the law of noncontradiction.

At this stage of the dialogue, the questioner seems to throw his hands into the air and demand, succinctly, to know what makes this all so hard to talk about. This small question, tucked away in the sixteenth chapter, provides Buddhaghosa an opportunity to justify both his understanding of Nibbāna and the reason for his text. The questioner asks, “[Q. 7] Why is it not stated in its own form?,” which is to ask why Buddhaghosa cannot simply come out and describe it instead of offering hundreds of pages of text about the method for coming to see it. The answerer replies,

[A.] Because of its extreme subtlety. And its extreme subtlety is established because it inclined the Blessed One to inaction, [that is, to not teaching the Dhamma] and because a Noble One’s eye is needed to see it. It is not shared by all because it can only be reached by one who is possessed of the path. And it is uncreated because it has no first beginning.⁴²

The answer here remains quite close to the first question and answer—Nibbāna requires specific training in order to be apprehended, and here he mentions the Noble Ones (*ariya*), the name for those who have glimpsed Nibbāna and begun the process, potentially over several lifetimes, of nirvanizing. Here, however, Buddhaghosa emphasizes precisely how difficult Nibbāna is to see. Its subtlety caused even the Buddha to consider not teaching about it—note again the recourse to pedagogical reasoning to address problems of language. Moreover, the path itself does not create Nibbāna (it has no first beginning); rather, the path creates the possibility of ‘seeing’ it.

Buddhaghosa calls Nibbāna uncreated (*appabhavo*—more literally, outside of becoming)⁴³ in order to call attention to its special status. In word choice, Buddhaghosa reserves the term ‘uncreated’ (*appabhavo*) only for Nibbāna. To clarify that status, he then considers in

⁴² Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 70–71.

⁴³ Pali Text Society, *The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English dictionary*, 449.

several questions whether Nibbāna’s uncreated status is identical with the atomistic elements that make up experience.⁴⁴ The questioner pushes this angle, wondering if Nibbāna’s uncreated reality is like that of the atomic particles that constitute experience. Buddhaghosa again argues for Nibbāna’s difference from existence again by appealing to perception—those trained in the path can come to see Nibbāna, but they cannot come to see the momentary atoms that form the causal chains of experience. This point may appear minor, another way of differentiating Nibbāna’s reality from both a mere void and from existence. However, when he writes, “the atom and so on have not been established as facts,”⁴⁵ Buddhaghosa provides further reason for thinking of Abhidhammic analysis as a method rather than an ontological description. The direct perception of Nibbāna offers a surer fact than the inferred atomistic components of experience.

Buddhaghosa summarizes his excursus on Nibbāna in this way. He writes, “The aforesaid logical reasoning proves that only this [that is, Nibbāna] is permanent [precisely because it is uncreated]; and it is immaterial because it transcends the individual essence of matter.”⁴⁶ Nibbāna, then, has a reality outside of the complex matrix of existence. This results, Buddhaghosa continues, in two related ways of coming to nirvanize, to not only glimpse Nibbāna but arrive at it. The first occurs when an arahant, someone who has arrived at Nibbāna, arrives but has the lingering fruits of previous actions still burning away their results. The arahant generates nothing new, but the old actions still proceed along until exhausted. Notable among the previous actions is the life element—some arahants continue to live for a time even after nirvanizing. The second way of coming to Nibbāna, which is the ultimate destination of the first group as well, is the reaching of Nibbāna without the remaining results of previous kamma, meaning the cessation of life with all other factors.

⁴⁴ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XVI, 72.

⁴⁵ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 72.

⁴⁶ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 73.

Buddhaghosa then concludes the section on Nibbāna by connecting it to the larger path of the whole text. Nibbāna can be reached by persevering at changing understanding in order to see the “unconstructed.”⁴⁷ These key terms, changing the role of construction in understanding, reflect what needs to change in order to see Nibbāna and what needs to cease in order to see it.

At the end of the same chapter, Buddhaghosa offers another set of analytical tools for clarifying the difficulty in speaking about Nibbāna. He differentiates between “knowledge as idea and knowledge as penetration.”⁴⁸ Knowledge as idea occurs from hearing about the Four Noble Truths, perhaps memorizing or reflecting on them, and this kind of knowledge is what it means to know as an idea. Knowledge as penetration occurs by actualizing the truths. The difference between idea and penetration helps make sense of the fact that both conventional and ultimate ways of knowing can nonetheless remain only ideas, entertained but not internalized. Ultimate truth can be approached as a philosophical game, taken up in the study and discarded upon leaving the room; conventional truth can be shared as advice to another person that we have never followed ourselves.

Buddhaghosa also further differentiates the Four Noble Truths into two categories, the mundane and the supramundane.⁴⁹ The first two truths, that of suffering’s pervasiveness and its origin in experience, are profound but also mundane, and their profound mundanity causes confusion in understanding the first two truths because our perception of them is conditioned by (badly-formed) habits. However, because they are mundane, we can gain penetration knowledge of suffering without seeing Nibbāna. These distinctions are fine-grained, but Buddhaghosa is making the point that we can know in a profound, existential way the suffering that is attendant

⁴⁷ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 74. Adjusting here Ñāṇamoli’s “unformed” to better reflect the suggested connection to *saṅkhāra* in *asaṅkhātam*.

⁴⁸ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 84.

⁴⁹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 103–104.

upon existence without having developed the capacity to see Nibbāna. The second two truths, including the truth of Nibbāna, are profound and supramundane, meaning that the difficulty in understanding stems partially from our badly formed habits but more directly from our inability to see something outside of experience, which requires training.

Buddhaghosa's point is interesting here and worth clarifying. The mundane and supramundane are both subject to misunderstanding but for different reasons. I may misunderstand a mundane object, like a tree, in a nearly infinite number of ways. I may see it only briefly and mistake it for a person; I may believe that it does not need water to survive; or, as Buddhaghosa would argue, I might mistake the collection of attributes that leads me to think of a tree with some essential and enduring tree-ness. These various mistakes require different kinds of remedies, which are more or less difficult in shaping my experience of the tree. However, supramundane knowledge is subject to misunderstanding primarily in one way, namely, by mistaking the supramundane 'object' as any kind of object at all, however well we understand mundane objects.

Speaking of Nibbāna thus requires a particular kind of care, attending, as Steven Collins argues, to the silences of the discourse.⁵⁰ Filling in what Nibbāna 'is,' what Collins refers to as the productive silences within the discourse, misses the very critiques that Buddhaghosa has raised about the extreme subtlety of Nibbāna. However, we need also to notice that for all its subtlety and qualifications, Buddhaghosa does discuss Nibbāna, particularly as related to the transformations necessary to 'see' it and because these transformations require teaching, which entails language, he does not simply smile and mysteriously walk away. Rather, working primarily from conventional, mundane knowledge, Buddhaghosa describes the process of how one gains the eyes of the Noble Ones and what seeing means in this context.

⁵⁰ Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, 2006, 188–90.

Understanding

The transformation leading to Nibbāna hinges most directly on what Buddhaghosa terms *paññā*, translated as ‘understanding.’ The term is as flexible in meaning in Pāli as in English, and so Buddhaghosa refines what the terms means. Within the whole *Path of Purification*, ‘understanding’ is the name of the third aspect, alongside virtue and concentration, necessary for obtaining Nibbāna. The three sections depend upon one another, as discussed in the introduction, and Buddhaghosa discusses that interconnection in order to clarify what he means by ‘understanding.’

The needed transformation in understanding requires virtue so that a person can receive instruction (he notes that the unvirtuous are not only difficult to live with but downright “uninstructable”⁵¹), and also because of the deep perversion of understanding native to the unvirtuous. The unvirtuous person, writes Buddhaghosa, “Though he fancies he is happy, yet he suffers because he reaps suffering as told in the Discourse on the Mass of Fire.”⁵² Buddhaghosa proceeds to relate this Discourse, in which the Buddha teaches that the unvirtuous would be better off hugging great flaming masses of fire to their bodies rather than the seemingly good objects (food, sex, comfort, prestige) that they desire because the flaming mass of fire would at least have the benefit of being more self-evidently truthful, showing that all craving causes suffering. The desired objects mislead and bind to samsara.⁵³ The unvirtuous tend to lack understanding because their craving constantly deceives, offering relief that increases and perpetuates the cycle of craving. Being teachable means being able to listen to, evaluate, and adopt new education, which requires both a capacity for being instructed and a certain distance from the thrall of desires. Understanding needs virtue as a way to provide a reflective distance

⁵¹ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. I, 154.

⁵² Buddhaghosa, chaps. I, 154.

⁵³ Buddhaghosa, chaps. I, 155 and following.

from the intense dynamism of craving. Note, too, that the dynamic also flows the other way in that a reshaped understanding benefits virtue; by coming to see even obliquely the underlying structure of craving in understanding, virtue becomes easier and more natural by appearing reasonable.

Buddhaghosa also reiterates that transformed understanding requires a developed concentration, the ability to apply steady thought to the issues at hand and to attend to the subtlety of experience.⁵⁴ We naturally have trouble examining a single puzzle for any length of time, and our understanding requires great strength and patience to see. Developing concentration provides other benefits of use in shaping understanding—for example, providing an opportunity to see and notice things not previously noticed in a way somewhat analogous to Nibbāna—but its primary purpose in this process is to assist in the transformation of a person in order to ‘see’ Nibbāna. Note, too, that concentration benefits from understanding, which provides a reason for the long and laborious hours spent meditating and developing concentration.

Buttressed by virtue and concentration, developing understanding is the most direct development required for seeing Nibbāna. While the whole of the *Path of Purification* relies on the metaphor of untangling a knot for its order and structure, the section on understanding adds a new image for the development of understanding, that of a tree.⁵⁵ Buddhaghosa describes virtue and concentration as the tree’s roots, providing the strength for holding the tree up. The soil is the truth about mundane knowledge, categorized for Buddhaghosa in the “aggregates, bases, elements, faculties, truths, dependent origination, and so on.”⁵⁶ The trunk of the tree grows

⁵⁴ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVI, 100.

⁵⁵ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XIV, 32.

⁵⁶ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XIV, 32.

according to the “purifications”⁵⁷ of understanding that emerge from these roots, fed by this soil, to emerge in the capacity to ‘see’ Nibbāna, the limitless sky touched by the top of the tree.

If, then, this image outlines the process for changing understanding, what precisely is being changed? Understanding has, as Buddhaghosa, writes, “various aspects . . ., [and] an answer that attempted to explain it all would accomplish neither its intention nor its purpose, and would, besides, lead to distraction.”⁵⁸ The understanding he wishes to focus on is that which is distinct from but connected to perception and cognizing.⁵⁹ He then offers a story to illustrate his point. He writes,

Suppose there were three people, a child without discretion, a villager, and a money-changer, who saw a heap of coins lying on a money-changer’s counter. The child without discretion knows merely that the coins are figured and ornamented, long, square or round; he does not know that they are reckoned as valuable for human use and enjoyment. And the villager knows that they are figured and ornamented, etc., and that they are reckoned as valuable for human use and enjoyment; but he does not know such distinctions as, “This one is genuine, this is false, this is half-value.” The money-changer knows all those kinds, and he does so by looking at the coin, and by listening to the sound of it when struck, and by smelling its smell, tasting its taste, and weighing it in his hand, and he knows that it was made in a certain village or town or city or on a certain mountain or by a certain master. And this may be understood as an illustration. Perception is like the child without discretion seeing the coin, because it apprehends the mere mode of appearance of the object as blue and so on. Consciousness is like the villager seeing the coin, because it apprehends the mode of the object as blue, etc., and because it extends further, reaching the penetration of its characteristics. Understanding is like the money-changer seeing the coin, because, after apprehending the mode of the object as blue, etc., and extending to the penetration of the characteristics, it extends still further, reaching the manifestation of the path. That is why this act of understanding should be understood as “knowing in a particular mode separate from the modes of perceiving and cognizing.”⁶⁰

Buddhaghosa illustrates here how all human beings have these three capacities—perceiving, cognizing (conscious-ing), and understanding—with each of the characters, the child, the villager, and the money-changer, standing in for a function. The story also works on a second

⁵⁷ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XIV, 32.

⁵⁸ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XIV, 2.

⁵⁹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XIV, 3.

⁶⁰ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XIV, 4–5.

level, likening our condition to a peasant who uses coins without understanding either economic theory or the material creation of money. We perpetuate a system that constructs us as agents within it without noticing that the system's self-perpetuating and our roles arise together. Our 'understanding' in this sense is our creation as agents within the system and the way that this system affects our perception. The peasant knows the money is valuable for human use and enjoyment, and this affects how the peasant reacts toward the money. Perception is shaped by the economic tools on offer; cognizing works within the system of the economy to make and use money; and understanding is the awareness of the functioning of the whole system that subtly, even subconsciously, shapes the role of the agent in the system.

Understanding as Buddhaghosa discusses its purification thus has two aspects. First, understanding is the pre-reflective awareness that shapes perception and cognition, determining in a subtle but powerful way what is perceived and thought. Note that the money-changer has a rich understanding of money but not necessarily a good evaluation of a whole economic structure, whether it accomplishes good purposes. While the money-changer is best equipped to understand the whole system, he more likely simply uses it to his advantage to make more money. This is the depth of understanding in need of purification. The very skillful, pre-reflective awareness that makes the money-changer successful at making money could be directed another way. Second, understanding creates the very system that is its awareness. Again, Buddhaghosa's example of the economy is insightful for seeing his argument. No economy exists at all apart from the individuals involved in it; the understanding of children, peasants, and money-changers all perpetuate a whole system that may, in fact, also perpetuate their unhappiness. What the money-changer takes to be a skillful making of money only preserves the system that keeps him forever a small cog in a large system; the peasant's feeling of satisfaction

at working hard and earning money keeps him a peasant; the child's failure to understand value simply makes her a powerless pawn.

What needs to change in order to 'see' Nibbāna is this sense of understanding, understanding as the collection of the pre-reflective assumptions about the nature of how we are in the world because, Buddhaghosa argues, our whole system of experience functions in a way analogous to this economy. This evolution in understanding must entail more than a shift in ideas. Simply being able to recite the ideas, as Buddhaghosa does or as I am attempting to recreate here, is not enough. Understanding must change at the very deepest levels of the way that we are in the world because, as Buddhaghosa writes in one of the most important comments of the whole text, "what is worldly consists solely of mental constructions."⁶¹ Our numerous assumptions about being in the world that condition our knowledge and action are all, Buddhaghosa interprets, the heart of the issue. Only once we have profoundly shifted understanding in this way do we open up the possibility of 'seeing' Nibbāna. Buddhaghosa's image of the land-finding crow, quoted at the head of this chapter, illustrates his point. We may direct our sight in the direction of (where we imagine) Nibbāna to be again and again, but only once all of the waste of the ocean is past can 'sight' gain the possibility of 'seeing' Nibbāna.

Understanding is also the very thing that 'sees' Nibbāna. Buddhaghosa prefers perceptual metaphors for Nibbāna in part because they emphasize the sense in which Nibbāna impinges directly on minds and can, with the right kind of perception, be noticed. What does the seeing is not the faculty of the eye or eye element, however, but the mind element itself.⁶² Mind, Buddhaghosa writes, is the "forerunner" of all kinds of consciousness.⁶³ Once mind, through penetration of understanding, actualizes a different awareness of experience that remains

⁶¹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXI, 41.

⁶² Buddhaghosa, chaps. XV, 42.

⁶³ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XV, 42.

untainted by craving, its forerunning consciousness no longer misses the subtle mental data of Nibbāna. Mind thus ‘sees’ Nibbāna directly.

For Buddhaghosa, the governing issue for the whole of the third section of the *Path of Purification* is the reshaping of understanding, and the tipping point in its reshaping relates to mental constructions: what they are made of, how they come together, how ignorance deforms them, their place in the chain of dependent origination that maintains samsara. A purified understanding of mental constructions is the most important step toward ‘seeing’ Nibbāna. In order to ‘see’ something new, we must learn first how wrongly we now see.

Mental Constructions

Buddhaghosa argues that our default understanding of mental constructions emerges from ignorance, like a peasant whose future is determined by an unseen economy, or fools who have taken metaphors too literally. Like the peasant, our participation in what we understand wrongly (or ignorantly) perpetuates that system and our suffering within it. Our every moment of experience is determined by this system. Our merest perception of the world is a simple contact or “molestation,” as the translator Ñāṇamoli renders it, like the sensory data impinging on the eye element to produce eye consciousness. However, in order for any momentary atom of eye consciousness to become perceived, it needs to be constructed into a mere perception, which in turn invokes feelings about perception and can be the subject of thought. Even before the valences of feeling and evaluations of thought, and even before mere perception that is recognized as perception, the mind’s understanding gathers together the bits of eye consciousness (or other kinds of consciousness) in order for experience to become anything to us at all.⁶⁴ This “agglomerating”⁶⁵ is the work of mental constructions, the dimension of mind that

⁶⁴ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XIV, 131, 132.

⁶⁵ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XIV, 131.

combines factors into a perception. That mind partially constructs our world in a complex way would not be a new idea in the contemporary world (although Buddhaghosa is writing fifteen centuries earlier), but Buddhaghosa is arguing that volitional shaping happens at a deep level of experience. Perceiving anything already has baked within the experience certain habits, desires, fears, and aversions, and these collected feelings, sense factors, thoughts, and desires become a ‘mental construction’ (*saṅkhāra*).

Maria Heim offers an excellent summary of Buddhaghosa’s use of the term, noting the various ways translators have wrestled with the term in rendering it into English, including “formations, volitional formations, determinations, compounded things, and constructions.... The term captures at once the psychological forces and activity of the mind as it makes sense of and acts in the world, as well as the existing dispositions, habits, memory traces, and patterns that predispose us to construe the world in the way we do.”⁶⁶ Mental constructions have the character of both “agency” and “patience,” determined by previous understanding and actions and also by the current construction of a situation.⁶⁷ They consist of the complex variety of finite materials that make up the physical and immaterial world, including our intentions, past habits and ideas, desires, and ingrained existential assumptions. However, they are also nothing other than one more factor, one that gathers but is not in a hierarchical relationship over other factors of experience. *Saṅkhāra* are constitutive of every moment of our experience in their gathering together of past and present factors in order to create an experience.

As Heim points out, the term itself, *saṅkhāra*, turns up twice as a technical term in Buddhaghosa’s description of understanding, both as one of the aggregates (the basic collections of human experience) and as part of the chain of dependent origination (the name for structure of

⁶⁶ Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things*, 2013, 47.

⁶⁷ Heim, 48.

experience that creates and perpetuates samsara). The importance of the dual listing is that it highlights the way that our everyday perception supports a system of suffering that prevents the ‘seeing’ of Nibbāna. By terming it an aggregate, Buddhaghosa is including it as one of the five traditional collections of factors that make up our experience. Buddhaghosa provides an interpretation of the five aggregates, positioning mental constructions within the matrix of human experience. Buddhaghosa’s work here is epistemologically complex (and quite interesting), but for our needs here, four primary features stand out.

First, mental constructions are not an independent, governing part of the mind, nor are they a purely neutral, structured arranging of factors, like Kant’s attempt to develop the idea of schemata as the way that sense perceptions become a manifold of intuition, nor do they interface with a manifold of sensory data to place them into transcendently deduced categories. Buddhaghosa is developing a phenomenology not as a way to penetrate to the constituent elements of a transcendental subject but rather to focus on the method of attending to phenomena themselves.⁶⁸ Mental constructions are partially determined by past thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, which shape the pre-reflective framework for recognizing experience. In the economic analogy, the money-changer’s training is shaping his perception of money, and that training is itself shaped by the economic system.

Second, as factors of mental awareness that do not have a ruling or universal status like transcendently deduced categories, mental constructions are shaped by past and current experience. Buddhaghosa recognizes different aspects to the forming function of mental constructions, like being interested (which gathers together factors for focus), energized (which keeps factors together), and intention (*cetanā*) or volition. In describing what this is like, he offers an image for intention. He writes, “It accomplishes its own and others’ functions, as a

⁶⁸ Heim and Ram-Prasad, “In a Double Way: Nāma-Rūpa in Buddhaghosa’s Phenomenology,” 4.

senior pupil, a head carpenter, etc., do. But it is evident when it occurs in the marshalling (driving) of associated states in connection with urgent work, remembering, and so on.”⁶⁹ While more evident in my deliberate choices, this gathering function of mental constructions nonetheless operates in all experience. Like a head carpenter, the gathering function of the mental construction participates as a factor in the experience. For example, in my perceiving of a cookie, the subtle intention to keep an eye out for and recognize cookies gathers together the various factors of a cookie—past mental constructions of cookies; my memories, desires, and expectations of the cookie; its actual physical existence as it appears to my senses as well as my perception of it; the feelings of pleasure or pain, anticipation and dread, that I feel on encountering it; and my thoughts about the cookie. This mental construction in turn affects my future thoughts about the cookie, my future feelings about the cookie, future mental constructions of cookies, and so on. For example, my decision to eat the cookie and feel guilty affects my physical body through caloric gains, granting me energy and weight; as well as my feelings about cookies and myself, as I am wracked with both pleasure and guilt; as well as my thoughts and judgments about cookies, as I consider whether it had enough chocolate chips; as well as my future perceptions of cookies, as objects non-optionally enmeshed in meaning; and even my self-understanding as a consumer of cookies. Mental constructions shape, and in turn are shaped, by their functioning.

Third, because mental constructions receive their shape from the factors in the other aggregates, Buddhaghosa categorizes the mental construction aggregate into the same divisions as those of the consciousness aggregate, considering the various ways that feelings, consciousness, and mental constructions all arise together in profitable, unprofitable, or neutral ways. Here, the subtle work of *sankhāra* as a term with weight within the process of dependent

⁶⁹ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XIV, 135.

origination begins to become relevant. Mental constructions, affected by past experience, inherited cultural language, biology, and other factors, are also inflected by ignorance of their own functioning.

Ignorance (*avijjā*), Buddhaghosa writes, “has the characteristic of unknowing. Its function is to confuse. It is manifested as concealing. Its proximate cause is cankers (*āsava*, see note).”⁷⁰ Ignorance affects mental constructions by concealing several things all at once—the nature of the subject, the nature of objects, and even the role of mental constructions themselves in creating experience. At a basic, ethical level, mental constructions conceal whether things are helpful and good for us. My experience of an opiate, for example, is easily distorted because of the intensity of its feeling, its effect on my biology, and the way that using it gives me a sense of control.

As a helpful marker for our objects and actions, Buddhaghosa uses the terms for recognizing whether particular matrices of feeling, thought, and mental construction are good or profitable. The term here being translated ‘profitable’ is *kusala*, a word not easily rendered into English. It can mean “clever, skilful, expert; good, right, meritorious.”⁷¹ *Kusala* mental states are ones that both come from and lead skillfully to good results. Buddhaghosa offers this example for the joy that accompanies action as an example. “When a man is happy on encountering an excellent gift to be given, or recipient, etc., or some such cause for joy, and by placing right view foremost ... he unhesitatingly and unurged by others performs such merit as giving, etc., then his consciousness is accompanied by joy, associated with knowledge, and unprompted.”⁷² *Kusala* mental constructions are occasions where a good end is accomplished in a good way,

⁷⁰ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVII, 51. The term *āsava*, or cankers, suggests the discharge that comes from an infected wound, and it is a traditional name for the problems that arise and carry over from deeper, underlying issues, particularly ignorance. Here, it reflects the way in which culture and language arrive to us already wounded.

⁷¹ Pali Text Society, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English dictionary*, 224.

⁷² Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XIV, 84.

accompanied by joy. This positive, gathered nexus is a *kusala* mental construction and not only a *kusala* action because it reshapes future perceptions of ethical events. Skillful choices come to be associated with joy, which offers a positive feedback loop.

Akusala, or unprofitable or bad, mental constructions, come about from greed, hate, or delusion,⁷³ where positive thoughts accompany bad actions, thereby resulting in bad results and encouraging bad actions which do harm to everyone involved. If stealing all the cookies from my children makes me happy, this affects my future mental constructions of cookies, training me to crave cookies and disregard my children. Although, as discussed in the introduction, kamma is never entirely certain, *kusala* mental constructions tend to lead toward *kusala* results; in other words, good and truthful perceptions lead to good results, and the reverse for *akusala* or bad mental constructions.

Aside from the distinction between *kusala* and *akusala*, Buddhaghosa recognizes a third category as well that reflects a deeper concealment that results from ignorance's effect on mental constructions. These are neutral mental constructions, which do not create lasting effects on the shape of experience. These actions, which I will mention only briefly now, have soteriological importance in the development of understanding. While Buddhaghosa emphasizes the way that mental constructions affect future experience for nearly all of us, he also marks out the way that the mind can participate in experience without perpetuating a false sense of self, constructing experience without building a habitual sense of self. A neutral mental construction is a way of marking this difference. They have a special role for someone coming to see Nibbāna because they leave no trace of kamma's fruits behind.

Fourth, the moral picture that Buddhaghosa describes is complex in painting the number of active factors in every action. As Maria Heim argues at length, this very complexity is a rich

⁷³ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XIV, 89.

source for understanding morality in Buddhaghosa's thought. She argues that many dominant approaches to ethics reduce ethical deliberation to the will, one particular and privileged faculty of human action, as it makes choices. Buddhaghosa, by contrast, describes something much more complex, offering an account of human life that privileges no human faculty as separate in this way and sees our very perception of the possible ethical choices around us as not only colored but even constituted by numerous past habits, memories, and desires. To act so as to do good involves the right factors in consciousness and pleasant feelings that shape a good mental construction of data, which in turn shapes consciousness and feelings in complex ways. Being a good person involves not only good actions but also good habits, sensitive perception, and skillful evaluation of particular situations. Moral inquiry requires deeper and richer understandings of the way that we construct experience. Recognizing the way that we shape our pre-reflective perception of the world in and through mental constructions is a fundamentally *moral* process.

Beyond the depiction of mental constructions as *kusala* or *akusala*, the creation of mental constructions suffers from a deeper root problem for the person looking for Nibbāna. While some mental constructions accrue merit through *kusala* actions, words, and thoughts, and while others accrue bad results through *akusala* actions, words, and thoughts, both kinds continue to accrue merit and demerit, the habits of mind and perception that shape experience. This perpetuation of experience is the perpetuation of samsara, and it again points to the place where *saṅkhāra* serve within the process of dependent origination. These are the twelve states which, arising together, make up our existential reality. Each one of the twelve links leads to the next, but each also depends on all of the others. For the monk looking for Nibbāna, any perpetuation

of mental habits that form the further creation of experience serve to occlude the ignorance that drives the system (and, thus, the need for neutral mental constructions).

Seeing where mental constructions fit into the chain of dependent origination shows why Buddhaghosa uses them as the turning point for coming to see Nibbāna. The twelve links of dependent origination are “ignorance, intentional [mental] constructions, awareness ... [or ‘directed cognition’], name and form, the six senses, contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, aging-and-death.”⁷⁴ In this primary ordering of the twelve links of dependent origination, mental constructions come second, following ignorance. According to the economic image suggested by Buddhaghosa, this positioning makes sense, and Buddhaghosa several times quotes the Buddha speaking from a sutta in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, writing “With ignorance as condition there are mental constructions.”⁷⁵ Ignorance on the part of the money-changer leads to the mental constructions that define his functioning without undoing the system which defines him.

Buddhaghosa is clear that no single feature, including ignorance alone, perpetuates dependent origination. Ignorance is not the sole cause of mental constructions,⁷⁶ and even ignorance has its causes.⁷⁷ However, the Buddha takes two primary starting places on the chain as felicitous for teaching dependent origination, which Buddhaghosa takes to be important when purifying understanding.⁷⁸ First, ignorance is important because it hides the system that mental constructions simultaneously perpetuate and instantiate. It leads to unhappy consequences, *akusala* acts, like believing that stealing is good because we feel pleasure when we steal.

Transforming understanding entails addressing the ignorance that conditions mental

⁷⁴ Heim and Ram-Prasad, “In a Double Way: Nāma-Rūpa in Buddhaghosa’s Phenomenology,” 12.

⁷⁵ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XVII, 25.

⁷⁶ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVII, 106.

⁷⁷ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVII, 36.

⁷⁸ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVII, 38–40.

constructions. Second, the Buddha highlights craving as a felicitous entry to understanding dependent origination because craving, like ignorance, carries more freight than it seems to carry. Craving subtly entails a craving for becoming—if I crave cookies, I am also craving a particular system of life for enjoying them. Both ignorance and craving perpetuate systems that, like in the economic analogy, simultaneously create systems and agents that have predetermined roles.

Mental constructions, these gathering schemata of pre-reflective experience that are in turn gathered and reconfigured, accumulate the factors that make experience. As quoted above, in one of the most telling lines of Buddhaghosa’s writing on mental constructions, he writes, “what is worldly consists solely of mental constructions [*saṅkhāramattam*].”⁷⁹ To experience anything is both to shape and be shaped by experience. Like peasants defined by an economy that is only dimly seen and exploitative, mental constructions, affected by ignorance, perpetuate the system of experience with its *kusala* or *akusala* results, the subject as defined by that system, and even the awareness of the whole system.

The Three-Fold Problem with Mental Constructions

Ignorance as one of the conditions gathered together in mental constructions confuses and conceals what is truly happening in experience.⁸⁰ The problem is akin to taking conventional language as substantial rather than metaphorical. Mental constructions themselves are taken to be permanent rather than a collection of factors shaped by other factors like desire, consciousness, and past actions—in Buddhaghosa’s metaphor, a head carpenter is mistaken for an administrator who never directly affects construction but only orders it around. The creator of mental constructions, the one having the experience, is also taken to be permanent, a ‘self’ (*attā*), rather

⁷⁹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXI, 41.

⁸⁰ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVII, 51.

than a collection of factors. Finding the kinds of experience that might provide stable happiness and avoid pain becomes the desire of the experiencer. The system is inherited through culture and language, and the system is self-perpetuating, defining a permanent self (which is in reality a collection of complex material and mental factors) that is looking for stability and happiness through desiring and achieving things (which are also not permanent). Skillful and unskillful ways of pursuing desires lead to good or bad results, but either kind of desire perpetuates an endless search for stability and lasting happiness because even good results come to an end.⁸¹

The search for stability fails, Buddhaghosa notes, because mental constructions have three problematic characteristics that are ignored or distorted by ignorance—impermanence, suffering, and not-self (*anicca, dukkha, anattā*). The transformation in understanding required to see Nibbāna is a penetration understanding that straightens out ignorance to become existentially aware that mental constructions share these three characteristics—impermanent, suffering and not-self. With this profound understanding, the monk is able to experience ‘all that is worldly’ without shaping it in false ways. This experience, pragmatically considered as a neutral mental construction, is most often characterized by Buddhaghosa as developing equanimity toward mental constructions. ‘Equanimity’ here means an energized acceptance, and I will return to its importance in chapter 5.

Buddhaghosa unpacks these three characteristics of mental constructions—impermanence, suffering, and not-self—in the precise middle of the process of purifying understanding. Prior to gaining equanimity toward mental constructions, the purification of understanding is a phenomenological examination of the complex factors that create experience; after realizing equanimity, the same process continues, but it is illuminated by the ability to perceive Nibbāna, or perhaps more accurately, to perceive in a Nibbāna-affected-way.

⁸¹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XVII, 62–63.

Understanding these three features of mental constructions is crucial to understanding the pivotal shift into the acceptance of selflessness.

Impermanence is meant, Buddhaghosa writes, in the sense of destruction.⁸² What has existed previously is no longer. We might be inclined to think of this primarily in terms of civilizations, or geography, or people, or through a more Abhidhammic perspective on momentariness and causality, but the problem with the impermanence of mental constructions in this context is their inability to provide stability. What sends a monk to the monastery is, Buddhaghosa argues, fear,⁸³ and that fear stems in part from the lack of shelter within experience itself. No moment of experience lasts forever, and experience itself ends for us in death. Although particular experiences are similar, they are unreliable in creating satisfaction, happiness, and peace. The blanket that brought me comfort as a child offers nothing of the sort now; the promise of a cookie is enjoyable but quickly passing. Each moment conditions what comes next, but each previous moment is gone and is, with all of its complex factors, unrepeatable as an exact phenomenon. While the epistemological dimension is in play here, Buddhaghosa's greater emphasis is on the way that experience is incapable of providing a stable existential space that frees from fear because, quite simply, nothing lasts.

Moreover, the whole process itself creates further problems. The process of experience fosters a particular kind of self, but the nature of experience guarantees the death of the self. In the economic metaphor, the peasant's economy creates his status as an agent of labor, but in doing so, it guarantees his interchangeability and, as he ages into a diminished physical capacity, his worthlessness for the economy. The peasant's creation as a subject is also a guarantee of his end. The craving for the stability of a blanket is doomed to fail because, ultimately, blankets

⁸² Buddhaghosa, chaps. 20, 13–14.

⁸³ Buddhaghosa, chaps. I, 7.

dissolve back into threads. Impermanence, as a characteristic of mental constructions, is a way of highlighting that every part of experience ends.

Buddhaghosa also describes the way that suffering characterizes mental constructions and therefore all of experience. It interweaves with the inability of any element of experience to provide stability and peace. *Dukkha*,⁸⁴ the Pāli term frequently rendered as ‘suffering,’ is complex to render into English. Ñāṇamoli prefers to render it simply as ‘pain,’ and the Pāli Text Society’s dictionary extends that with the less bodily “unpleasant ... [and] causing misery.”⁸⁵ Steven Collins prefers “frustration or unsatisfactoriness”⁸⁶ in order to highlight the sense that *dukkha* concerns the failure of something to accomplish what we would prefer or expect. Too simplistic a reading of *dukkha* can lead to the misunderstanding of Buddhism as overly-pessimistic in its analysis of life. After all, suffering does not overshadow pleasure at every moment. Collins highlights this mischaracterization in Pāli thought more broadly by pointing out that suffering characterizes experience as “a reflective conclusion drawn from soteriologically oriented premises.”⁸⁷ By reflecting phenomenologically on the nature of experience, seeing the suffering in existence is the “proper seriousness”⁸⁸ required in facing the reality of impermanence. Collins is pointing out that, at the very least, we need to assume that Buddhaghosa is not naïve to the regular pleasures that attend experience when he says that all that is worldly is characterized by suffering; rather, he is working to point out something dissatisfying baked into the whole structure.

However, the best guide in this case is likely Buddhaghosa, who provides his own definition of *dukkha* and refines the term by continuing the language of fear developed in

⁸⁴ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XX, 15–16.

⁸⁵ Pali Text Society, *The Pali Text Society’s Pali-English dictionary*, 325.

⁸⁶ Collins, *Selfless Persons*, 191.

⁸⁷ Collins, 191.

⁸⁸ Collins, 191.

relationship to impermanence. Buddhaghosa frequently defines terms in one place in the text and presumes that the reader recalls it in each later instance. Earlier in the text, Buddhaghosa writes that *dukkha* is characterized by oppression [*pīḷana*],⁸⁹ and this insight allows him to hone in on what he identifies as the primary attribute of suffering. *Dukkha* is oppression because it is one feature of existence taking an insistent, even totalizing role, over one or more other elements of experience. In this sense, bodily pain is suffering because it inhibits and oppresses the other dimensions of experience. If I drop a box on my foot, it causes physical pain because of the complex arrangements of neurons within my bruised body, but it oppresses as suffering because it wipes out my ability to feel anything other than a throbbing foot. In this sense, grief is, as Buddhaghosa describes it, a mental pain that suppresses and oppresses the other feelings and thoughts of existence. Mental constructions have the characteristic of *dukkha*, of suffering or pain. Our inherited patterns of experience habitually oppress other aspects of experience, and this is what Buddhaghosa means by *dukkha*.

With these definitions in the background, Buddhaghosa describes *dukkha* as a characteristic of mental constructions because it simply means “terror [*bhayatṭhena*].”⁹⁰ Mental constructions provide no safety, no refuge from destruction because they are themselves being destroyed, but also because they are completely totalizing. No perception, thought, or feeling is free from mental constructions, and their subtle systemic shape oppresses our experience by inhibiting parts of which we are not even aware. Mental constructions destroy and are destroyed, but they are also the only game in town—all that is worldly is solely mental constructions. The condition of existence itself is not only being destroyed but also oppressive. The creation of the peasant’s agency within the system is not only doomed to end, it is also guaranteed oppression.

⁸⁹ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XVI, 50 and 51. Also, Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXI, 7. “The

⁹⁰ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XX, 15.

Buddhaghosa's rendering of suffering as oppression may seem, on its face, to be less plausible than Collins's more general reading of *dukkha* as what is seen with properly serious reflection on life. After all, if our experience edits out certain aspects of reality that could theoretically be materially perceived, so what? When we walk through a city, we may be grateful that our mind shapes our reality not to include every screaming detail of a daily walk.

Buddhaghosa's argument, however, is that we are unaware of the shape that mental constructions place on our experience. We do not see what is not chosen for construction, even in our clearest moments. Pain is simply a more evident manifestation of the oppression. We are subjects of an autocratic regime of our own habits, desires, culture, and materiality; we are prisoners within walls we never notice that we build. We cannot see what we do not see, and this situation is oppressive because what we may most need, or what might grant us happiness, may never even be a possibility for us. Worse, the constructed self of mental constructions is distracted and rewarded within dependent origination. We become so enchanted with desire and craving that we utterly miss its oppression of our experience. We choose a security blanket by not only ignoring the fact that we know very well that blankets come to an end but also because choosing *some* metaphorical blanket seems like the only option. Suffering causes terror—Buddhaghosa's choice of terms—because it threatens to rip away the illusion of a security blanket by revealing precisely how oppressed we are.

Buddhaghosa's point is akin to our self-satisfaction in buying an electric car. We feel like we are damaging the planet less and creating a better, more just economy that supports our endangered planet. However, an electric car is fueled by electricity created by burning coal or other fossil fuels; it is built of rare earth elements that poison those who mine them; it does nothing to transform the culture of transportation; and it perpetuates the consumerist mindset that

sees goods at things to be devoured. An electric car is a good, ecologically-minded option at one level, but we buy it for many reasons. We are oppressed by our own self-satisfaction, unaware of the destruction that we falsely believe that we are holding at bay. Mental constructions oppress by occluding reality behind a distracting calculus of pleasure and pain.

Not-self, the third characteristic of mental constructions, is meant in the sense of a lack of control. The things of experience are being destroyed; ‘experience’ is all we have, which promotes terror; and we are powerless to change the situation as it stands. Buddhaghosa introduces not-self as the lack of a core [*asāraḥkaṭṭhena*], and by ‘core,’ he writes, he intends some part or aspect of human personhood that stands outside of, and thereby immune to, experience, “one who is his own master.”⁹¹ We do not have this, he writes, because “what is impermanent is painful, and it is impossible to escape the impermanence, or the rise and fall and oppression....”⁹² Experience is shaped by its oppression, haunted by its impending end, and by ‘no-self’ Buddhaghosa means that we have no ability to change this situation. No part of experience stands external to it, undetermined by it. We cannot simply jump, will, think or feel our way out of experience. The process of dependent origination creates a false self and calculus of pleasure and pain that provides the illusion of escape. We can relieve suffering for a moment, but we are not masters of our own experience. Fear, then, plays a role here as well because in addition to mental constructions being worthy of fear (suffering) and unable to provide respite in themselves (impermanent), they are also inescapable and ungovernable.

Because ignorance contributes to mental constructions, the system of experience only *seems* to provide a whole system for dealing with fear. Actions can become skillful, as can speech and thoughts, prolonging the apparent stability and reducing the suffering. Long-lasting

⁹¹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XX, 16.

⁹² Buddhaghosa, chap. XX.16.

people and things (including deities in Buddhaghosa's thought-world) seem to last forever. We seem able to determine the course of our own lives at least some of the time. The defining characteristics of mental constructions are difficult to notice because each remains cloaked by these temporary respites within experience itself that do nothing to surmount the heart of the problem.⁹³

The picture would be pessimistic, however, only if there were no way out. To state his point quite simply, Buddhaghosa argues that by realizing these characteristics at a profound level of understanding and learning to accept them with equanimity (as anger or frustration only perpetuates experience), we can attend to the quite subtle effect of something that is not itself subject to experience or existence, namely, the unmade reality of Nibbāna. Stating this shift simply is, of course, only the shallowest level of understanding and only the first step in actually realizing this shift.

What is needed, as Buddhaghosa describes it, is a deep-seated acceptance of these truths about mental constructions. What this active acceptance leads to is the freedom for the various dimensions of intention, feeling, and thought to no longer expend their full energy on finding stability in an impossible situation. Rather, they become able to perceive the world in a different way.

Seeing Nibbāna—Or Nibbāna-Seeing

Equanimity with respect to mental constructions enables the 'sight' of Nibbāna. This 'sight' or 'contact' with the Unsigned is not a glowing light, special feeling, or any kind of sign or experience at all. To see Nibbāna is a result of having changed one's sight, but it is also a new way to see, not so much the vision of the Extinguished as Extinguished-Governed-Seeing, or Nibbāna-Seeing. Collins's suggestion that Nibbāna be verbalized makes great sense here, and I

⁹³ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXI, 3.

would add only that, for Buddhaghosa, it also functions for the still-living monk as an adverb. It is both an actively engaged process and the defining manner by which the remaining life can then be lived out. As a monk nirvanizes, understood even more broadly as the first glimpse rather than complete extinction, his perception is altered by Nibbāna and begins to be shaped by a free, peaceful quality that is utterly alien to fear for the first time.

Buddhaghosa's first concern after describing the shift to equanimity toward mental construction is pedagogical, focusing on the diverse set of circumstances, strengths, and degrees of skillfulness that individuals may bring to this point in the process. While the need for understanding is universal, the process for realizing it is, according to Buddhaghosa, remarkably particular. The ease or degree to which it becomes visible depends upon the strength of the monk at the various faculties needed to arrive at this point, and upon the depth to which the monk has gained understanding of the three problematic characteristics of mental constructions.

Buddhaghosa is particularly concerned with the numerous ways that different students might make this transition, and so he describes not only the different degrees that students might succeed in realizing but also the numerous stages and degrees that a person might move through in different orders. All of them take as their centerpiece the achieving of equanimity toward formations and seeing Nibbāna, but we should note Buddhaghosa's worries for the practical carrying forward of this process.

Also, having seen Nibbāna, the monk has only arrived halfway through the purification of understanding. As mentioned above, of the five chapters on the purification of understanding, seeing Nibbāna occurs in the middle. Notably, the second half of the purification of understanding occurs with Nibbāna in view, a slow removal of the ignorance-defined problems of experience, followed by the extinguishing into Nibbāna (which may take one or several

lifetimes to achieve). In other words, coming to see Nibbāna takes a great shift in perspective, but Buddhaghosa does seem to think that this level of attainment is not altogether rare. This may run rather counter to our sense that Nibbāna is reserved for the very few elite. While other parts of the Buddhist tradition may hold this perspective, Buddhaghosa does not seem to hold this view. By contrast, he carefully describes the extreme rarity of developing supernormal powers, which arise as a result of very specially cultivated forms of meditation,⁹⁴ but are not required for the glimpsing of Nibbāna. My sense of Buddhaghosa's attitude throughout the text is that he believes that if a student needed to talk to someone who could see Nibbāna about a question in their practice, their teacher likely would at least know someone who knew someone who could help. Seeing Nibbāna requires arduous work, but it is not impossibly rare. Two and a half chapters are devoted to the ongoing development that occurs while seeing Nibbāna, marking the deeper and length nirvanizing that remains before reaching Nibbāna.

To describe what this tipping point is like, Buddhaghosa returns to images in what he terms the Twelve Similes, twelve images which can be useful at any point in teaching but which particularly highlight this stage of transition. Each simile offers a differently accented overview of how the change occurs, and examining one with Buddhaghosa's included explications will help to show how understanding the three characteristics (impermanence, suffering, and no-self) opens the possibility of something new. Buddhaghosa sketches out the third simile in this way.

The owner of a house, it seems, ate his meal in the evening, climbed into his bed and fell asleep. The house caught fire. When he woke up and saw the fire, he was frightened. He thought, "It would be good if I could get out without getting burnt." Looking round, he saw a way. Getting out, he quickly went away to a safe place and stayed there. Herein, the foolish ordinary man's taking the five aggregates as "I" and "mine" is like the house-owner's falling asleep after he had eaten and climbed into bed. Knowledge of appearance as terror after entering upon the right way and seeing the three characteristics is like the time when the man was frightened on waking up and seeing the fire. Knowledge of desire for deliverance is like the man's looking for a way out. Conformity

⁹⁴ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XII, 8.

knowledge is like the man's seeing the way. Change-of-lineage is like the man's going away quickly. Fruition knowledge is like his staying in a safe place.⁹⁵

In this simile, Buddhaghosa emphasizes the steps that lead out of the burning house. Equanimity toward formations occurs as the man makes a decision to escape the burning house. From there, the man discovers the way and resolves to follow it. This resolution is what Buddhaghosa terms conformity knowledge (knowledge that has conformed to the Buddha's teaching of the path), the development of the strength and resolution to continue toward Nibbāna. Change-of-lineage, the moment at which Nibbāna becomes the destiny of the individual (even if after several more rebirths) rather than continuing in samsara, is the actual action of moving forward with the developed resolution.

Although both are vital for obtaining Nibbāna, conformity knowledge and change-of-lineage are two related but not identical processes. Each addresses the two problems tangled together in mental constructions, the perpetuation of suffering and the inability to perceive in a Nibbāna-inflected way. Change-of-lineage knowledge "is unable to dispel the murk" created by the dependent origination, which requires conformity knowledge.⁹⁶ Change-of-lineage knowledge simply *is* the ability to see Nibbāna.⁹⁷ In order to nirvanize, both conformity knowledge and change-of-lineage knowledge must come to fruition, the first no longer generating the ongoing factors of existence and the second serving as evidence and promise of peace beyond experience. In other words, the shifted awareness that is the change-of-lineage offers a richer vision of the tangle of experience, allowing the knot to become fully undone as it is illuminated by Nibbāna.

⁹⁵ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XX, 94–95.

⁹⁶ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXII, 7.

⁹⁷ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXII, 5.

The final result of conformity knowledge and change-of-lineage knowledge is becoming an *arahant*, a word meaning ‘worthy’ but also referring to the final stage of realization. Because conformity knowledge leads to the generation of no new factors of experience, a person might become an *arahant* either with remainder or simultaneously with death. Complete realization means that the altered perception of Nibbāna remains without the remaining tangled factors of existence. In untangling the tangle, the *arahant* not only lays bare the factors of experience but also leaves them behind—except that with worthiness comes a freedom to help those who remain entangled.

No-Self

While no-self as a practice and idea within Indian thought has raised some general interest in Western epistemology and phenomenology,⁹⁸ Buddhaghosa deploys the term within the process of coming to Nibbāna-seeing in a specific way. ‘No-self’ might be thought of as roughly analogous to ‘theological anthropology’ in a Christian context. While certain ideas or traditional formulations may often play a role in describing ‘no-self,’ individual thinkers develop particular versions of ‘no-self.’

Rather than expressing interest in defending the idea or concept of no-self, Buddhaghosa uses it instead as a regulatory principle, or even a type of non-affirming negation. No-self characterizes mental constructions in the sense that no part of experience remains utterly apart or unaffected by the others. This does mean that human beings have no unchanging and unchanged core of identity, but for Buddhaghosa, this is only the most evident problem pointed out by a no-self principle. The reason for becoming aware of this defining character of mental constructions is not in order to make a metaphysical or ontological argument about what ultimately constitutes being—again, for Buddhaghosa, the practice is the point, not the conceptual picture—but to

⁹⁸ See, for example, Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi, *Self, No Self?*

provide clearer existential understanding of very human habitual distortions of reality. No-self, *anattā*, is shorthand for the inescapable embeddedness of all human life. No self, or will or mind or choice or (as we will see later) overlord, stands unaffected by the complex changing factors of the world. Buddhaghosa argues that if something did stand outside it, we would long ago have seen the end of the destruction, suffering, terror, and oppression that characterize experience. Instead, by creating false senses of control and distance, the whole cycle perpetuates and reinforces itself.

This embedded mutual dependence that ignorance-inflected mental construction covers over and confuses is graspable with some work in a conceptual way, but Buddhaghosa is clear that a conceptual grasp of the problem may only feed the sense of independent self-mastery. Ontologizing the problem, rather than addressing the deeper, pre-reflective way that intention, desire, and habit structure experience, is such a normal mistake that Buddhaghosa includes it as “attachment to insight,” the tenth entry in the catalogue of the ten imperfections of insight.⁹⁹ This list is a humorous and gently prodding catalogue of misunderstandings that all students (and, he deftly suggests, many teachers) are prone to make of this complex development in understanding. Every moment of experience must become naturally understood to be characterized by impermanence, suffering, and no-self, as spontaneously as the money-changer grasping a coin.

Realizing that every part of experience is conditioned by these ignorance-inflected mental constructions is not, however, a tragic process, a point to which Buddhaghosa repeatedly returns. Rather, by slowly gaining some existential awareness of the way that mental constructions shape experience, experience itself begins to change. The oppression that causes terror within experience can be avoided by no longer *oppressing*, using a single, imagined self as the totality

⁹⁹ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XX, 122.

for measuring the whole. Given suffering's characteristic of oppression, Buddhaghosa describes the opposite of suffering as freedom, the liberty to allow parts of experience their effects.

Equanimity (*upekkhā*) enables this freedom. The Pāli Text Society's dictionary suggests the intriguing translation of *upekkhā* as "hedonic neutrality or indifference,"¹⁰⁰ which points to its contradictory character. Equanimity is at once a welcome desire for experience (hedonic) but permissive of what that experience contains, including the end of all experience. We will look more closely at equanimity below in considering its relationship to love in chapter 5.

No-self in Buddhaghosa's case is thus not a metaphysical statement but principle of practice. It can serve as an epistemological heuristic, but its effective use depends upon its consideration not as a concept or idea but as guideline for developing pre-reflective perception. To subscribe to no-self is to recognize at a profound level that even our habitual being in the world is inflected by an oppression that tries vainly to avoid death. The aim of this analysis is not, however, to offer further oppression, but rather to suggest a way out through the hedonic indifference to experience. This equanimity slowly frees perception to be impinged on by what is not another factor but more akin to the silence between musical notes, namely, Nibbāna. To return to the quotation that begins this chapter, freed from the incessant need to perpetuate imaginary selves, the knowledge of equanimity about mental formations recognizes something new, blissful, and peaceful, Nibbāna, like a land-finding crow from a ship.

¹⁰⁰ Pali Text Society, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English dictionary*, 150.

Chapter 4: No-Self Practice and Practicing Non-Exclusion

“Living forgetful of self,
In God is all its intention,
Happy and so joyfully it journeys
Through waves of this stormy sea.”¹

The previous two chapters delved deeply into Teresa’s and Buddhaghosa’s methods and descriptions of the relationship of no-self practice to coming into contact with ‘something’ beyond being. I believe it is crucial to begin by exploring each thinker in their own words. However, although both Teresa and Buddhaghosa are, as one scholar pointed out to me, jewels of their respective traditions, the reason for reading them together invites some further explanation. I begin this chapter with a more personal account of how these two writers came to be paired in my mind, followed by an analysis of how our readings of their works improve, and their arguments become clearer, when they are placed in each other’s company. Much of this benefit appears throughout the analysis of the previous two chapters, but it appears there primarily as subtext. Here, I foreground what their pairing reveals, particularly about mental constructions and the center room, the pacification of the will, and suffering.

Finding Distinctive Voices, Together

What first suggested to me that Buddhaghosa and Teresa might make good dialogue partners was their bending of rhetoric to the needs of a non-conceptual practice. At first glance, this similarity may not seem obvious—Buddhaghosa is scholarly and encyclopedic, while Teresa is conversational and haphazard. Yet, their authorial voices share some interesting parallels. Both deploy multiple genres, including humor, as rhetorical tools for making their points. Older commentaries on both of them tend to shy away from their humor. Buddhaghosa is often formal

¹ Teresa of Avila, “Poetry,” in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Vol 3*, trans. Otilio Rodriquez and Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, D.C.: Ics Pubns, 1985), sec. 5, p. 383.

and rationalist in his style; Teresa's writing about her life and visions is sometimes held to be sacrosanct, and nothing kills humor like obsequious piety. Yet, in both cases, something about their personalities comes through. Teresa's salty, conversational commentary sits ill-at-ease with too pious a reading—are her headaches and complaints about church authorities, even the ones she likes, also sacred texts? Teresa, who mentions her laughter at her own process of writing, seems likely to chuckle at the question. Buddhaghosa's habit of resorting to everyday images and well-worn scriptural anecdotes undercuts his image as the ultimate rational scholar. His practicality when he writes about community life reads like someone who has lived through the ups and down of that fishbowl existence. One has the sense that he had to pare down his complaints about monasteries to only eighteen, which shares a strange affinity to Teresa's complaints about bad spiritual directors, headaches, and entitled community members. They both deploy even their complaints strategically. More strikingly, Buddhaghosa's affirmation of the importance of friendship in the faults of the monastery, a passage I explore further, does not seem to have an entirely rational basis. Strictly speaking, friends seem unnecessary for developing virtue, concentration, and understanding, but Buddhaghosa is clear that they are the only thing that makes monastic life worthwhile (not, interestingly, meditation or study or even the bliss of Nibbāna). They both believe that rhetoric needs to function in conventional and ultimate ways for the good of the practitioner, and neither is satisfied with a statement when an image will do. I first thought to read them together because of this rhetorical resonance.

What further motivated my comparison is the remarkable similarity of their projects. This rhetorical complexity serves in both cases as a strategy for disarming or displacing a problematic, deeply held assumption about the world. Both describe an unselfing practice that places human beings in touch with the Unsigned; both see monastic contexts as the natural

location for this work, but neither sees it restricted to such communities; both are stuck with the quite difficult problem of writing about the Unsigned, which, by definition, sits in a peculiar relationship with signs and language. While we could draw other parallels to Buddhaghosa in Christian thought—a more practice-oriented way of reading Thomas Aquinas, for example, or as Peter Feldmeier does in his work comparing Buddhaghosa’s thought to John of the Cross’s²—the broadness of rhetoric and emphasis on practice suggested to me the more seemingly unlikely candidate of Teresa.

Placed together, rather than located within their respective intellectual traditions, fresh and useful features of their work stand out. Teresa’s conversational tone belies a sharp attention to the carefully framed practice of detachment, a difference far more evident when placed next to Buddhaghosa’s meticulous rendering of the factors of experience. Buddhaghosa shows a humane touch, particularly when thinking about students, that we miss if we see him as a monochromatic scholar of the Dhamma (the Buddha’s teaching). Reading Buddhaghosa’s section on the imperfections of insight in Teresa’s company reveals it to be a careful exegetical explication, certainly, but also a caring warning about the perils of self-satisfaction in students and in teachers. Placing his work near Teresa’s suggests that the broadness in rhetoric is tactically intentional in both writers, and Buddhaghosa is up to more than collating appropriate lists.

What ultimately persuaded me the comparison bears its fruit is in the way that, placed together, each thinker’s work addresses lacunae in the other’s work. Tracing these differences is not always easy, of course, because of their significantly different contexts. Nonetheless, they seem to be thinking about a similar set of problems.

² Peter Feldmeier, *Christianity Looks East: Comparing the Spiritualities of John of the Cross and Buddhaghosa* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

For example, in first reading *Interior Castle*, I simply had no idea what Teresa meant by ‘intellectual visions’ in the center room. If the faculty of the intellect is incapable of reaching somewhere within the soul, how should a person have an intellectual vision? I first tried to answer this question through the lineage of contemplative writing and practice in Christian thought. The idea that the intellect must die, or be subsumed in some way, and then return later in spiritual development, is hardly unique to Teresa. Yet, I will confess that I found little help in reading within the tradition. As discussed in the chapter on Teresa, she is adopting traditional terms for the vision—intellectual rather than imaginative, for example—but she seems to be deploying the term, as I have argued, in a somewhat unusual way. Other authors within Christianity who write on a similar idea, like Marguerite Porete’s remarkably complex treatment of the question, seemed to me to raise as many questions as answers.

In Buddhaghosa’s thought, however, I began to detect an answer—in fact, two answers. First, the issue is not about conceptuality so much as the way that we *inhabit* conceptuality. In other words, concepts can be used as evidence of self-mastery, as a way to reify the self, or they can be used as parts of the process of detachment. I discovered this emphasis on practice in Teresa through Buddhaghosa’s writing, much as the scholar Peter Tyler claims to have done through Wittgenstein.

Second, Buddhaghosa shares the idea that when understanding has been transformed, particularly to recognize the three-fold problem with mental constructions, the intellect becomes sufficiently freed such that the Unsigned can somehow impinge on the mind, a feature which he describes with the image of a land-finding crow. This perceptual shift seems much closer to Teresa than what can be found in the works of many other Christian thinkers. What occurs in the center room is not the death of the intellect or faculties so much as their reshaping, sculpting, or

engraving. By turning down the noise of the faculties, the trinity engraves Teresa with a shifted awareness, not unlike the way Nibbāna is adverted (*āvajjana*) to by the understanding. Here, a strong disparity appears, one to which I will return in a following chapter, namely, that the agency that Teresa ascribes to God is not at all ascribed to Nibbāna by Buddhaghosa.

The process works in the other direction as well. Buddhaghosa places the section on virtue, as noted earlier, at the very beginning of the text. Its distance from the developed understanding that nirvanizes seems distant, so much so that Buddhaghosa could be read as thinking of ethics as an entirely preliminary work. Teresa, by contrast, carefully reiterates the importance of virtuous actions at every stage of development. The best way to determine whether any of the practice is working, she thinks, is to see how we behave.

This thoroughgoing insistence on ethics provides a corrective to seeing the distance from ethics to Nibbāna in *Path of Purification* as anything other than a result of the order of teaching. With the sense that virtuous action is appropriate at each stage, the many stories of achieving Nibbāna that occur in the section on virtue seem less like promissory notes for the faithful student than an affirmation of virtue's importance throughout the practice.

Moreover, Teresa raises a point that remains largely subtext in Buddhaghosa's description of practice, namely, how a monk can know how far he has progressed. Buddhaghosa sometimes seems to treat this as self-evident, as if reaching a higher development of meditation explained itself as it arrived. Yet, he is also sensitive to the many self-deceptions that happen along the way, like in the ten imperfections of insight (a list of common self-deceptions and half-truths along the way), but also in the emphasis he places on building a close friendship with a teacher who deeply understands the monk. Teresa's work in this area foregrounds and more fully develops Buddhaghosa's ideas here. The monk knows how far he has progressed partly from his

meditative experience but also from the feedback others give him about his actions. In other words, the way to know whether the practice is working is to look at his behavior, reflected in the eyes of a good friend.

Teresa's concerns about the difficulties a sister faces with a bad spiritual director also parallel Buddhaghosa's concerns that the teacher be the right teacher and friend to the student monk. For both thinkers, actions alone do not offer the clearest evidence of whether the practice is working; rather, it is the caring and critical eye of a friend who can see, in both compassion and clarity, the effects of the meditation or prayer. Recognizing that Buddhaghosa also sees behavior as the best indicator of progress is an insight that emerges by placing his work near Teresa's. Virtuous actions thus also seem to have a role throughout Buddhaghosa's description of practice. Virtuous actions are reliable evidence of how things are developing.

No-Self: Mental Constructions and the Center Room

Although Buddhaghosa's more technical analysis of mental constructions utilizes quite different language from Teresa's descriptions of the interior room of the castle, his analysis nonetheless offers a helpful entry into her no-self theology. No-self theology is a method for unselfing, as Teresa describes it, but in Buddhaghosa's work, we see more clearly that no-self, as a principle of practice, emphasizes embeddedness and connection. No-self is an approach that attempts to leave nothing out rather than predetermine a locus of central importance. Teresa's castle metaphor suggests that the process of transformation is a slow journey inward, a quest to achieve something at the heart of the fortress through detachment, but the metaphor is also that of cleaning house—removing vermin, cleaning rooms, opening up long abandoned spaces to light. The journey is thus also one of increasing interconnection and relationship, and this

dimension of the practice reflects no-self theology. The point of detachment is not alienation but rather leaving nothing utterly outside the pale.

The problem of attachment in Teresa's thought, as refracted through Buddhaghosa's analysis, is one of oppression. The mistake of identifying with exterior goods, virtuous acts, and the other images of the castle is that it occludes the truth under a layer of seeming manageability. Oppression combines the inhibiting of some factors of life with the pleasure of feeling in control. By isolating deep-seated understandings of the self and identifying with them, life seems well managed. Like the example of the sisters that Teresa scolds for confusing lethargic trance with spiritual attainment—she counsels they be given something to eat and something to do—one problem with attachment is that it attempts to make life manageable by making it measurable. If, for example, we could simply fill every conscious thought with approved religious thoughts, perhaps derived from scripture or about Jesus, we gain a sense of satisfaction. Teresa, who could never conform her mind in this way, ultimately finds that the whole understanding that underlies this approach to prayer remains committed to oppression. The idea here is resonant with, albeit less epistemologically complex than, dependent origination.

In the worst case, this leads to the identification with exterior goods, a situation that Teresa returns periodically to describe as the worst possible human condition. Again, Buddhaghosa's vocabulary provides an expansion on Teresa's point. What is so bad about identifying the self with wealth, for example, is that the situation is one of oppression, of diminishing and hiding some elements for the sake of another. The image of God in human beings is, as she describes it, limitless rooms, an image of the undefined possibilities of human life. To subject those possibilities to the success of wealth is nothing less than oppression and

suffering,³ not so much a choice about how to live life as the razing of human capacities for the sake of a courtyard. Living life as though only wealth mattered makes life manageable, but it also makes it a tyranny.

The emptiness of the center room marks the absence of oppression. Teresa is highlighting the way that despite her preference for the monarchical metaphor in referring to God as the King, the rule is not one of oppression. No part of creation determines and limits the others. The rooms of the castle, in their limitless variety imaging God, do not receive a finite end. Recall as well that Teresa describes the castle as infinite in two respects, both its spatial capacity and in the way that the light permeates the whole. The center room marks both the way that no part of human experience needs be an ultimate oppressor to the others, and also that God is not an oppressor of human life.

Here, then, we arrive at a much clearer picture of no-self in Teresa's thought. Stated very succinctly, no-self is a practice of allowing no element of experience to oppress the others. Moreover, this practice both requires and creates profound spiritual sensitivity. Although God is connected to creation and human beings (as de la Fuente protests), the goal of no-self practice is to cultivate a sensitivity so high as to perceive the delicate engraving or sculpting of God in the shape of perceptions themselves. This sculpted, sensitive awareness strengthens the commitment to the practice of no-self by giving it the character of peace, an answer to the desire to make existence manageable through attachment.

The Pacification of the Will

³ 'Oppression' as word rarely appears in *Interior Castle*, although as a concept it remains central to Teresa's thought both about the soul and about her political situation. When the word appears, she frequently describes 'oppression' as "interior" and, in one case, as one of the characteristics of hell (VI:1.9). The terms that her translator chooses to render as 'oppression' mean more literally tightening (*apretamiento*), a striking visual metaphor for the strangling of human capacity.

For Teresa, the key to the process of detachment rests in the faculty of the will. She repeatedly commends persistence in working and praying with the will, emphasizing its choosing capacity over the intellect's sense of mastery. Read only in the context of Christian thinkers, her point here is difficult to follow. If 'will' means the human faculty of choice taken as the defining center of human life, the ultimate command center of choice, her descriptions of the will make sense only up until the center room, where the will itself gives up its own way. It chooses self-destruction. Like the flying butterfly, the will itself dies. This reading seems to suggest that the sister should work with the will until nothing else remains and then abdicate choice altogether.

Again, reading Teresa in Buddhaghosa's company provides a refocused understanding of the way that she is deploying the term. If we understand the will as more analogous to intention (*cetanā*) in Buddhaghosa's thought, then the will needs to be considered, in the practice of no-self, as one more complex operational faculty among others. The will is not the definitive seat of human life and decision but rather one more aspect shaped by desires, habits, the capacities of perception, and so on. For the will to die, or to give itself to God's will, is not the destruction of the ultimate place of human choice but the realization that no place of human choice has ultimate status. The will is broadened, much as Teresa describes the shift to contemplative prayer as an expansion of the heart.⁴

This perspective gives 'will' in Teresa's thought a much different cast. To work with the will in prayer is not the focused screwing up the face and clenching of teeth in concentration, a *fiat* choice in the face of all the factors; rather, it is a gradual but persistent reworking of desire and attention, including cultivating the factors of experience that make the choice more feasible. This understanding of prayer provides a more fleshed out alternative to the intellectual prayer with which Teresa claims to have struggled. The difference is between a mode of knowledge,

⁴ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. IV:1.5.

perhaps reciting rote prayers or visualizing a scriptural story, that subtly supports some human faculty as the ultimate governor, and therefore oppressor of experience; and a mode of awareness that grows in sensitivity to a diverse set of factors until its sensitivity becomes conscious its own reshaping. This distinction also reinforces her claim that supernatural visions are useful only inasmuch as they reshape the will. If they harden the sense of self mastery, they are either dangerous or not genuine.

Additionally, this distinction foregrounds the way that Teresa does not seem to identify prayer with meditation or corporate worship. In the academy and in church life, the term ‘contemplative prayer’ is almost always taken to be coded speech for forms of meditation, but Teresa seems to be describing a broader strategy. Both meditation and corporate worship might serve as prayer, but a sister might also work with the will in communal living, in eating supper, and the everyday moments of walking to the next activity. Working with the will as a method for prayer is, in Teresa’s thought, a way of attempting to untangle from even the subtle perpetuations of oppression, including limiting the effects of transformation to a kneeler or pillow.

To conceive of the will in this more complex way is to transform the meaning of ‘will’ not only for prayer but also for ethics. To be good, considered in the light of Teresa’s no-self practice, must involve more than making good choices in spite of the surrounding factors. Being good must entail the cultivation of good factors, habits of life or even community resources. Moreover, being good requires sensitivity, a cultivated attention that is able to perceive the diverse factors in their interaction and conflict within an ethical dilemma, including the subtle oppressions that perpetuate bad systems. I will return to these effects in the following chapters, but here we can begin to see the way in which the ability to see beyond systematic oppression begins and ends for Teresa as an act of prayer.

Embeddedness and Suffering

The way that Buddhaghosa links oppression and suffering also offers a different perspective on Teresa's treatment of suffering. Teresa never offers a comprehensive account of the nature of suffering, as is typical for her style, and she refers to suffering (*sufimiento*) in a number of different contexts—in reference to her own headaches, what those dedicated to the Lord claim to be ready to endure, Christ's life, and many other occasions. She describes suffering as something that the selfless long for,⁵ but also as something that happens only outside the center room.

While systematizing Teresa's treatment of suffering in a Buddhaghosa-like fashion is unhelpful (and probably impossible) by missing the value of her indirect approach, a few general themes of her understanding of suffering in connection to no-self stand out. In two places, Teresa offers helpful overviews that hint at her overall view of suffering. In one of the few places where she addresses the nature of suffering more directly, she speaks of two kinds of suffering, inner and outer suffering.⁶ Outer suffering comes from "our human nature," our bodily, emotional, relational existence, which is also the source of many consolations, or feelings of pleasure and support. Inner suffering is the result of the hooks embedded in suffering, the "disquieting passion that lasts a long while."⁷ Inner suffering is characterized by some aspect of pain becoming oppressive—the threat of losing myself, or the fear that the pain will never cease, and so on. This distinction allows her to clarify her understanding of the end of transformation. Although outer, human suffering remains in the interior room—the sister is still embodied, hurts when she stubs her toe, enjoys a cup of tea, wants to see her monastery succeed—it does not interfere with the abiding sense of peace and divine union. Inner suffering vanishes altogether. Outer suffering

⁵ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:3.4.

⁶ Teresa of Avila, bk. V:3.4-5.

⁷ Teresa of Avila, bk. V:3.4.

without inner suffering is like experience without the weighted hook that drags an oppressive pall into each moment. The sister feels pain at stubbing her toe without self-recrimination or the sense that the world is out to get her. She enjoys her tea without worrying whether it will last, where the next cup will come from, or whether it was prepared exactly right. She wants to see her monastic community succeed, but she does not experience her self as defined by that success.

In the second extended reflection on suffering, she reflects on the suffering of Christ. She shares her conviction that every moment of Christ's life was characterized by suffering,⁸ not through foreknowledge of his death but rather through the tremendous love he felt for the people around him and the pain that they experienced. The point appears consistent with her distinction between outer and inner suffering. Christ experiences the full range of suffering in outer suffering as compassion—he loves his companions, mourns Lazarus, feels concern for his safety—but it lacks the features of inner suffering that perpetuate the suffering through oppression. Read with other Christian sources of the time, the passage clearly echoes the penitential theology of her period. Existence entails suffering because sin infects existence, and Christ endures the results of sin without having participated in its genesis. Read in conversation with Buddhaghosa, however, the description of taking every moment of existence in creation as a type of suffering sounds quite different. Buddhaghosa, after all, makes this point about the nature of experience, and he also does so by linking suffering to oppression. Even the happiest moments of experience, while undeniably happy, participate in a system of oppression—taking a false sense of self as a given that must be perpetuated and yet must fail.

Suffering, understood as oppression, offers a different way of reading Teresa's treatment of the topic. Outer suffering, which derives from the finitude of human factors, threatens to become oppressive at every moment but is more closely related to the momentary experiences of

⁸ Teresa of Avila, bk. V:2.14.

pain and pleasure. Worry over a missing child or a pulled muscle has a physical and emotional expression, and but its threat to oppress other elements of experience stems from the loss of control that each implies. Inner suffering is that feeling of losing a sense of manageability and control.

Following this logic to Christ, Christ experiences outer suffering, the pain of finitude, and as she uses the term, he does not experience inner suffering. However, Teresa is suggesting that Christ is oppressed not by the hooks buried in the pain and pleasure of experience but by choosing to accept the effects of those hooks in others. He is limited by and made subject to the world. Incarnation, as a Christian doctrine, is for Teresa a doctrine about oppression, a way of expressing the freedom of ineffable God made subject to the limits of creation.

Connecting oppression with suffering clarifies what she sometimes describes as a desire for suffering. First, suffering can be useful in the process of detachment. As Buddhaghosa also points out in quoting the Buddha's flaming mass sermon, the honesty of pain can be more revelatory at times about the general state of our experience than pleasure, which so easily reifies a sense of self-mastery. In this sense, suffering has a spiritual usefulness in Teresa's thought that parallels Buddhaghosa's thinking on the topic. Strictly speaking, however, seeking out suffering also perpetuates the sense of self-mastery, a point which Teresa acknowledges. The desire for suffering is most emphatically *not* a desire for extreme penance or self-torture in Teresa's thought, but a desire that the afflictions of life be used as occasions of honest reflection.

Second, the selfless do also desire to suffer not in a way that can subtly reify a sense of self-mastery but rather in a way parallel to Christ, namely, through their strong relationships and connection to the people around them. The desire for suffering that Teresa describes is the desire for outer suffering that stems from being thoroughly committed to the people and causes around

them. They desire that suffering not for its sensory experience but because it stands to help the people around them through connection, solidarity, and relationships. In other words, the desire for suffering, at least in the case of the selfless, is a shorthand way of describing a commitment to concerns of justice, teaching, and compassion.

Much as the pacification of the will leads to an increased sensitivity to oppression as it is internalized at the deepest level of consciousness and understanding, the process also leads to a desire to help other people by connecting to them. Again, no-self, perhaps in a surprising way, leads directly to a range of issues of ethical import. Beyond the sensitivity to the pain of oppression in other people, Teresa claims that this practice leads to the desire to *do* something about that more deeply sensed connection.

The following chapter connects no-self, understood as a method for remaining open to the widest possible range of interconnected human life, to its ethical claims.

Chapter 5: Fruit Bat Metaphysics, and All You Need Is Equanimity (or Love)

“It came about through the careful diligence and intelligence of this good friend.”¹

“A good friend who exhibits the instances of talk, in whose presence one hears what has not been heard, corrects what has been heard, gets rid of doubt, rectifies one’s view, and gains confidence; or by training under whom one grows in faith, virtue, learning, generosity and understanding.”²

Once no-self is understood as a heuristic term for a practice-centered approach to reshaping deep-seated awareness in such a way as to allow no single aspect of human life the role of defining oppressor, a distinctive theological anthropology begins to emerge in Teresa’s writings. This depiction of selfhood remains incomplete by necessity, but it is holistically minded. It also does not describe a picture of human faculties that could serve as a paradigm or pattern. Rather, by engaging closely in the analysis of human life, it seeks to illuminate through performance rather than picture. It relates to ethics not like a single, defined strategy, whether a decision tree, statement of duty, analysis of goods, or even depiction of virtue—although it might use all of these methods at different moments. Instead, Teresa’s theological anthropology connects to ethics through its emphasis on the interrelationship of awareness cultivated in prayer and the subtle oppressions that characterize human experience, which may be internalized forms of external oppression. By definition, we are unprepared for anything that comes to us as a problem (as the rabbi Edwin Friedman puts it), but the ethics of no-self makes the point that what we fail to recognize might be damaging the world and us anyway.

¹ Teresa of Avila, “The Book of Her Foundations,” in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Vol 3*, trans. Otilio Rodriguez and Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, D.C.: Ics Pubns, 1985), chaps. 31, 36.

² Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. I, 49. The instances of talk are, according to Ñāṇamoli’s citation from the Suttas, “Such talk as is concerned with effacement, as favours the heart’s release, as leads to complete dispassion, fading, cessation, peace, direct knowledge, enlightenment, Nibbāna, that is to say: talk on wanting little, contentment, seclusion, aloofness from contact, strenuousness, virtue, concentration, understanding, deliverance, knowledge and vision of deliverance.”

Before delving more deeply into the ethical dimension of no-self, two main facets of no-self theology would benefit from a fuller explication. The first connects to the role of knowledge within the inner, empty room of Teresa's castle. If knowledge tends to reinforce a sense of self-mastery, and if no-self is primarily a practice of engaging human experience, what role does knowledge play? This question manifests acutely in the center room of the castle, but it is also true more broadly about the role of knowledge. The second facet relates to the role of desire and love. Teresa frequently describes desire and love as the engine of no-self practice—love of God powers and makes bearable the changes of detachment. Buddhaghosa, by contrast, eschews the language of desire because of its entanglement in dependent origination; to desire something is to assume mistakenly at a deep level that the world is both more permanent and more in our control than it is. What role does desire have with respect no-self?

Knowing: Fruit Bat Metaphysics

As discussed in the previous chapter, Teresa describes the most profound reshaping of understanding as an 'engraved' or 'sculpted' knowledge. The image suggests that Teresa finds herself acted upon and reshaped without her participation, and her very faculties and functioning are reformed by the process. Knowledge in this sense is not the mastery of an idea but the reconfiguration of knowing itself. Metaphorically, it is rather more like stepping back from a telescope than pointing it in a different direction. The change is not that new, spectacular astronomical data fills the view, but that the very nature of the view has shifted. The telescope offers a useful perspective on many things, but it is useless at seeing the hand that directs it.

This shift in vision becomes more apparent by reading her text in conversation with Buddhaghosa's depiction of mental constructions. His metaphor of the land-finding crow helps make this point. Having come to recognize the deep way in which the mental constructions shape

our experience, Buddhaghosa describes the way that perception becomes sensitively attuned to the process of creating mental constructions, noticing when it happens and subsequently developing equanimity toward that process. This sensitivity is like a land-finding crow, able to recognize and ignore the endless sea. When this same sensitivity finds something new, Nibbāna, it recognizes that it has found something different. In the metaphor, the crow finds a place to land where the ship can follow, even if the crow has no words to describe the land and the ship cannot know what that land contains or even what precisely the crow has seen.

From this point forward, the monk who has seen Nibbāna experiences something akin to sculpted or engraved knowledge. Here, the extinguishing metaphor falls a bit short because the ‘sight’ of Nibbāna facilitates the ongoing developments in understanding. Nibbāna functions, if anything, rather more like a light or lens at this stage, offering a fruitful perspective in the process of changing understanding. Epistemologically, the shift in understanding grows from Buddhaghosa’s phenomenological approach, which examines experience in fine-grained detail and determines its name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*). Name-and-form (‘mentality-materiality’ is Ñāṇamoli’s preferred translation) refers to the precise ways that our experience is constructed by the mind (name) and from objects (form).³ Our more contemporary Western sensibilities may be ready to jump forward and proclaim that much comes from mind, but we should note that while Buddhaghosa agrees, he sees this understanding as hard won and as a profound shift in understanding. In other words, again, to gain sensitivity about engraved or sculpted knowledge requires something more than a mastered linguistic concept of what it means. Analyzing things according to name-and-form, *nāma-rūpa*, requires a strengthened and transformed understanding, which frees the capacity to ‘see’ Nibbāna, which in turn deepens the ability to analyze things according to name-and-form. With finely tuned attention, the monk discovers

³ Heim and Ram-Prasad, “In a Double Way: Nāma-Rūpa in Buddhaghosa’s Phenomenology,” 1.

Nibbāna, something unconstructed which is not co-created by the mind but nonetheless occupies it, even provides a helpful perspective for freeing it. Nibbāna never sculpts or engraves—those images belong to agency, which is Teresa’s language—but by focusing on Nibbāna, the various constituents of experience are seen more clearly.

Both Teresa and Buddhaghosa are describing something largely unlike but reminiscent of the passive intellect, Aristotle’s idea that part of mind understands all things by becoming all things. Their description of this phenomenon is largely unlike Aristotle’s passive intellect in that it most emphatically does *not* apply to all things. Buddhaghosa, but also Teresa in less obvious ways, argues that our knowledge gains its shape not only from external forms but also from desire, previous knowledge, and the constructing dimensions of the mind. No part of the mind is a purely passive intellect. Rather, both thinkers claim that with training, the mind can become sufficiently attentive to allow something beyond being to affect the mind—something closer to receptivity than pure passivity. This receptive intellect is akin not to the default mode of perception but rather the highest kind of cultivated sensitivity. With profoundly transformed understanding, the mind can *finally* be formed.

If this highest type of sensitivity, a self-consciously passive intellect, is one late result of no-self practice, what role does knowing have in no-self practice more broadly? We might assume wrongly, for example, that knowledge stands entirely aside from a no-self practice. After all, given the way knowledge can easily be seen to support a self-understanding shaped by self-mastery, we might expect both Teresa and Buddhaghosa to counsel a general ambivalence about learning. However, neither takes this perspective—Teresa frequently extols the value of education and wishes she had access to more; Buddhaghosa’s text is concerned with teaching

ideas as well as practice. Both see knowing, rightly directed, as a highly useful way to cultivate a sensitivity that notices and welcomes engraved knowledge.

Both Teresa and Buddhaghosa approach the process of obtaining selflessness in a way that does not construct a metaphysical picture but rather continually disposes the person toward being open about deeply held metaphysical views. This approach is hardly unique to Buddhaghosa and Teresa. It resonates with many other theological and philosophical strategies, including the therapeutic approaches of Kierkegaard, at least some readings of Nāgārjuna's emphasis on rejecting views (including a viewless view), Pyrrhonian skepticism's insistence on suspending judgments as the end of practice, and the *Zhuangzi*'s reflection on the importance of ethical flexibility, adjusting actions and beliefs freely to the needs of context. However, as this list of thinkers suggests, the very idea that this could be a livable position is contested. Kierkegaard's writings, despite their performative elements, can be read as flat metaphysical commitments to an ascending aesthetic, ethical, and theological scale; Nāgārjuna's writings can be and are sometimes read as offering a view for which he is arguing.

Seeing this shared approach in Buddhaghosa and Teresa, then, is a way of understanding both what is distinctive about the position as well as its livability. Becoming selfless entails a steady practice of mental and physical habits that is fueled by deeply held metaphysical beliefs about the world but which also undoes, changes, or sometimes destroys those beliefs. The image of Nibbāna—a fire that consumes all of its fuel and is extinguished—is surely relevant here, but following Buddhaghosa's evocative metaphor, I am calling this approach 'fruit bat metaphysics.'

Buddhaghosa compares this strategy to a fruit bat in his list of the twelve similes that characterize the insight that leads to seeing Nibbāna. He writes,

The Fruit Bat. There was a fruit bat, it seems. She had alighted on a honey tree (*madhuka*) with five branches, thinking, "I shall find flowers or fruits here." She

investigated one branch but saw no flowers or fruits there worth taking. And as with the first so too she tried the second, the third, the fourth, and the fifth, but saw nothing. She thought, “This tree is barren; there is nothing worth taking here,” so she lost interest in the tree. She climbed up on a straight branch, and poking her head through a gap in the foliage, she looked upwards, flew up into the air and alighted on another tree.⁴

The bat of the story desires a satisfying fruit and is unwilling to settle for something unripe or too small, something that will not prove sustaining. By carefully cultivating the desire for a fruit that truly satisfies, the fruit bat slowly, shadow by shadow, discerns the true nature of the barren tree. The bat then moves forward to another. In Buddhaghosa’s explication of the simile, this pursuit echoes the drive that moves the monk to investigate experience but not settle with a half-true reward.

Maria Heim and Chakravarti Ram-Prasad take up this perspective as they argue that Buddhaghosa’s method is to foster immunity to the lure of metaphysical views altogether.⁵ By ‘view,’ they seem to have in mind its use in Buddhism (*ditṭhi* in Pāli) as a fixed framework of interpretation, and for metaphysics, they offer a very general definition to scoop up its many presentations in philosophy: “metaphysics is about how things are and come to be what they are (on whatever construal of “things” and “is”), while a metaphysical argument is one directed towards determining how those things are what they are.”⁶ They claim that Buddhaghosa utilizes his practice as a way to change a person’s disposition toward claims about the ‘how’ of reality and its transformations, removing ‘views’ that make reality (or Nibbāna, I would add) more difficult to see.

They further argue that although Buddhist metaphysics might “frame” Buddhaghosa’s project, it does not enter its content.⁷ Heim and Ram-Prasad point out that phenomenology takes

⁴ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XXI, 91.

⁵ Heim and Ram-Prasad, “In a Double Way: Nāma-Rūpa in Buddhaghosa’s Phenomenology,” 26.

⁶ Heim and Ram-Prasad, 2.

⁷ Heim and Ram-Prasad, 4.

different trajectories in its Western traditions, and, in order to respond to Kant's attempts to identify a transcendental subject, many thinkers use phenomenological methods to take up a "metaphysical presupposition that the purpose of interrogating experience is to go to the things themselves and arrive at the transcendental subject."⁸ They quote Dan Zahavi (whose own work on a minimal self follows this trajectory), who suggests in an analysis of Michel Henry that phenomenology must ultimately "go beyond its study of manifestation to the subjectivity that renders manifestation possible."⁹ Heim and Ram-Prasad are arguing that this move in the argument, using phenomenological analysis to arrive at the conditions that create awareness, is precisely the metaphysical move that Buddhaghosa chooses to avoid.

They further argue that Buddhaghosa's method avoids metaphysical commitments by emphasizing contemplative practice. They write, "Practice is sufficient for the dismantling of the reflex by which the untutored take reflexivity and the objects of experience to be marks of a pre-given subject clinging to what it is aware of."¹⁰ In other words, breaking experience into its constituent parts need not support (or necessarily disprove) any particular metaphysical picture, but the practice of doing that dismantling provides a different quality of awareness that changes the 'stickiness of views', how the practitioner engages or inhabits metaphysical ideas.

Heim and Ram-Prasad are focusing primarily on Buddhaghosa's practice of analyzing experience according to name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*) as analogues for intention and affectivity in Western phenomenology. To analyze an experience according to name-and-form is to patiently peel apart which aspects the subject brings to the experience (name or intention) as well as what strikes the subject (the form or affectivity). The detailed methods that Buddhaghosa offers for engaging this differentiation are complex and outside the purpose of this project, but

⁸ Heim and Ram-Prasad, 26.

⁹ Heim and Ram-Prasad, 3.

¹⁰ Heim and Ram-Prasad, 31.

Heim and Ram-Prasad's more general argument extends to the other dimensions of Buddhaghosa's work in the *Path of Purification* as well. Buddhaghosa describes the process of analyzing phenomena according to name-and-form within the context of purifying understanding, the process of changing understanding with respect to mental constructions. To pick up Heim and Ram-Prasad's use of the term 'view,' mental constructions serve as pre-reflective views, as much metaphysical as perceptual. Buddhaghosa's phenomenological analysis aims at unsettling the ways that metaphysical views shape perception, like the perspective of the money-changer whose self-understanding is subtly determined by the economy. Developing equanimity toward mental constructions is Buddhaghosa's language for what Heim and Ram-Prasad mean by suggesting that the dismantling of reflexivity-as-proof-of-self is sufficient.

Contemporary practitioners of the Theravāda tradition also echo this sense that their approach, of which Buddhaghosa is one key interpreter, avoids metaphysical positions. Bhikkhu Bodhi, clarifying the Theravāda tradition as distinct from nondual schools of Buddhist and Indian thought, emphasizes the way that Theravāda practices build clarity of vision rather than metaphysical realization.¹¹ What this clarity enables, he continues, is a more direct apprehension of the nature of suffering as well as the other noble truths. He emphasizes the way that practices that sharpen perception itself predominate over any particular metaphysical view.

However, Buddhaghosa's perspective is not simply an anti-metaphysical one, a charge which would convict his thought of the very metaphysical overreach that his work purports to avoid. Heim and Ram-Prasad focus on his method itself, describing how it maintains distance from the any substantial claims about the self while also maintaining distance from the view that no self exists in a metaphysical sense. They are describing a practice that leads to a

¹¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi, "Dhamma and Non-Duality," accessed August 19, 2015, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_27.html.

“transformation of attitude”¹² toward metaphysical claims rather than the absolute destruction of metaphysical claims. In other words, the practice of no-self also addresses metaphysics in transformational rather than didactic way.

To be clear (and perhaps to clarify Heim and Ram-Prasad’s point), the privileging of practice as a way to sharpen perception does not entirely avoid metaphysical claims. Buddhaghosa’s method is non-metaphysical only if entirely divorced from its actual practice. The motivation for beginning the practice, the monk’s fear of the ongoing suffering of existence in Buddhaghosa’s paradigmatic example, as well as the belief that the practice might lead somewhere, which requires faith in the Buddha’s teaching about suffering and Nibbāna before they can be seen, quite obviously entails metaphysical positions about the nature of how things are and how they change. The reason to engage in the difficult and complex practice, the energy that animates it, originates in a metaphysical frame. The embodied practice needs metaphysical claims to energize it. To return to the fruit bat simile, the bat needs to desire fruit in order to search. The monk needs to desire freedom in order to purify understanding. The sister needs the early stirrings of desire for God to enter the castle of prayer.

The practice changes the perception shaped by those metaphysical claims, the way that those views are inhabited or held. A monk may begin practice out of a desire for freedom, bliss, and peace, but the practice changes the outworking of that desire. Attachment to a metaphysical view requires a passionate commitment to a mental construction rather than equanimity toward it. A monk who is too attached to a view of Nibbāna cannot progress because in the case of Nibbāna above all else, subtle perception is required.

The monk needs to cultivate fruit bat metaphysics, a disposition that finds energy in metaphysical claims without being defined by them. Heim and Ram-Prasad do not discuss the

¹² Heim and Ram-Prasad, “In a Double Way: Nāma-Rūpa in Buddhaghosa’s Phenomenology,” 5.

need for metaphysics as a kind of fuel or energy, but metaphysics' energizing role is implicit in their description of metaphysics as the method's frame. To fine tune their point, metaphysics empowers the method by creating the context where such a complex phenomenological method makes sense. Deeply held and pre-reflective beliefs generate and energize the practice.

The dynamic form of the practice begins from metaphysics—fear, compassion, and the desire for peace—but the method does not become an argument for those metaphysical views and, in fact, undoes them. As Buddhaghosa writes, “In the ultimate sense all the [four noble] truths should be understood as void because of the absence of (i) any experiencer, (ii) any doer, (iii) anyone who is extinguished, and (iv) any goer.”¹³ This sentence, offered partway through the purification of understanding, effectively rejects every part of the metaphysics that has led to transformation; yet, Buddhaghosa is not saying that it thereby cancels the process altogether, and it certainly does not erase the reality of Nibbāna, which Buddhaghosa then devotes many more chapters to explaining. This complexity, deriving energy from metaphysical claims through desire combined with detachment, is what I am calling fruit bat metaphysics.

I have picked up Buddhaghosa's metaphor of the fruit bat in order to highlight the way in which Buddhaghosa's method necessarily entails seeing certain attitudes toward metaphysical beliefs as a problem while nonetheless being energized by them. Basic or dearly held assumptions about reality perpetuate oppression. Heim and Ram-Prasad emphasize the analytic dimension of Buddhaghosa's approach to this problem, the Abhidhammic-style of analysis which trains the mind to examine the factors of experience in focused, intense ways that do not then lead to an argument about the metaphysical nature of the self or world. However, Buddhaghosa's approach is more than a phenomenological analysis. After all, his method is not utterly agnostic about metaphysics, either in the sense that metaphysical problems about the

¹³ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XVI, 90.

nature of reality must remain unknown (‘agnostic’ sounds rather too much like *avijjā*, ignorance, which Buddhaghosa sees as the root of the problem); or in the sense that metaphysical positions do not matter because they *do* matter by providing the desire for the path to Nibbāna.

Buddhaghosa is neither anti-metaphysical nor a-metaphysical. Rather, Buddhaghosa is describing a practice where grasping metaphysical commitments lightly, or inhabiting metaphysical commitments in a different way from attachment, allows metaphysics to serve an energizing purpose.

What is true of metaphysics in particular is also true of knowing more broadly, and a primary theme in Buddhaghosa’s epistemology is fruit bat knowing. Knowledge can perpetuate the paradigm of self-mastery. Buddhaghosa explores this point most sensitively in the ten imperfections of insight.¹⁴ Even for an advanced student or elder teacher who has become profoundly aware of the shaping power of mental constructions, new and wonderful knowledge, rather than Nibbāna, may feel like the end of the whole path. True, genuinely helpful insight can become an obstruction or an attachment. The imperfections of insight serve, among other purposes, to point out the way in which this no-self practice requires a different manner of holding or inhabiting knowledge.

Buddhaghosa’s fruit bat simile echoes a point made by Jonardon Ganeri in his analysis of the Buddha’s teaching in several Pāli *suttas*. Truth, he argues, is never a universal in the realm of self-knowledge and self-awareness. It requires timeliness and context for its realization. Ganeri writes that truth “can be valued in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons.”¹⁵ He develops the comparison that the Buddha makes between a teaching and a snake. A snake is a danger unless

¹⁴ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XX, 105.

¹⁵ Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of the Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology*, 1 edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 51.

grasped in the right way, and truth, too, requires a particular grasp if it is not to destroy more than it saves.

For example, in the sutta that includes the snake imagery, the Buddha teaches that neither pleasure nor pain is in itself inhibiting to development along the path; properly speaking, *attachment* to pleasure and pain causes problems. However, because pleasure and pain are so affecting, understanding and realizing this truth is tricky. On one occasion, the Buddha strongly reprimands one monk for teaching a permissive attitude toward pleasure not because, in one strict sense, he was wrong, but because the way he taught the idea was insufficiently attentive to the way that pleasure's lure defines our human culture and context. Ganeri argues that the Buddha takes a therapeutic approach, offering the right truth at the right time. Simply saying that pleasure is no problem gives us the wrong end of truth, the dangerous end, if we do not see that carelessly accepting the idea that attachment alone is the problem quickly becomes a self-justification rather than insight. Ganeri names the virtue of being a good therapeutic client "receptivity,"¹⁶ and the term has merits for seeing the therapeutic approach toward beliefs in the *suttas* as individuals accept and later discard representations of the truth in a journey toward it.

Ganeri's exegesis and argument on truth's context and timeliness highlight the parallel way that discovering the truth requires both desire for it and flexibility about it. Knowledge is not grasped neutrally. It has, baked already within it as a mental construction, a deep-seated understanding of the self. Fruit bat metaphysics entails inhabiting metaphysics and indeed knowledge in an energized yet open way. If desire drives the fruit bat, the fruit bat also needs a receptive attitude toward each moment of discovery. When the fruit bat comes to a branch, she must look for the fruit each time. If she begins to assume that fruit cannot exist, she will not

¹⁶ Ganeri, 56.

explore the next tree; if she assumes that whatever tiny or unripe fruit exists on the branch will do for dinner, she will make do with what is not truly food.

For Buddhaghosa, ‘receptivity’ as the term for the stable attitude that we need toward the truth does not cut deeply enough. To be receptive, both to new ideas and to correction, is vital, but the matrix of suffering that defines experience—dependent origination—requires therapy with a much stronger degree of engagement and energy. The monk needs skepticism, even doubt, to animate the phenomenological analysis. (The monk also needs a supportive community, a point to which I will return in the next chapter.) Buddhaghosa frequently refers to doubt (*vimati*), and he nearly always does so in the context of its being overcome or purified. The context of its use throughout the *Path of Purification* suggests that doubt is useful because it summons the energy to engage in the required program. Doubt demands a reply. It summons the energy for doing the dedicated work that the practice requires.

How, then, to understand this animating energy that propels the monk in the acceptance of a metaphysical vision (the only way out of suffering is to trust in the Buddha’s path which leads to an escape), only to undo the vision along the way? Buddhaghosa answers this question by developing a technical term for a type of mental constructions. Following the Abhidhamma, he chooses the word energy (*virīya*), but he particularly emphasizes its importance. He highlights it as a distinguishing characteristic of the monk who untangles the tangle.¹⁷ He also associates it with the perseverance necessary to continue along through difficult parts of the path.

He offers his fullest explanation of energy during his Abhidhammic analysis of the term as a mental construction concomitant with consciousness, and indeed ‘energy’ follows immediately upon the analysis of intention (*cetanā*). Recall that strictly speaking, the problem with mental constructions is not in their aggregating as such but in the way that ignorance

¹⁷ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. I, 7.

inflects their gathering so as to disguise and oppress the composition of experience. In other words, what a transformed understanding requires is awareness of and equanimity toward mental constructions. This positive use of mental constructions matters because two of the primary categories of mental constructions, intentions and energy, have vital ethical and soteriological work to do once they are held with equanimity. In the case of the fruit bat, what allows the bat to both desire and to be open is what Buddhaghosa terms ‘energy.’

In defining its role as a mental construction, Buddhaghosa writes, (vi) Energy (*virīya*) is the state of one who is vigorous (*vīra*). Its characteristic is marshalling (driving). Its function is to consolidate conascent states. It is manifested as non-collapse. Because of the words: ‘Bestirred, he strives wisely’, its proximate cause is a sense of urgency; or its proximate cause is grounds for the initiation of energy. *When rightly initiated, it should be regarded as the root of all attainments.*¹⁸

Here, Buddhaghosa affirms that energy provides the drive and perseverance for continuing the methods of analysis that he has laid out, but he also connects ‘energy’ in its precise sense with the gathering function of mental constructions. Strictly speaking, intentions gather, and energy consolidates and drives. If I intend to eat a pastry, my perception of the pastry is a gathered collection of previous knowledge, habits, and desires that shapes how I encounter the form of a pastry. If I intend to keep eating the pastry, seeing my fourth and seventh bites as part of one whole experience, energy holds those different intentions together. Intention, like all other mental moments, is always a singular a mental construction—the whole process of deciding to choose a pastry, eat it, and enjoy the memory of a recently gone pastry are each constructed of many individual intentions. Understanding each moment as a continuation of the next, holding together the various disparate memories and factors, entails individual energy mental constructions. Buddhaghosa acknowledges that energy can be skillfully directed (or not), but at a profound level of understanding, energy forms the basic fuel not only of a pastry habit but also of

¹⁸ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XIV, 137. Emphasis mine.

the path of purification. Right energy is the anchoring, fueling root of all attainments. The monk must learn fruit bat metaphysics, a way of inhabiting descriptions and deeply held understandings about reality loosely, and the source of this work is energy, that feature of our experience that holds things together.

To return to the image of the fruit bat, the bat's primary virtue is energy, driving forward while holding things together. This drive allows the fruit bat to hold the desire together with the present lack of fruit, evaluating each tree branch honestly. Together with receptivity and a transformed understanding, energy allows the knowledge of the fruit bat to be productive.

Stepping further back to no-self as a practice, if knowledge is to serve as more than a natural tool for the sense of self-mastery, it is because knowledge stands not as an answer to experience but because it, too, becomes grist for the process of transformed understanding. Knowledge loses some of its tendency to oppress if it is attended to within the context that defines it and the desires that partially construct it. By attending to those aspects, knowledge becomes a driving force of energy.

This perspective is a distinct one. It does not, on the one hand, reduce all of knowledge to a supposedly universal propositional structure which always already includes deep-seated notions of a self. On the other, it also does not reduce all of knowledge to the pure play of the mind's invention—while the form (*rūpa*) of things impinging on the senses offers neither limit nor objectivity to knowledge, it also never allows the creation of speculative knowledge in a vacuum.

Buddhaghosa's more analytic, epistemology-focused writing addresses these knowledge-based aspects of practicing no-self in a context where teaching and philosophy are highly valued, but in Teresa's context, academic training is denied to women. Moreover, in her context,

religious practice is assumed to have an intellectual character, which automatically excludes her. This different context shapes Teresa's treatment of fruit bat knowledge. Like Buddhaghosa's practice, her thought emerges from a distinct metaphysical perspective. Not wanting to become rigidly identified with the terrifying vermin outside the castle, the sister turns inward in prayer toward God; then, desiring God and the many good things that seem to accompany those who have moved closer to God, the sister sets out to explore the inner castle. The practice also changes those metaphysical claims for the sister. The good things that come from prayer—locutions, visions, ecstasies—are not God, and that confusion must be worked out at a profound level of understanding and realization. Virtue, while useful at every stage of development, must not itself become a source of attachment, supporting a subtle variety of self-mastery rather than selfless humility. Early methods of prayer and study clean the soul of mud and vermin, but intellectual prayer, which can be useful for cleaning, gives the false impression that God is an idea, knowable by the mind. The metaphysical views that lead the sister onto the road can become the kind of metaphysical view that inhibits transformation.

Teresa, in one of her more famous quotations, describes the tension between knowing a metaphysical picture and the desire which responds to it this way: "I only wish to inform you that in order to profit by this path and ascend to the dwelling places we desire, the important thing is not to think much but to love much; and so do that which best stirs you to love."¹⁹ The point is not, in other words, thinking good thoughts; rather, Teresa counsels, the sister needs to think thoughts and do actions that stir desire. Ultimately, every understanding of God needs to be set aside because, as contemporary scholar Peter Tyler summarizes, "Our intellects (*nuestras entendimientos*) cannot grasp that which we seek—whether it be the nature of God or the nature

¹⁹ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. IV:1.7.

of the soul....”²⁰ Much as an untransformed understanding cannot ‘see’ Nibbāna, the intellect—in Teresa’s language—cannot perceive God. It is the wrong tool. What is needed, rather, is a growing sense of affection, desire, and love that expands the sensitivity of the sister.

Peter Tyler’s work takes important steps toward reading Teresa this way in his book drawing out Teresa’s strategies in conversation with Wittgenstein. What makes her work so amenable to a Wittgensteinian lens is its affective, transformational character. Tyler writes that *Interior Castle* “is better interpreted from the Wittgensteinian perspective ... as using linguistic strategies of unknowing and affectivity to lead the reader to personal affective transformation for engagement in *Obras* [works] in the world.”²¹ The ultimate aim of these linguistic strategies is to cultivate a subject who can “act in the world through ‘embodied unknowing’ in selfless action.”²² Teresa’s language becomes a strategy for fostering holistic transformation when affectivity rather than the intellect is the guide.

The details of her strategy for cultivating this desire differ from Buddhaghosa’s, and seeing these details is illustrative. Tyler identifies four main elements of this strategy in *Interior Castle*. First, Teresa offers many images throughout the text not to create a perfect semantic meta-image but rather to effect “spatial and emotional disorientation.”²³ The writing itself stultifies the intellect by juxtaposing overwhelming and contradictory images—castles, butterflies, crystals, pearls, mud, vermin, a home—that Teresa suggests should be kept in mind precisely for their overwhelming effect. Rather than calling attention to the working of the mind through intense analysis of name-and-form, her approach attempts to call attention to the working of the mind by stunning it. Second, Teresa also attempts to evoke desire, characterizing

²⁰ Peter Tyler, *The Return to the Mystical: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Teresa of Avila and the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 170.

²¹ Tyler, 169.

²² Tyler, 46.

²³ Tyler, 171.

the castle and journey into it as delightful journey into greater joy.²⁴ She categorizes the pleasures that attend each series of rooms in the castle in refined and suggestive ways in order to entice desire. Third, Tyler highlights Teresa's insistence on the need to engage in the practice of prayer she describes, which cultivates a self-awareness that is not a "head knowledge" but an "experiential knowledge connected to the libidinal springs of delight, the *affectus*..."²⁵ Fourth and finally, Tyler identifies the process of transformation required as one of detachment, at first from more visible possessions and business, then to more intangible characteristics like honor and virtue, before finally detaching from more deeply held senses of God and self.

Teresa's strategy here provides a richer way to engage the images of Buddhaghosa's text. Teresa seeks to stun or pause the discursive mind while at the same time cultivating interest and desire. Her text attempts to foster something very like Buddhaghosa's energy in a different way, stimulating desire while forcing flexibility in imagery. Her images may each clarify a point—the depth of transformation with the butterfly, the callousness that comes from deriving identity from external phenomena, the ignorance with the mud that dirties the early rooms, the possibilities of the soul through the spaces of an infinite castle—but in aggregate, they confuse on purpose. They disarm self-mastery by refusing to be subject to it. The strategy is akin to Certeau's criticism of attempts to create a spatial representation or sculpture of the castle. These attempts miss the whole point of the castle, which does not provide a static image so much as perform the failure of the image to be a comprehensive explanation.

This point offers an interesting insight into Buddhaghosa's pedagogy as well. While he overtly uses his frequent stories and images to clarify, they also seem likely to pause the intellect and arouse desire. His stories and images serve not as mere illustrations, in a wooden, analogical

²⁴ Tyler, 171.

²⁵ Tyler, 172.

sense, but rather as a tactic themselves. If a rapid succession of enticing images serves to decenter the intellect's primacy in Teresa's text, it seems likely to serve a similar one in Buddhaghosa's writing. We should pause a moment to note that if Buddhaghosa truly is using a plurality of images in a strategy akin to Teresa's, then reading the *Path of Purification* as an encyclopedia of practice likely misses its point as a teaching. This strategic understanding of imagery suggests that Buddhaghosa's synthesis in *Path of Purification* is not a single meta-image, even of untangling, or of aggregated philosophy from the Buddha's teaching, but rather a performance and practice.

The anchor of this transformational strategy in Teresa's work is, as Tyler notes in his third point, not a head-knowledge but something more connected to desire. Teresa, however, worries that her reader's understanding of desire may be misleading. Desire, affection, and love are what draw fruit bat metaphysics forward, but these terms are easily grasped the wrong way, rather like the aforementioned image of grasping a snake. Thinking on this question, and continuing after her famous quotation about loving rather than thinking much, she writes,

Perhaps we don't know what love is. I wouldn't be very surprised, because it doesn't consist in great delight but in desiring with strong determination to please God in everything, in striving, insofar as possible, not to offend Him, and in asking Him for the advancement of the honor and glory of His Son and the increase of the Catholic Church. These are the signs of love. Don't think the matter lies in thinking of nothing else, and that if you become a little distracted all is lost.²⁶

Love, then, is not a species of delight (*gusto*) but a commitment to the training of the soul's affections (without itself being a species of affection, like delight) and thoughts (which may wander a bit). Because God cannot be thought, love finds its actualization only in striving—pleasing, avoiding offense, asking, pursuing. Love, in other words, provides energy, or a striving attitude, that allows the sister to proceed through what Tyler identifies as the fourth aspect of

²⁶ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. IV:1.7.

Teresa's strategy, the process of detachment. Love provides a type of stability without itself becoming a metaphysical view. This is not an exhaustive picture of love for Teresa—I will return to a fuller picture in a moment—but love does overlap with Buddhaghosa's understanding of energy.

To summarize, first, what makes fruit bat metaphysics distinct is the commitment to method over metaphysics. At no point does phenomenological analysis or detachment discover a stable position that is held as finally and ultimately true. Instead, the pursuit itself offers a form of stability—the stability of energy or of love. The practice of no-self requires that knowledge, too, become one more facet of experience and not its crowning achievement. Contextually, because knowledge in the human context seems to support a paradigm of self-mastery, strategies are needed that radically decenter knowledge. Phenomenological analysis and intentionally evoked disorientation serve as complementary ways to dispossess the intellect of its apparent superiority.

An odd byproduct of the approach is the tendency for critics to shoehorn its writings into fixed metaphysical positions. I have pointed out that the reasons for this are somewhat different in each case due to the historical reception of their texts, but I would add that each is, perhaps, *more* easily misread because metaphysics does serve an energizing role in each thinker's description of transformation. Whatever Tyler is emphasizing by calling Teresa's position an 'embodied unknowing,' it mischaracterizes her approach to see it as anti-knowledge or anti-metaphysical. Neither Teresa nor Buddhaghosa argues for an *anti*-metaphysical position (which of course would also be a metaphysical position), and parts of their texts, removed from the methods which inform the whole, sound rather like ontological positions. Buddhaghosa's description of an uncreated Nibbāna accessible only once a 'person' has shed their bad

understandings can be quoted to make his work sound fairly dualist (and not unlike a position in the Indian Samkhya school of thought). Teresa's metaphors, particularly the drop of water vanishing into the river and the lights of a house becoming mingled, when taken on their own, make her sound rather like a nondualist, showing the vibration or play between the uncreated and subtly connected creation. However, read as a whole, Buddhaghosa and Teresa are working to unpin metaphysics from a sticky, governing role. Even if some kind of metaphysical position is inevitable at every moment along the path, they argue for a constant return to method—detaching from the created, analyzing each experience to its components. As Heim and Ram-Prasad usefully put it, contemplative practice comes to substitute for a final metaphysical picture of subjectivity.

I suspect that fruit bat metaphysics, taken as a family of approaches, is often subjected to readings that forcefully locate their 'final' position within metaphysics as determinative. Kierkegaard's infinite qualitative distinction, for example (if I am right in thinking of his approach as part of this family of approaches), is not so much a regulatory concept of metaphysics, as it is often treated, so much as it is a way of becoming disentangled and detached from the compelling systems and experiences that seem to define life. When their works are read as a whole, both Teresa and Buddhaghosa resist being pinned into a metaphysical picture, and taking them seriously on this point opens the possibility of reading them in a much richer way. Both are arguing that what is needed is a stable attitude toward metaphysics that is detached without being unaffected, or as Buddhaghosa terms the state, a condition of equanimity.

Second, I have argued alongside Maria Heim, Peter Tyler, and others that Buddhaghosa and Teresa privilege method ahead of metaphysics, but I have also argued that the metaphysics nonetheless plays an energizing role in both thinkers. Metaphysical commitments about the

nature of reality send the practitioner into the process of transformation. Faith in Christ sends the sister to her inner life in order to escape attachments to outer objects; faith in the Buddha sends the monk into homelessness.

Metaphysical commitments sustain the process of transformation, which Buddhaghosa identifies with the mental construction of energy. Recall that energy is what consolidates conascent states, preventing their collapse. The monk's understanding, or metaphysical belief, that following the Buddha's teaching leads out of suffering consolidates and holds together the monk's difficult work strengthening virtue, concentration, and enriched understanding, and so becomes, as Buddhaghosa writes, the root of all attainments. In other words, metaphysics itself can provide the energy for the shifted attitude toward metaphysics, and this should make clear that Buddhaghosa is not anti-metaphysical. Indeed, part of his concern with ethics stems from his concern to maintain a community who can generate this kind of energy. Ganeri makes a connected point in relationship to the Buddha's simile comparing his teachings to a raft—useful for crossing the dangerous water but a hindrance to carry on the dry land on the other side of the river. The very thing that powers the monk becomes a hindrance on the other shore.²⁷

In the practice of no-self, knowledge thus plays an energizing role but also requires special care because of how easily it oppresses other features of human life. Practically, this suggests that one of the most pressing theological problems in theological anthropology is not one of content or paradigm but of hermeneutics. When I began this project, seeing the ways that both Teresa and Buddhaghosa cross genres in order to make their arguments, I wondered if the style of theology that works from a no-self practice would challenge our recognized ways of writing theology. While this is true, the way that knowledge is treated in the metaphor of the fruit bat suggests that the greater challenge is to the way that we read and teach theology. Writing

²⁷ Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul*, 45.

informed by a no-self practice does not challenge hard-boiled, deductive analysis so much as its implicit authority as the final or best answer.

If no-self is the practice of allowing no element of experience to oppress the others, no-self theology relies on using the tools of analysis without thereby seeking within those tools a complete solution. Again, this practice resonates with some treatments of knowledge in philosophy, like Simone Weil's exploration of the concept of ideology "The Power of Words,"²⁸ where oppression and knowledge can also become intertwined. What is distinctive about no-self theology, however, is its emphasis on the very acts of thinking, reading, and analyzing as naturally inclined toward oppression, due to a number of background factors that have shaped our experience. This emphasis is not anti-intellectual—fearing analysis is also oppressive—but it does diagnose a human tendency to retreat to the conceptual.

Practically, no-self theology is a critique of tacitly ending any theological conversation on an act of knowing. The key insight here is in the 'tacit.' No canonical Christian theologian argues that the idea of God and God are the same, and contemporary theology has many tools for attempting to speak about God without falling back on a concept—God beyond being, or the foundation of being, and so on. No-self theology contributes the insight that our desire to resolve and control things, particularly without a contemplative practice that relativizes the role of knowledge, nearly always overpowers even evocative terms. Teresa and Buddhaghosa both rely on personal and communal instruction, particularly over a long period of time, as the primary ways to overcome this proclivity.

To state the point plainly, while some seminaries and churches use theology as way to diagnose, reveal, or investigate oppression, very few churches or seminaries teach a stable

²⁸ Simone Weil, "The Power of Words," in *The Simone Weil Reader*, Reprint edition (New York: Dorset Press, 1981).

attitude toward knowledge as a tool for unseating oppression. We see this in part because the needed stability in instruction, practice, and community are lacking in these contexts. The idea of a mentor, teacher, and friend in these contexts may happen haphazardly but is not cultivated. To return to a comment from Cynthia Bourgeault in the introduction about the church's failure to connect outward practice to conscious interiority, no-self theology points out that, as Bourgeault is suggesting, the problem is a one of hermeneutics. People need to learn to read practices in ways that emphasize interiority. Moreover, no-self theology suggests that practices fail to connect conscious interiority in the church because the church fails to model a way of finding stable energy for support in transformation. Knowledge becomes an easy resting place. Lacking the kind of contemplative practice that Heim and Ram-Prasad suggest can take the place of metaphysics, metaphysics subtly returns as the answer. The challenge and insight of no-self theology is to think more carefully about the stability that makes knowledge effective and energizing rather than a solution which reaffirms the old oppressions by a back door.

Love

Among Buddhaghosa's eighteen faults of monasteries, the final fault is the illustrative exception. Where the first seventeen faults describe ways that the monastery can oppress a monk, the final fault focuses on something positive that a monastery needs. Buddhaghosa describes the fault in this way. He writes, "[Fault] 18. Lack of good friends: where it is not possible to find a good friend as a teacher or the equivalent of a teacher or a preceptor or the equivalent of a preceptor, the lack of good friends there is a serious fault."²⁹ Where the other seventeen faults characterize the things that become oppressive in monastic life—too many requirements for keeping the space clean in a large facility, for example, takes time away from meditation; or close proximity to a trade center means being constantly interrupted by travelers—lacking good

²⁹ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. IV, 18.

friends is not an oppressive *thing* but rather a dearth or absence that oppresses. This is the only fault referred to as a ‘serious fault’ (*mahādosā*—and in the entire *Path of Purification*, this is the only situation described with the term). Friends, teachers, and mentors show the positive benefits of the monastic life. They are companions along the pathway, making understandable and bearable the long work. Their title does not seem to matter—whether they are officially assigned to the role they hold is less important than the relationship that they create. They stave off oppression, but they do so not by overcoming the other aspects of monastic life but by holding them together with the monk in a way that makes the path worthwhile.

This small section on the eighteen faults of the monastery offers in microcosm an image for selflessness as a whole. No-self is characterized negatively, as the freedom from suffering, but also positively as the capacity to see Nibbāna. No-self practice leads to something beyond being—an extinguishing, something that exceeds or radically differs from existence, that is experienced as blissful, peaceful. This ‘something’ may defy speech for all of the reasons that Buddhaghosa discusses, but realizing it fully is the ultimate point of becoming selfless. The good friend provides the staying power, even a foreshadowing, of fruition. The first glimpse of Nibbāna that a monk receives comes not from Nibbāna directly but, more likely, through a good teacher and friend. Those glimpses in friendship provide a way forward, as Buddhaghosa describes it, like a land-finding crow finally discovers the escape from the waste of the salt sea.

Teresa, too, is interested in more than becoming undefined by attachments. What drives the sister through the process of transformation is an intense desire for God, who cannot ultimately be desired like one more thing in the world. In the latter half of the rooms, the sister begins to ‘see’ God, with all the qualifications such sight entails, in the prayer of recollection and in quiet, in visions and in locutions. However, she initially sees God in the experiences of the

sisters around her. The shared friendship in the monastic community, its love, is known in another person before it is known in prayer.

Love, as it connects to no-self practice for these two thinkers, thus begins in two ways. First, love is known in the beginning in another, singular, specific person. Second, it continues as the driving attraction of something beyond being, God in Teresa's case and Nibbāna in Buddhaghosa's. Functionally, these two quite different realities, which remain unfettered by existence, serve a quite similar purpose in the process of becoming selfless. Glimpsed first in another person, by coming into sight, they transform seeing.

Teresa is as disorganized in her descriptions of love as on every other topic, which (as I hope has become clear is the pattern) is not a failure of her writing's structure so much as a strategic decision. If, as Teresa writes, the aim of her strategy is not to think much but to love much, simply thinking about love is inadequate in realizing selflessness. Indeed, an encyclopedic overview of love would be misleading by subtly reinforcing the self-mastery paradigm. This commitment to love as a practice does not diminish the need to be accurate about it—after all, mistaking love for thinking about love is something Teresa criticizes in the same sentences where she praises loving over thinking—but it does make sense of the way that Teresa discusses love not as an abstraction but as something closer to a posture or energy for sustaining the pathway of transformation.

As quoted above, Teresa does offer a general overview of love not as great delight but rather as “desiring with strong determination to please God in everything....³⁰ Commitment has more in common with love than paroxysms of pleasure in Teresa's thought, and yet part of Teresa's rhetoric highlights the places where delight intersects with commitment. Love is not, in

³⁰ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. IV:1.7.

other words, bereft of or absent delight. Rather, love is the energized commitment that welcomes God in everything. Love implies more than a mechanically kept duty.

As a broad commitment that endures through many self-understandings, love entails many different moments within its energized commitment. Teresa describes it as both a preliminary practice to prayer³¹ and as the ultimate realization of transformation. She describes it as an “arrow” shot by the will that wounds God and summons a response;³² the very strength of commitment penetrates and invites God in this intriguing vision of love as an arrow.

Perhaps most surprisingly in comparison to our contemporary English use of the term ‘love,’ she associates it not with attachment but with detachment. We may most easily think of love as one among several types of attachment—we speak of equal facility of loving family, friends, countries, sports teams, and the way we look in a particular jacket. We may even think of it as a totalizing emotion, rather like the role of the passions in early Christian thought, where a person is made ‘passive’ under the control of the passion. However, as Teresa uses the term, love makes an easy partner with detachment rather than attachment—love does not oppress. In her earlier text *The Way of Perfection*, she identifies love, detachment, and “true humility” as the interconnected practices which enable and accompany prayer.³³ In its character as energy, as lived commitment, love maintains relationships among different elements, but it is neither an attachment nor a passion.

In short, love is the energy that provides a commitment to no-self practice. Beyond the role of fruit bat metaphysics as a way of engaging knowledge, love is a way of becoming aware of and remaining connected to the diverse components of human experience in a quite powerful

³¹ Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, chap. 4.4.

³² Teresa of Avila, *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, trans. Otilio Rodriguez and Kieran Kavanaugh, First Edition, The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Vol. 2 (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1980), chap. 6.5.

³³ Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, chap. 4.4.

fashion. Moreover, to anticipate what a fuller investigation of love looks like in Teresa's thought, 'love' describes the full, energized expression of the non-oppressive relationship between a person and God.

Buddhaghosa's systematic analysis again provides an entryway into seeing the no-self aspect of Teresa's thought. Here, however, a pause is needed to parse some of the critical differences between them on this point. Their uses of rhetoric and references to the Unsigned strongly diverge. Teresa speaks of loving God and being loved in return, an anthropomorphizing that, if applied to Nibbāna, would undoubtedly dismay Buddhaghosa. Nibbāna lacks the kind of agency that Teresa ascribes to God, and, more importantly, Buddhaghosa would find metaphors of this kind utterly misleading because they too easily slide into the very overlord paradigm that Buddhaghosa sees as the obstacle to transformed understanding. The difference between the two thinkers is undoubtedly metaphysical—any conflation of Nibbāna with God settles for an impossible half-truth for Buddhaghosa, and the idea that God lacks agency in engaging the world would be among the worst kind of errors for Teresa.

However, because of their parallel no-self processes, it is striking that the difference can also be seen as the result of different analyses of oppression. Buddhaghosa sees any ultimate divinity as subject to the same objections that he offers for a self that stands immune to or aside from experience, and so the metaphors for Nibbāna focus on cessation as, among other things, a way to highlight Nibbāna's radical difference from being and our imagining of it. The problem calls for a therapeutic reply, in other words, rather than absolute response in a way entirely consonant with an approach to knowledge like the fruit bat metaphor. That the problem is therapeutic does not diminish the strength of his objection. The inclusion of ignorance and its concomitants within the tangle of experience is not a localized problem, and so his objections to

confusing the Unsigned with divinity should not be swept aside as local objections to an Indian context. Teresa, by contrast, sees God's action as the therapeutic action that enables no-self practice. Only through God's love, carried out in Christ and continually carried out in the church, does no-self practice become possible at all. Teresa sees God as radically different from the world of being, much in the same way as Buddhaghosa thinks about Nibbāna, but she completely disagrees about the metaphors needed to realize that connection.

While these two perspectives can be further traced out within their respective traditions, here I want to note that given some of the broad parallels, we should not be surprised to discover a roughly parallel sense of engaged commitment. While distinct, these parallel senses of commitment are useful for understanding the role of energy and commitment in no-self practice and in theology. As already discussed, love is the term that Teresa adopts, and by 'love' she means something connected to detachment and yet profoundly relational. Buddhaghosa's term for this commitment is *upekkhā*, which is frequently translated 'equanimity.' However, much as Teresa troubles simplistic readings of love, we should beware of any simplistic reading of equanimity which, as a word, has the ring of complacency to it. 'Equanimity' seems to evoke the ubiquitous golden buddhas that adorn Asian restaurants all over the United States—smiling, disengaged, a bit worn, and sat in the corner—peace represented as a gentle benevolence over a buffet. Buddhaghosa intends something altogether different with *upekkhā*. As mentioned above, the Pāli Text Society's dictionary suggests 'hedonic neutrality' as way of pointing at its paradoxical character. At the outset, we need to note that this is the disposition toward mental constructions that allows the sight of Nibbāna; if all that is worldly are mental constructions, as Buddhaghosa writes, then equanimity is the disposition of the most advanced practitioner of no-self to all living beings. Note, too, that this is an occasion where reading Teresa provides a much

richer engagement with Buddhaghosa’s work. As we trace equanimity, its meaning should have something to do with energized commitment, or as Teresa calls the state, love.

Maria Heim argues that the divine abidings, a section of *The Path of Purification* dealing with the phenomenology of kindness and compassion, covers the same ground as what we talk about under the category of love.³⁴ Although Buddhaghosa does not use the equivalent of the term ‘love’ here—the divine abidings examine the development of different ways of being connected to sentient beings, of abiding in experience—the content of the section is even more closely related to the way that Teresa talks about love than the ways that we tend to talk about it. Here, Buddhaghosa develops methods for developing four interrelated facets of love: loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*).³⁵

Buddhaghosa offers an image linking these aspects into an overall picture of love. He suggests thinking of a mother with four sons—one an infant, one who is sick, one who is a youth, and one who is an adult.³⁶ She hopes that the infant will be happy, now and throughout his life (loving-kindness); she wants the sick son will become healthy and aches at his being unwell (compassion); toward the youth, she feels delight at the vibrancy of his enjoyment of life (sympathetic joy); and toward the adult son, she feels a steady care that does not worry over each and every occurrence day to day (equanimity). Altogether, Buddhaghosa argues that these facets map out the overlapping experiences of love.

The section on the divine abidings occurs within the broader context of developing concentration, which, to connect it to the text’s central metaphor, is the strength of attention to follow the individual threads of experience through the tangle. Within the long section devoted to the development of concentration, Buddhaghosa describes many different types of

³⁴ Heim, “Buddhaghosa on the Phenomenology of Love and Compassion,” 3.

³⁵ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. IX, 1.

³⁶ Buddhaghosa, chaps. IX, 108.

meditation—*kasina* (which involves focus on a single color), foulness, the divine abidings, recollection of the Buddha, and more. The measure of concentration's strength is termed the *jhānas*, or levels of concentration reached in meditation. Heim nicely summarizes Buddhaghosa's reasoning for the diversity of meditation practices and the prominence of the divine abidings.

Buddhaghosa recommends that the choice of meditation subject be determined by one's teacher, the "good friend" whom one loves dearly, who knows one well, and from whom only helpful advice is forthcoming. By studying a student's temperament, the teacher will advise on the choice of meditation subject; generally speaking, all people can benefit from practicing two particular meditation subjects: loving kindness and death (suggesting that we all need to address our antipathies with loving kindness and generate urgency about practice by awareness of impending death). But beyond that, one's temperament (greedy, hating, deluded, faithful, intelligent, or speculative) will determine the subject for one's practice.³⁷

The divine abidings serve as a particularly relevant method of developing concentration, a way of sharpening the capacity to see Nibbāna. The development of concentration is the place where equanimity, the disposition needed for shifting the understanding's relationship to mental constructions, is learned. Moreover, because of the general need to address issues around love, the divine abidings are an especially crucial site for the cultivation of equanimity. While other types of meditation can also lead to equanimity, the divine abidings work at both an individual and social level. The equanimity developed in the more intellectual meditations, like *kasina* meditation (where the monk meditates on single color until they can focus on it and let it pervade their mind at will), finds a stronger deployment in the divine abidings.

This positions the divine abidings in an important role within the process of coming to see Nibbāna. The equanimity that the monk needs to gain toward mental constructions is likely either learned or refined in the divine abidings. Even as a deepened understanding shifts the monk's capacity to see the structure of experience, the practice of attending to the

³⁷ Heim, "Buddhaghosa on the Phenomenology of Love and Compassion," 5.

phenomenology of love develops the adjustment in focus needed toward the system of experience.

Buddhaghosa goes into great detail on the way to develop each of these aspects of love, all of which are required to understand equanimity. He begins with loving kindness meditation, which he takes as the paradigmatic case, at length. The practice entails wishing happiness and good will toward a person. He divides the people we know into four basic types—ourselves, those who are enemies, those toward whom we have neutral feelings, and those who are dear. Each meditation takes one of these categories as the example of love that needs expansion, and loving kindness meditation begins by taking oneself as this example. To begin the work, the monk thinks, “May I be happy and free from suffering” or “May I keep myself free from enmity, affliction and anxiety and live happily.”³⁸ The monk begins with himself, allowing wishes of happiness to pervade thoughts and feelings about himself. Buddhaghosa is confident that we want happiness for ourselves and sees it as the natural example to extend outward. Having grasped those thoughts, the monk then proceeds to direct those same kinds of thoughts toward someone beloved, someone to whom they feel neutral, and to an enemy, all of whom are chosen with the help of the friend and teacher who provides some guidance on the suitability of a concrete person for each of these categories.

Developing the same degree and quality of loving kindness for an enemy as for oneself is, of course, quite difficult. Buddhaghosa anticipates that along the path obstructions will arise, and most of the section on the divine abidings is taken up with Buddhaghosa’s quite interesting and lengthy instructions on overcoming obstructions. While they are listed within the work on loving kindness as the obstructions to wishing happiness, he refers back to them as the same obstructions for the other dimensions of love—compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

³⁸ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. IX, 8.

His advice runs the gamut from the practical suggestion to engage in gift exchange—hatred is harder to maintain in the face of gratitude—to a highly intellectual exercise reminiscent of name-and-form analysis about locating the exact part of the person which causes the hate (is it their left eye that causes the hate? Is it the pupil or the cornea, or is it an eyelash? If it is a word, which syllable? Is it their arms? Which thing causes the hate?) in order to disrupt the hateful pattern of feeling and behavior. He counsels thinking of stories of the Buddha as an inspiration, or, conversely, as a leverage of shame in order to dislodge the resentment. The monk may focus on the parts of a person's character or actions that are good (rather than resentment-inspiring). Buddhaghosa includes advice about finding compassion for the suffering the person will undergo in the future or has undergone in the past, as well as admonishment to consider what purpose that anger might be thwarting on the monk's own path, recontextualizing the purpose of the anger.

The section shows a surprising fluidity between pervading thoughts with loving kindness and literal actions of loving kindness. While the purpose of the phenomenology of love (to use Heim's term for it) is to clarify the aspect of love toward another person by showing the various ways that resentment inhibits it, this process of clarity is often not solved on a meditation cushion. The monk needs to listen to stories, consult scripture, or offer gifts. The results of pervading loving kindness can then become a meditation subject, as we will see, but reaching the ability to meditate on loving kindness first requires experiencing it in practical actions. In other words, if we imagine that phenomenology is mostly about sitting in a room alone, Buddhaghosa's description suggests that it has more to do with actions, social life, and reflection with a friend. Time on a meditation cushion comes later to join these other actions.

In this breaking down of resentment, Buddhaghosa begins to show the way in which loving kindness, or love more broadly, can accompany detachment. The wish for happiness to

pervade oneself and others does not necessarily entail a clear vision of the circumstances that bring about that happiness. The desire for happiness may come about either because of or despite circumstances, and the monk is charged not with imagining *what* would make a person happy but with simply wishing happiness. This works phenomenologically to untangle the love for another person from the specific circumstances that the monk might prefer. The many strategies for undoing resentment are directed at specific circumstances—events that occurred, particular aspects of character, visions of identity—that inhibit the wish for happiness. In Buddhaghosa’s analysis, the *only* way to love is through detachment, the detachment of particular outcomes from a particular person.

As the monk begins to enjoy success in pervading loving kindness, the monk can proceed to the next stage, the breaking down of barriers, the term for moving from considering particular people to the specific elements of experience that are obstructing love in the monk. According to Buddhaghosa, the monk will know they have reached the time to break down barriers when, in conversation with their teacher, they are able to consider the following thought experiment. If a bandit captured the monk and the three persons reflected upon—the loved, neutral, and hated—and demanded that the monk choose who among these prisoners will be murdered, the monk will know barriers have broken down when he cannot choose among the four.³⁹ Heim points out that an ethics of self-sacrifice is not part of Buddhaghosa’s ethics.⁴⁰ If the monk feels inclined to offer up one of the four more than the others, he continues to work on the particular resentments that are obstructing loving kindness. If he passes the thought experiment, he is ready to take this pervasion of loving kindness as the sign (like a *kasina* sign) for meditation.

³⁹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. IX, 41.

⁴⁰ Heim, “Buddhaghosa on the Phenomenology of Love and Compassion,” 7.

The process is parallel for the other aspects of love, which Buddhaghosa continues with compassion and sympathetic joy, changing the process where relevant. The exemplary case for cultivating the feeling of compassion is someone in abject misery rather than the monk himself. From this center, the monk then needs to pervade that compassion toward all sentient beings, moving through himself, the loved, neutral, and hated persons, until the monk extends compassion toward all sentient beings and longs to see their suffering removed. Cultivating sympathetic joy begins by taking a beloved person as its first example, reflecting on something wonderful happening to a beloved that inspires sympathetic joy in the monk. The obstructions in this case center around envy, and in its boundary-less state, the monk strives for the success of all sentient beings.

Equanimity should be cultivated only after the successful cultivation of the first three aspects of love, and it takes its paradigm case from the monk's feelings toward a neutral person. The monk pervades his thoughts with an active acceptance, which ultimately results in feeling peace. Heim comments that this may reach the ends of what we normally mean by love,⁴¹ but I would argue that this not the case. Equanimity is a species of love we would recognize. Equanimity is, for Buddhaghosa, the active acceptance of difference, the welcoming and energized commitment to particular things. Even if the other modes of love bracket the circumstances that will enable happiness, the removal of suffering, and sympathetic joy, these other modes of love look to the future; equanimity accepts what is. It is the welcoming form of love that does not insist on its own way.

Equanimity extends the insight of wishing for happiness without defining its specific circumstances into the surrender of the desire for particular kinds of people. Equanimity accepts each person, as is. In my own work as priest, spending time with those who are dying,

⁴¹ Heim, 8.

equanimity and its attendant peace is often the final form of love that the dying person, as well as their family and friends, have for someone who has lived a long life and is dying a peaceful death. For Buddhaghosa, practicing love attentively requires the development of this welcoming variety of love, the detachment from the possible categories of people—family, citizen, likeable, ethnicity, and ultimately the living—while nonetheless remaining particular to the person. A dying person may be loved even while their death has been accepted as one part of their life; a dying person may be loved without reconciling each and every damaged relationship in which they shared. To return to Buddhaghosa's first example, equanimity is the love a mother feels for an adult child—energized and dedicated but free from the particular ups and downs of a day.

Buddhaghosa's phenomenological practice is always about particular people—the practice is not about cultivating the feeling of general well-wishing, a love of an imagined humanity or world. Rather, by practicing loving kindness to particular people, the monk gains insight into breaking down their own obstructive barriers. This experience of what loving kindness is like in a diversity of contexts helps the monk to see what he needs to do in the practice of love. Once he comes to a rich practice and experience of that love, together with a teacher, he takes that experience as a focus for meditation.

The process is not different with equanimity, but it does emphasize a hitherto hidden dimension of love. Once the monk has trained in the first three aspects of love, he can reflect on the very subtle acceptance that he has toward the neutral person. Equanimity must come last in part because it is subtle and easily lost among love's other dimensions. However, it also comes last because, more than the other aspects of love, equanimity can *seem* to deny particularity. The love of a mother toward her grown child is expansive and accepting of difference while remaining particular; or, in the example of a long-loved friend and elder who is dying, the love

includes complex realities of a lived life and upcoming loss. The gentle acceptance in each case is not a denial of particularity but rather the acceptance of a surprising range of existence.

Undoubtedly, this step is the most difficult (a truth I have experienced and also seen borne out among many grieving families as well as in the experience of those who are dying). Developing equanimity toward the self or beloved can come very slowly. Indeed, given Buddhaghosa's sense that we naturally want ourselves to be happy rather than be peaceful one way or another, developing equanimity toward oneself may be the most difficult part of the challenge. The order of teaching as he writes it, beginning with loving kindness toward oneself and concluding with equanimity toward oneself, suggests that this is the case, although he cautions teachers and students that different temperaments may find that they experience this differently. Ultimately, developing equanimity toward one's own experience is the penultimate skill for developing equanimity toward mental constructions.

Understood in this way, the practice of love requires staying connected in relationship by removing obstructive attachments. Love actually *requires* detachment not from the person but from our idea of the person. Heim connects this sense that love requires clarity of vision to the ethics work of Iris Murdoch, who argues that love and learning to see another person's reality are profoundly intertwined.⁴² Detachment, in this sense, is a removal of deep, often hidden, subjective obstructions to love.

Buddhaghosa also offers further relevant phenomenological reflection on the four facets of love by characterizing them as having near and far enemies. These are states of consciousness that interfere with the cultivation of the divine abidings. 'Far enemies' are the opposites of love and serve as more obvious obstructions to love. 'Near enemies' also obstruct development but

⁴² Heim, 9.

seem (and can take the place of) actual love. Heim summarizes Buddhaghosa's development of this idea.

Compassion's near enemy is grief or sorrow (it may come close to sorrow, but is lost if it becomes sorrow), while its distant enemy is cruelty. The near enemy of loving kindness is sensual desire (*rāga*), since both loving kindness and desire involve seeing good qualities; its enemy, as we might expect, is hatred. Sympathetic joy is imperiled by its near enemy, sensory joy based on valuing earthly goods for oneself instead of joy based on wanting good things for others; and its far enemy is discontent. Lastly, equanimity is threatened by ordinary indifference as its close enemy, and attraction and aversion as its distant enemies.⁴³

Buddhaghosa here introduces further finesse and flexibility into his analysis of love. Much as many different mental and physical techniques might be needed to dislodge an obstruction, love can face more than one type of obstruction. Hatred or resentment is the obvious enemy of loving kindness, but sensual desire proves a more complex obstruction. Our attraction to another person may seem like loving kindness—we want to be near them, touching them—but it only masquerades as a concern for the other person's happiness. This attraction may be sexual, but it may also be a more platonic sensual desire. For example, babies seem to stimulate a great desire to be smelled entirely independent of whether we care for their flourishing. Babies inspire both loving kindness and sensual desire, mingled together.

Each near enemy is an obstruction in the sense that it resolves love into a more manageable and thus oppressive condition. Sorrow inhibits compassion by shifting love into purely individual silos so that abject suffering inspires sorrow about the world rather than suffering with a person. The shift seems like the transition needed to move to compassion without boundaries, the step necessary for taking it as a meditation sign, but in fact serves as a localizing of compassion's grief to an idea of the world rather than an actual person. Equanimity is not ordinary indifference or apathy, which pervades no part of love, but rather an engaged

⁴³ Heim, 9.

acceptance that connects without being either attracted or averse to a particular person.

Buddhaghosa's description of near enemies suggests the great subtlety and attention required by the monk in looking for the obstructions to love. Both types of obstructions need to be overcome in order for the monk to "become forbearing and cease to be the 'prey' of [his] own hatred."⁴⁴ Free from obstructions and boundaries within love that serve as predators, the monk also becomes free of the suffering caused by these obstructions.

Another useful characteristic of Buddhaghosa's divine abidings lurks in its name. In Pāli thought, this pattern for analyzing love is also sometimes called the 'immeasurables' as it is named in the Abhidhamma (the part of the Pāli canon devoted most directly to philosophical analysis) because, as Buddhaghosa notes, the scope of the four facets of love is endless.⁴⁵ This again differentiates its practice from other forms of meditation that develop concentration but have a quite different general effect. Foulness meditation, for example, reconfigures the way that the monk encounters and understands ugliness and beauty, but it does not lead to a measureless concern for sentient beings in the same way. However, Buddhaghosa generally prefers the term divine abidings (*brahmavihāras*). He offers this reason for the name: "For these abidings are the best in being the right attitude towards beings. And just as Brahmā gods abide with immaculate minds, so the meditators who associate themselves with these abidings abide on an equal footing with Brahmā gods. So they are called divine abidings in the sense of best and in the sense of immaculate."⁴⁶ The divine abidings offer the best attitude toward beings, but they also place the meditator on an equal footing with the highest divinities.

In the Buddhist monastic context, where the primary trope for becoming monks is going forth from home to homelessness, a divine *abiding* takes on additional importance. This abiding

⁴⁴ Heim, 5.

⁴⁵ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. IX, 110.

⁴⁶ Buddhaghosa, chaps. IX, 106.

is not the same as a lay householder's life—it is not 'home' in that sense. Rather, it serves as a home in the same sense that the Buddha's immaculate mind serves as his home. To associate with the abidings is, as Buddhaghosa claims, to live in the same place as the highest divinities, with a mind that remains free from hatred and connected to all sentient beings. Love, as the name divine abidings suggests, is a dwelling in a particular kind of mind that relates to the world without oppression. The process of developing the abidings becomes, through the purification of the mind, a place to remain free from being the prey of thoughts and emotions.

Equanimity, the aspect of love that is the welcoming, energized commitment to connection to particular beings, thus provides a more concrete picture of what changes in developing equanimity toward mental constructions. If ignorance inflects mental constructions to make experience seem unchanging, free of suffering, and completely under control, equanimity is the training of the mind to remain connected to experience and experiencers even when plagued by anxiety, suffering, and the loss of control. Equanimity is the hard-fought love that sends out the land-finding crow again and again when the only thing visible is the endless salt sea. Equanimity is the driving love that sends the fruit bat from flower to flower to examine each for what it is. *Upekkhā* is far grander in scope and importance than its rather drab English translation as equanimity.

Upekkhā or equanimity is also therefore a much more positive expression of the monk's being toward the world than we might expect. The pursuit of Nibbāna, even at this advanced stage of coming to see it, entails a profound dedication to other people. The pursuit of Nibbāna cannot be entirely selfish because that very selfishness would require an oppressive way of relating to the world. Love is not Buddhaghosa's term for this type of commitment, but readers of Teresa can recognize its closer parallel to the theme of love in her Christian tradition.

As an entryway to Teresa's work, Buddhaghosa's analysis of love provides a helpful paradigm for understanding the role of love in her no-self practice. Like Buddhaghosa, Teresa thinks of love as being both particular and as having different kinds. In insisting that every spiritual experience, no matter how wonderful or intense, must give way to a sister in need, she writes,

[God] desires that if you see a Sister who is sick to whom you can bring some relief, you have compassion on her and not worry about losing this devotion [the joy of a spiritual experience]; and that if she is suffering pain, you also feel it; and that, if necessary, you fast so that she might eat -- not so much for her sake as because you know it is your Lord's desire. This is true union with His will, and if you see a person praised, the Lord wants you to be much happier than if you yourself were being praised.⁴⁷

Her description of these loving actions parallels quite closely loving kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. While this section is usually read as having ethical importance, which it certainly does, it is also a reflection on love itself. Love is always toward a particular sister and not simply the idea of it, a problem that Teresa discusses earlier in the text. Moreover, love takes different forms—cultivating happiness, compassion in sorrow, and mutual rejoicing.

With a detour through Buddhaghosa's work on love as a practice, Teresa's depiction of love's practice and its connection to detachment becomes clearer. Much like the divine abidings, love is not antagonistic to detachment; love *requires* detachment from the tangle of ideas and desires that arise together with a relationship. If I extend loving kindness to another person, I must learn to do so not as a surreptitious way to support my own desires (which Buddhaghosa points out is its near enemy) but as a genuine desire for their well-being, and this pruning of relationship requires constant and not singular work. I must also beware the tendency to fall in love with my idea of another person rather than the actual person. Teresa emphasizes that love should be understood as a commitment and action, but if I am committed to my idea of a person

⁴⁷ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. V:3.11.

rather than the person, my commitment and actions express only a grand sense of self-mastery. Love requires detachment as its partner because, like knowledge, desire subtly suggests a paradigm of self-mastery. Loving children easily mingles with loving their success; loving someone in pain can easily slide into the satisfaction of feeling necessary.

Teresa describes the highest level of detachment as a freeing of desire *for* another person, a detachment from everything that is also a desire to be alone in reflection or occupied with helping someone.⁴⁸ The highest level of love as she is describing it sounds, in other words, a great deal like equanimity. It is a welcoming love that extends to oneself and to others; it has the character of an energized commitment.

To see Teresa's notion of love as being akin to Buddhaghosa's description of equanimity suggests the way that scholars too easily assume her appropriation of the terminology of romantic love. Teresa's famously loved novels of chivalry as a young woman, and their influence is certainly present in her writings. The structure of the *Interior Castle* is, after all, the domesticating or storming of a castle to find one's promised beloved and lover. Her actual adoption of the language and metaphor, however, transforms the tropes of romance into something new. The quest leads to an empty room through a long, slow, thorough cleaning. We need to attend to innovations of the trope as much to her adoption of it.

Buddhaghosa's reasoning against self-sacrificial love also illuminates Teresa's thinking on the topic. Buddhaghosa's thought experiment about being undecided whom to send to the bloodthirsty bandits shows that detachment leads to a stronger sense of the worth of all the different kinds of beings. Love is not, in his thought, self-sacrificial, because sacrifice suggests for him a subtle type of oppression—someone must be subsumed by another. This resonates in a surprising way with Teresa's writing. She alternates descriptions of love between examples of

⁴⁸ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:3.8.

self-sacrifice—the selfless sister would gladly lay down her life for the right cause⁴⁹—but also a sense of equality between the selfless sister and her neighbors. Not only does the selfless sister continue to eat and drink but she also continues to take gentle delight in her prayer and in loving acts.

To those outside the center room, these acts appear to be self-sacrificial. The sister is destroying her own desires in favor of the desires of others. Yet, through Buddhaghosa's concern that self-sacrifice expresses oppression in a different mode, we can see that Teresa shares a similar worry. Self-sacrifice sounds suspiciously like self-mastery, the preservation of an ultimate idea of oneself that surrenders the other. Instead, she alternates descriptions as a way to express, in the logic of no-self, what Buddhaghosa attempts to express by noting that love is ready to become a meditation subject only when it has grown to such a degree as to make the blood-thirsty bandit case undecidable. For example, Teresa writes,

For not only do they not desire to die but they desire to live very many years suffering the greatest trials if through these they can help that the Lord be praised, even though in something very small. If they knew for certain that in leaving the body the soul would enjoy God, they wouldn't pay attention to that; nor do they think of the glory of the saints. They do not desire at that time to be in glory. Their glory lies in being able some way to help the Crucified, especially when they see He is so offended and that few there are who, detached from everything else, really look after His honor.⁵⁰

In having realized their selflessness, these sisters no longer believe that one must die or be oppressed for another to succeed. Love is not about the choice of others above the self but about a commitment to the whole, complex tangle of human life.

If the lack of oppression helps make sense of the actual practice of love for Teresa, her thought also requires an additional dimension. Love as a topic must turn ultimately to love of God for Teresa. She even develops the image of a divine abiding—the interior crystalline castle

⁴⁹ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:3.2.

⁵⁰ Teresa of Avila, bk. VII:3.6.

as an empyreal heaven, God's home—but for Teresa, the energized connection of love is not only the key preparatory practice that opens the capacity to see the Unsigned but intertwines with the Unsigned's relationship to the world. God loves the world with equanimity—a committed energy that that does not oppress it. To develop this kind of love is thus literally to share in God's life without exhausting it.

Love, for Teresa, describes the non-oppressive relationship between God and the world, but it also becomes the way for understanding the end of no-self practice. Rather than being blown out, she writes of lights mingling together in a house, and a drop of water vanishing into a river. To grow more perfect in love is, in a direct sense, to become more perceptive of God.

The difference here with Buddhaghosa is illustrative. In the *Path of Purification*, any development of concentration alone is incapable of obtaining Nibbāna, and recall that the analysis of love comes for Buddhaghosa under the category of developing concentration. Buddhaghosa frequently reiterates the usefulness of developing concentration together with understanding because the fruits of each are beneficial for the other, but he also remarks that it is possible to develop only one or the other. Developed purely on its own, concentration's uppermost form is serenity, a peaceful and untroubled existence. Understanding, developed purely on its own, leads to fruition, which is the technical term for the lowest level of the Noble Ones (those who can see Nibbāna) but who may not on that account realize it in this lifetime.⁵¹ Love makes seeing Nibbāna easier, and may even serve as one of its most likely training grounds, but it must be combined a radical reconfiguration not only of concentration but of the pre-reflective understanding's shaping of experience. The distinction between gaining serenity and fruition is largely academic for Buddhaghosa; the idea that a person would develop one apart from the other is unlikely due to their mutually supporting structures. Nonetheless, with the same

⁵¹ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XXIII, 31.

impulse that drives the Abhidhammic analysis of breaking down things down to their component structures, he describes the differences.

For Teresa, the process of breaking concentration apart from understanding is not helpful, or even possible at pedagogical level, because the transformed understanding, entering the empty room, and the practice of love have affinities that make them inseparable. Buddhaghosa's inclination is to parse the differences to understand their dependence. For Teresa, however, no-self practice must emphasize love because it is characteristic of the final destination, namely, God. If no-self is the practice of not allowing one element of experience to oppress the other, love is the positive vision of this state as it moves toward completion. In addition to agency, this incorporation of love as profoundly characteristic of the Unsigned is a place where their practices of no-self part ways. Theologically, it is significant to note that no-self practice has a positive aspect that finds its paradigm in God's love. Thinking of no-self theology as a purely apophatic exercise is thus mistaken, at least in Teresa's case. No-self practice needs energy, commitment, and love.

Moreover, in Buddhaghosa's thought, the divine abidings are not in and of themselves capable of creating the perfect serenity that is the mark of fully developed concentration because they are not capable of reaching to the highest *jhāna*, or meditation state. Each of the specific abidings reaches to a certain *jhāna*. Loving kindness leads to the meditative state of beauty because all sentient beings become unrepulsive to the monk. Compassion reaches a rung higher and leads to the *jhāna* of boundless space, the perception of the condition of objects (space) that outstrips any particular objects, because compassion prepares the monk to see beyond only materialist perspectives. Sympathetic joy reaches one rung further to the *jhāna* of boundless consciousness because the training in sympathetic joy is, Buddhaghosa notes, above all a training

in celebrating the arising of consciousness in any form. Equanimity reaches the penultimate *jhāna*, that of nothingness, because equanimity prepares the monk to accept and see what is. Nothingness, in this sense, is not a despairing absence but a clear-sighted apprehension that is able to see the ways that mutual dependence creates the world of experience.⁵² The direct entry into Nibbāna from life requires the final, higher *jhāna*, combined with the highest developments of understanding.⁵³

It is tempting to read Buddhaghosa's ranking of love as a dismissal of love, particularly given the history of Buddhism's reception in the West as either nihilism or a rejection of earthly life altogether. Indeed, even within Buddhism itself, Buddhaghosa's branch of the tradition is sometimes pejoratively termed a 'lesser vehicle' as a way to criticize, among other elements, the sense that attaining Nibbāna seems profoundly individualistic or even selfish. However, as becomes more evident in seeing his work together with Teresa's higher view of love, nothing could be further from the truth. Love is, along with preparation for death, the great common training course of humanity. Practicing and meditating on it leads far higher than many any other meditations, and, perhaps more importantly, love makes the long, long road to Nibbāna easier. It is interwoven with friends and teachers, the needed companions of the pursuit of Nibbāna. The monk might pursue or learn many different kinds of meditation, but receiving good advice about that meditation depends on having the good friend, the teacher. Love, too, is alone in providing a symbolic type of dwelling for the monk. We should notice the metaphor—monasteries are not

⁵² Buddhaghosa, chaps. IX, 120–123.

⁵³ One additional layer of complexity echoes the tension between the importance of the divine abidings and their inability to reach the highest *jhāna*. Much as equanimity is usually or even best learned for many students in the divine abidings, the practices in divine abidings are where Buddhaghosa introduces the concept of a 'near enemy.' This concept of a 'near enemy' then becomes important in obtaining the higher *jhānas*—each higher *jhāna* has a near enemy (Buddhaghosa, chaps. X, 5, 25, 32, 40.). Again, the divine abidings are not strictly required for progress, but the highest levels of meditation benefit enormously from the work accomplished by the wisdom in and around those divine abidings practices.

homes, but love leads to the one home available to monks, which is to have a mind like the Buddha's.

To summarize the role of love in Teresa's no-self practice, love is the positive restating of no-self practice, the energized commitment that makes possible attending to the elements of experience in non-oppressive ways. Rather than attachment, love requires detachment from the tangle of desires and concepts that naturally interweave with a relationship. For no-self theology, love also characterizes God's relationship to creation. To love in any way is to share in divinity in a non-oppressive way, and to love more fully is simultaneously to grow in union with God and more able to be richly aware of the diverse elements of creation. Recall the twin ways in which Teresa describes human beings as imaging God, apophatic in the sense of endlessly developing capacities (the endless rooms) and also in the ability to encounter the divine (the empty center room). Love describes the commitment that links the two together. Teresa's powerful rhetorical voice in characterizing love draws attention to the way that engaging with the elements of human experience and relationships engages desire and emotion as much as intellect and concept.

While I will say more about the value of no-self for theology in the following chapter and conclusion, here I want to point out one important facet. No-self theology relies on friendship, partly as an analogical paradigm for understanding the underlying commitment to non-oppression, but also, critically, as the primary way that relationship with God begins, continues, and ends. In one sense, the importance of friendship is not a surprise, I think, to most human beings. However, in another, it is striking how little we stress the role of friendship as foundational to theology. If no-self practice takes a way of engaging experience as its base, then the relationship with friends and teachers must play a primary role not only because frequent feedback provides a clearer vision of the practice than a static text but also because the friendship

provides love, the commitment, continuity, and joy to carry out the practice. Teresa's performative writing is even more than a method—it is also her attempt to befriend her reader, to offer a small glimpse of what underlies the practice that she is describing. (Judging from the ongoing popularity of her work, she seems to succeed a surprising amount of the time.) She is arguing that an idea's rightness depends not only our relationship to the idea, the way that we inhabit it and use it in our life's context, but also on the continuity of friendship and love that allows the relationship toward the idea to change.

Put simply, no-self theology suggests that the teaching of Christian doctrine relies on developing long-term, healthy friendships. Although small nods toward this perspective exist, little in a seminary environment fosters those relationships, even if a few faculty and students recognize their importance. Crassly, I would suggest that those who are most attentive to relationships with alumni/ae and students are development offices, who largely seem to have recognized the wisdom of relationship as a leverage for change even within wallets. In congregations, the interdependence of teaching and relationships remains largely unrecognized. For a wide variety of reasons, not the least of which is that focusing on content is simpler than building relationships, Christian formation tends to mean the choice of the form and content of curricula, not the development of people who are supported by friendship and community.

No-self theology argues that teaching transformation is inseparable from relationship and community. Friends, teachers, and community are inseparable from the process of theology. If we are interested in contemplative practices as ways to address interior and systemic oppression, we need to account not only for individual practices but the communities that sustain and teach them. These relationships are not accidental to the successful teaching of contemplation or compassion—they are determinative.

Chapter 6: No Earthly Good?

“If you’re holding heaven, then spread it around
 There’s hungry hands reaching up here from the ground
 Move over and share the high ground where you stood
 [You’re] so heavenly minded, you’re no earthly good.”¹

Johnny Cash is expressing a critique of religious practice that is not only commonly expressed but also commonly felt. Becoming ‘heavenly-minded’ seems to involve either a longing for some faraway and distant heaven that has nothing to do with the mundane pleasures, daily grind, and injustice that characterize our lives; or, being heavenly-minded is a fantasy retreat to a land of holy ideas separate from the more natural functioning of a dependent and fragile world. The only good we normally associate with being heavenly-minded is a mild sense of stress reduction, rather like what we receive from exercise.

As is likely clear, Teresa and Buddhaghosa think about becoming heavenly minded in an altogether different way. To become heavenly minded is to open up to the diverse elements and expressions of experience—more ‘heavenly aware’ of God’s home and the Buddha’s mind but also more richly aware of the earth. To gain the mind of heaven is the sought result of no-self practice. Heaven, as Teresa describes it, is the spaciousness at the center of the castle that defines the whole by making it undefined; encountering it directly sculpts the soul and offers union with God. For Buddhaghosa, a heavenly dwelling is the home open to the homeless monk, a way of living in a mind like the Buddha’s that finds peace among sentient beings and the skills needed to proceed toward Nibbāna. For both thinkers, a heavenly mind is a dwelling place, a stable position for encountering the world, but also an empowering place, where good actions flow

¹ Johnny Cash, *No Earthly Good*, Streaming, vol. The Rambler (CA: Columbia, 1977).

more naturally from their deepest roots. Learning to ‘see’ the Unsigned leads to a radical transformation with profound implications for ethics.

Both Teresa and Buddhaghosa discuss plenty of earthly goods that can be accomplished apart from becoming entirely heavenly minded, and both go out of their way to emphasize how important trying to be good is at any level of realization. Discussing no-self practice apparently worries both thinkers that their readers, who are likely not utterly selfless and enlightened, will feel dismissed. The various degrees of virtuous living, notes Teresa, are available to anyone who develops the right habits and capacities and not only to those who are heavenly-minded. If gaining virtue is often characterized by a paradigm of self-mastery and is therefore limiting for the sister interested in divine union, its shortcomings nevertheless do not undermine its value. Desiring the good for oneself or another detaches us from the conflation of ourselves with exterior goods, the condition of living outside the castle. Being virtuous in any degree is good. Buddhaghosa, too, is clear to emphasize the value of even small good acts. Refraining from a few bad actions, like stealing or striking another person, gains the interested layperson the needed distance to make more intelligent choices about future actions. Moreover, literally every good act bears fruit, even if that result is not immediately evident.

Their more complete pictures of ethical life, however, come interwoven with their depictions of no-self practice. The problem with being good in small ways is not that it does not matter but that a paradigm of self-mastery offers poor insight into how good and skillful actions work. Being virtuous does not, according to Teresa, equip someone to be a teacher of virtue. For Buddhaghosa, gaining distance by standing on virtue is helpful for anyone, but the way through dependent origination requires a clearer understanding alongside the virtue. Understanding good actions, desirable goods, a good life, or what is lovable requires much more intensive analysis.

No-self practice also offers the promise of re-sizing the self, as I discussed in the introduction. Both Teresa and Buddhaghosa utilize variations on re-sizing imagery for connecting no-self practice to ethics. Buddhaghosa relies on the image of untangling. The whole, intractable knot of experience, with suffering seemingly bound into its constitutive cords, is too ungainly to be open to change. The work of untangling shrinks the knot strand by stranding, revealing the anguish of the knot comes only from the oppression of one rope upon another—the smaller or even dissolved knot allows its constituent cords to move freely and without friction. The self, as the controller of the knot, turns out to be a fiction and vanishes from experience.

Teresa imagines the size transformation as one of growth rather than shrinking, but the effect is similar. She describes a self that grows ever-larger in capacity as it gains ever-expanding access to its limitless rooms. Simultaneously, the soul becomes ever-more transparent, better able to see the realities within and around it. In expanding, the soul becomes less poisoned and pained by the tiny, verminous desires that seemed so harsh in the beginning. Its size allows diverse experiences within it. At the center, the soul finds no central authority but a space that remains open to the divine presence.

In both cases, no-self practice offers changing sizes as a heuristic for recognizing the ethical shift caused by the practice. What changes is not an ontological self but rather the shaping conditions that predetermine how the world is seen. No-self's commitment to oppressing no element of experience leads to a re-sculpting of pre-reflective experience. Perceiving the Unsigned leads, for all its evident paradox, to a transformed attitude and perception of one's enemies, an idea mentioned too casually in our discourse. Both Buddhaghosa and Teresa mean something profoundly different from the quiet disdain and mild tolerance we tend to substitute for the transformation that they discuss. Because the world is seen in a radically different way, a

way that grows more and more sophisticated over time and development, ethical life is seen differently.

This chapter lays out the case for why no-self practice, or being heavenly-minded as it is envisioned in no-self practice, entails a helpful shift in ethics. First, no-self practice reveals that ethics is necessarily intertwined with shaping the constituent threads of selfhood, and it reveals and reinforces the need for much richer pictures of human life than the more conventional focus on ethics only at the level of making decisions or choices. Second, perceiving beyond being is inextricably bound up with this transformation. Perceiving God or Nibbāna is not separable from the process. Third, much as love and friendship provide the positive commitment that holds the change together for an individual, communities take on a vital ethical role in no-self practice. This need for community takes a monastic form in each thinker, but both argue that it is not only a monastic concern and that these communities are as important for ethics as is a more complex picture of selfhood.

Beyond Choice

Maria Heim concludes her book on intention (*cetanā*) in Buddhaghosa's thought with a hopeful look toward Buddhaghosa's complex phenomenological picture of personhood as a fresh moral resource for our era. She draws on the British moral philosopher Iris Murdoch as a way to discuss what Buddhaghosa's more complex picture grants us. Murdoch is critical of the turn toward depictions of autonomy which elevate and isolate the importance of the will for ethics, and Heim's examination of intention in Buddhaghosa's thought reveals its useful and rich complexity in addressing what is lacking in an isolated account of the will.

Murdoch is concerned, Heim notes, that many of our contemporary conceptions and philosophies of moral agency assume that human beings "enjoy an autonomous will ... [whose]

moral activity consists in making decisions,” rather like a person entering a shop who can then “survey the value of the goods and select among them, commanding the full resources of reason and objectivity.”² Murdoch criticizes this picture because it fails to account for the assumptions that underlie its own claims to be self-evident. Murdoch describes those assumptions succinctly in this way, writing,

The very powerful image ... presented is behaviourist, existentialist, and utilitarian in a sense which unites these three conceptions. It is behaviourist in its connection of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable, it is existentialist in its elimination of the substantial self and its emphasis on the solitary omnipotent will, and it is utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts.³

Murdoch’s statement of her objection here is brief but illuminating. Elsewhere, for example in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch offers a genealogy of how this powerful image becomes so enthralling in our time, but Murdoch’s brief description here of the dominant paradigm raises her central concerns, which are similar to those highlighted in no-self practice, particularly concerning the will. Her language about the elimination of the substantial self differs from Buddhaghosa’s overt no-self language, but Murdoch is talking about the rich complexity of factors which make up human experience and not, as she rejects in the next line, a discrete piece of identity that remains unaffected by experience.

Murdoch fears that conceiving of morality this way entirely misses both day to day ethical choices as well as the subtle framing that happens in recognizing any situation as ethically relevant. As a way to probe what the contemporary focus on choice is missing, she offers the image of a mother-in-law who works interiorly to accept her new daughter-in-law.⁴ Although the mother-in-law had wanted something different for her son than the partner he

² Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things*, 2013, 219.

³ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), 8–9.

⁴ Murdoch, 17.

chooses, she investigates her own judgments and feelings to see where her own false opinions might have led her to misjudge this woman in her son's life. Murdoch argues that even if this interior work never results in an action everyone can see (even if, perhaps, the new daughter-in-law died and so no new actions toward her were possible), then we would still recognize the interior work of confronting and overcoming one's own biases as something of moral value. Moreover, the mother-in-law's self-reflection calls attention to her capacity to see, including the ways that her desires, habits, and ideas shape her everyday encounters with her family. This domestic (and perhaps not uncommon) example offers a problem, Murdoch thinks, to our current ethical paradigm that so values public action and the autonomous will. If being ethical requires only action, either according to duty or for some good, why do we have the sense that confronting bias in ourselves, reshaping our perception, is a worthwhile ethical activity? If ethics assumes a free, autonomous will, why do we have the sense that if the mother-in-law changed her behavior and not her mind that she would be duplicitous rather than virtuous?

Responding to these concerns, Heim argues that Murdoch's investigation into the complex desires, ideas, and forms of attention that shape morality would be well served by the depiction of personhood that Buddhaghosa offers. Heim argues that Buddhaghosa's picture offers much wisdom in this vein through both his conventional metaphors and ultimate analysis, his deploying of both narrative and phenomenology. In exposing "the fiction of autonomy,"⁵ Buddhaghosa reveals the complex array of desires, intersubjective interactions, and degrees of awareness that govern what we are able to see. Buddhaghosa's no-self practice offers an example of the substantial self that Murdoch claims is needed in the philosophy of ethics.

Heim's point is that Buddhaghosa's no-self practice includes what we could without irony call a substantial self, at least compared to the anemic focus on decision that governs so

⁵ Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things*, 2013, 224.

much of ethical reflection. Indeed, beyond a complex and interdependent picture of human life, Buddhaghosa's work provides ways of accounting for the role of interiority that Murdoch describes.

Parallel with Murdoch's critique, Buddhaghosa's depiction of no-self practice criticizes the autonomous will paradigm as an unrealistic picture of power. Murdoch emphasizes the way that this paradigm does not match our lived experience of what we understand as ethical, but Buddhaghosa highlights the way that this paradigm is untruthful about how much power we have over ourselves. His argument is also about lived experience but in a different way. We cannot, he points out, simply *fiat* ourselves out of suffering. If we were truly free and autonomous, Buddhaghosa continues, we surely would choose lasting happiness rather than the terminal, incomplete joys that characterize our existence. Where Murdoch emphasizes the ability to account for daily lived experience, Buddhaghosa emphasizes the vulnerability that is frequently covered or ignored in daily life.

Murdoch chooses the mother-in-law example to emphasize the importance of interiority, but it contains echoes of concerns over vulnerability. To take up a thread Murdoch considers briefly, why can the mother-in-law not simply *like* her daughter-in-law? It would make every party in the situation happier, and it ought to be possible for a free, autonomous will. Yet, as Murdoch points out and as we know, changing whether we like a person is not a matter of a simple choice but rather includes a wide range of interior factors, some of which may be entirely beyond our control. We are vulnerable not only to one another but also to ourselves—our ideas, self-judgments, habits of mind and body, and any number of past factors. Moreover, Buddhaghosa argues that we are vulnerable to these factors, habits, and circumstances not as a king should listen to a subject but rather as water in a stream that is being redirected by rocks.

Bound together with the experience of daily lived ethics is our being conditioned by relationships with one another and by death.

Also, no-self practice reveals the way that the autonomous picture cloaks the exteriority needed to perceive systemic ethical problems. Murdoch describes the autonomous model of thinking about ethics as analogous to a visit to a shop, and Buddhaghosa's own use of an economic model shows the shortcomings of thinking of ethics as a narrow study of choice. Choosing only the moment of purchase, whether conceived in terms of negotiating among goods of assigned value or in terms of selecting what duty requires, cloaks the determining structures that identify things as ethically interesting. This side effect of the autonomy paradigm is a tacit blessing of the already existing marketplace of value. By failing to see how situations, people, or things come to be framed as of ethical value, we struggle to perceive how to address systemic ethical problems.

No-self practice contributes to this situation by connecting vulnerable depictions of personhood, depictions that point out the fiction of the overlord and autonomous paradigms, to the exteriority needed to recognize a systemic problem *as* a problem. Part of the appeal of the ethical emphasis on autonomy is that it describes an ineradicable power; we see ourselves as guaranteed agents, free to respond to the contingent world regardless of circumstances. The shadow-side of the ethical emphasis on autonomy is that this invulnerability depends upon a specific blindness to the conditions that allow for the fiction of invulnerable choice. Selflessness, as a pattern of addressing perception in a way that increases attention, offers not a more complicated paradigm so much as a way for seeing the hidden and assumed frame of our perception. This shift is a transformation of attention,⁶ as Murdoch often characterizes the

⁶ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 33.

framed perception of the world, a way of becoming sensitive to the intentions, desires, and energies that perpetuate the most seemingly obvious dimensions of a situation.

This type of attention matters not only for a more realistic sense of our lived experience in ethics but also for awareness of more intractable moral concerns. As we saw with the various thinkers in the first chapter, many of our most difficult moral questions depend on gaining some exteriority. The refusal to see the danger of climate change stems from diverse sources, but the failure to attend to it is because the problems that structure the system (assumptions about human embeddedness in the world, the role of production and technology in human life, and so on) emerge in tandem with the autonomous model.

However, one of the most intractable systemic ethical problems is the autonomous paradigm itself. Murdoch is not alone in her criticism of it within philosophy. Thomas Nagel's development of the idea of moral luck approaches the same issue from a somewhat different perspective. The ability to make certain kinds of choices depends upon circumstances beyond our control, or our moral luck.⁷ Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self*, offers a genealogy of the development of the idea of autonomy as an attempt to address its apparent hegemony and obviousness in Western thought (as he intentionally and loosely uses the term).⁸ Contemporary public scholarship has taken up variations of this appeal as well, as in Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*,⁹ where Haidt argues that our moral decision making requires a more robust account of how we come to value things in a 'gut' sense.

⁷ Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 24.

⁸ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Reprint edition (New York: Vintage, 2013).

Yet, the autonomous paradigm remains the strong, even dominant paradigm in ethics, and Teresa's and Buddhaghosa's treatments of selflessness suggest why this is the case. Even if we come to see its genealogy in our thought, the practice of undoing its work requires using that genealogy in a particular way—as leverage for detachment or fodder for phenomenological analysis, to recall Teresa and Buddhaghosa's methods. The irony of creating a genealogy of the autonomous paradigm is that it can also simply be read as conforming to that paradigm, like a money-changer offering an analysis of the rise and fall of the value of a particular currency. A genealogy offers further evidence of the structure's flaws but not in itself a way *out* of participating in the structure. It provides a first step but not a path.

The insight that no-self practices offers is that gaining exteriority to the paradigm is not a matter of conceptual investigation. For comparison, consider our media consumption. If we become aware that our news media diet influences our moral values, this is not sufficient to change our values. Moreover, simply changing our diet is *also* not sufficient if all of the media shares common lacunae. What is needed is akin to a different hermeneutic of news watching. Umberto Eco, in his novel *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, memorably describes in detail the everyday hermeneutic that allowed Italians during the Second World War to read *through* the Italian propaganda rather than accepting its claims at face value.¹⁰ While propaganda was the only news source, readers knew that it was lie, and this allowed them to read it with much greater sophistication, attentive to their desires to understand what was happening and make sense of tragedy while also attentive to the desires of the government to appear triumphant and strong.

No-self practice critiques our enthralling image of choice-based ethics, but it also offers more. Heim is right in pointing out that the analysis of human desire and intention in

¹⁰ Umberto Eco, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, trans. Geoffrey Brock, 1st edition (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 2006).

Buddhaghosa's work, both in its Abhidhammic and its conventional sections, offers a far richer way of thinking about human life, but his use of no-self practice also offers something more. What no-self practice offers to ethics is a method for becoming gradually conscious of pre-reflective paradigms and frames which predetermine how something is seen. Strategically, no-self practice goes about this process in different ways. Buddhaghosa's name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*) analysis drives to atomize the components of experience into diversity rather than pre-determined categories. Teresa overwhelms the imagination with images in order to create space for receptivity. Murdoch counsels the mind-shifting experience of seeing the world through another's perspective in a novel a way of enriching attention.¹¹ In other words, the ethical work of no-self practice is a series of practices and hermeneutic lenses that work to disentangle the oppressive threads of ontological pictures.

Finally, we should remember that we do not need to reach the loftiest transformation of no-self practice in order to gain some purchase on the subtle oppressions of the self-mastery paradigm. Thinking about it is insufficient, but beginning with any of these attention increasing practices—name-and-form analysis, prayer as awareness, or reading as a way to enter another's perspective—can help.

Freedom

Both Teresa and Buddhaghosa describe this increasing consciousness of subtle oppression as freedom. In this context, freedom is not the liberty to exercise abilities, which assumes a paradigm akin to self-mastery; nor is freedom the ability to justify one's own choices, which is a subtler form of the paradigm of self-mastery. Teresa offers a parting reflection in *Interior Castle* that suggests freedom's importance for the text as a whole. She writes, "Considering the strict enclosure and the few things you have for your entertainment, my Sisters,

¹¹ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 347.

and that your buildings are not always as large as would be fitting for your monasteries, I think it will be a consolation for you to delight in this interior castle since without permission from the prioress you can enter and take a walk through it at any time.”¹² Teresa’s image here is striking and too easily missed. She is casually but deliberately undermining the whole structure of monastic life that she herself remained dedicated to founding. She suggests the inadequacy of its physical, social, and authority structures. Her point does not seem to be the destruction of her life’s work—she continued to support and create new communities—but rather that the kind of selflessness sought by these communities provides a very radical freedom that is detached, as she writes, from every created thing. Although the sisters may remain physically bound to a location, they become free from the institution, the prioress, half-learned confessors, difficult neighbors, and especially from internalized oppression. Certainly, Teresa is taking a jab at the misogyny that endangered her life and so much of her work.

Yet, the point is not only cultural or political. Teresa is describing a complete detachment, the result of painstaking transformation and castle exploration over many years. The alternative spaces of the interior castle serve as a refuge, a space undefined not only by oppression but also *altogether undefined* through the presence of God within it. To live in this radically detached way is not an utter rejection of valence. Teresa goes at great lengths to point out that she continues to eat and drink, would rather have enough sleep, does not enjoy the physical pain in her head, and still strives for the good the communities that she has founded. Teresa, in all of her casual and pointed language, still appears quite invested in the world. Detachment does not signal a lack of preference, desire, or valence in dealing with the world. Rather, detachment leaves Teresa free to respond creatively to the needs of fundraising and

¹² Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. Epilogue, 1.

leadership without being inhibited by the culture that attempts to define her. Detachment frees her by unhooking her from an oppressive pre-reflective encounter of the world.

We see here the relevance of Buddhaghosa's metaphor of the money-changer in parsing Teresa's point. The issue in detachment is not, as the sister might believe at the outset, a complete pruning of desire so that she becomes unbranched and solid like the trunk of a tree. Utterly bereft of desire, she would be like a rock, determined and shaped by outside forces. Teresa warns of this tempting misreading in her criticism of sisters who assume that focused lethargy is the same as spiritual development.¹³ Instead, Teresa's strategy in describing the practice of detachment is to notice at a profound level the subtle system which has created her as an agent, as a self within a nexus of culture and community. This determined and false sense of self is limiting and limited. A cognitive awareness of this system is, as Buddhaghosa argues, useful but also insufficient. Becoming apathetic within this system is simply to accept it. What is needed is freedom that emerges with an energized commitment not to oppress any aspect of human experience. That freedom enables the insight and awareness to pursue systemic change as well as an altogether freer way to inhabit any system. As Teresa has described it, even if imprisoned in a third-rate monastery and under an oppressive authority, a sister can gain through her prayer a consciousness of the dimensions of oppression and also freedom from being completely determined by them.

The freedom cultivated in no-self practice is thus twofold. First, the sister becomes increasingly free with respect to pre-reflective assumptions and desires about self-image. Teresa's strategy uses a long process of detaching from objects of desire, beginning with exterior objects, continuing through pre-reflective understandings of the self as a master, and proceeding

¹³ Teresa of Avila, bk. IV:3.11.

to the experiences and ideas of God held most dear. By no longer being attached to a certain idea of herself or to an idea of what she holds most dear (God), she becomes free to see differently.

This leads to the second dimension of freedom, becoming free to act to change a culture or institution. Anyone with sufficient power can effect change in a culture or institution, but the aim of no-self practice is to understand the underlying afflictions and oppressions that lurk beneath more simple shifts in culture. This freedom enables the changes to culture and institution that Teresa finds important. For example, the pursuit of honor, or the persecution of the *conversos* (Jewish converts who had become Christian during persecution who nonetheless continued to be targets of oppression), two issues of importance to Teresa, are symptomatic of the deeper attachment to being a certain kind of self, located within a certain kind of community. According to Teresa, we cannot simply join the right protest movement, or have the right revolution, or begin attending a different church, in order to change the obsession with honor. A change of self-understanding or community may be obsession in another form. Its roots lie not in an essential human nature but in a sense of self-mastery that only seems natural because of our attachment to desires, reinforced by the limitations of culture, community, and institution. With some of selflessness's freedom, the commitment to oppressing no part of experience grants the vision and energy to engage all of these political things—Teresa herself protests, undermines authority, even forms her own monastic order rather than remain in her original community.

To describe this twofold freedom flat-footedly, consider the quotation attributed to Gandhi: Be the change you want to see in the world. Teresa's point is that the range of what we can be arrives to us so limited by both culture and the structures of the mind that the most needed changes may never occur to us. Working toward selflessness opens up that possibility. In the language of the gospels, Teresa's method of detachment takes the claim that we should be in but

not of the world as a way of describing how we find resources to transform the world, not avoid it.

We can begin to see here in more fine-grained detail the hope, explored in the first chapter, that thinkers like the Dalai Lama and Rowan Williams have invested in contemplative practice. Resizing the self, as Teresa works on the issue, addresses societal issues by uncovering the pre-reflective determinations of the self in order to gain some leverage on them and thereby address the larger issues. No-self practice grants leverage on systemic problems, like unfettered consumerism and the ecological crisis, by changing the 'who' seeing the problem. If the problem with consumerism is the stubborn image of 'consuming,' we need to address the issue as the way we understand ourselves at a deep level. With these larger issues, drawing upon contemplative practice is a way to call upon radical but possible changes in identity, decentering our notions of ourselves as consumers or rulers of creation. We need to take apart our sense of self-mastery, which entails coming to see ourselves in an altogether different light.

Note, too, that in no-self practice the ability to address these larger issues does not take an eschatological character, as if we all would need to become *arahants* and saints before we could no longer pre-reflectively understand ourselves as consumers. The very deepest kinds of attachment, like the way that dependent origination inflects experience or pernicious way that sin lingers into the penultimate depths of the castle, may indeed require a complete transformation, but consumerist paradigms are not quite so deep. By working on the deepest levels of understanding, no-self practice aims to unseat oppressive paradigms at each increasing level. In other words, working on becoming heavenly-minded would not, for Teresa, simply effect heaven on earth. It would, however, gradually allow us to inhabit the world differently.

Simply *seeing* a new model of selfhood is insufficient for detaching from the kind of self created by the economies and systems in which we live. If we simply entertain a new model in a conceptual way, we only reinforce the system of desires that holds self-mastery in place. Resizing the self for these kinds of issues is, as Teresa discusses it, a freedom to become less determined by the systems in which we find ourselves, including and especially the most self-evident systems. The insight of Teresa's contemplative practice for resizing the self is that it entails an intentional shift not only in model but in how that model is inhabited. Detachment has more to do with how we inhabit models, or with a hermeneutic of experience, as the image of the fruit bat suggests, than replacing one model with another.

The therapist and rabbi Edwin Friedman's work in family systems theory, particularly as it relates to church and corporate culture, offers a useful parallel for thinking about how the capacity to become richly aware of systems is helpful in cases smaller than the wholesale rethinking of human embeddedness on the planet. In his work with Jewish and Christian congregations, Friedman comments that he began to notice that replacing the people within an institution often did not change the dysfunctions of the institution, and that while families and congregations are genuine different, "what most unites all spiritual leaders is not a set of beliefs or practices but the factors that contribute to our stress."¹⁴ People exist in systems of relationships that share and manage stress, and some systems manage anxiety by oppressing certain roles within them. Congregations often replace a misbehaving leader with another misbehaving leader. In investigating the phenomenon, Friedman argues the issue lies not with individual personality traits or foibles but rather with the system itself.¹⁵

¹⁴ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, 1st ed. (The Guilford Press, 1985), 1.

¹⁵ Friedman, 42.

Friedman frequently prefers images to describe insights, which, read in the context of Teresa and Buddhaghosa, is not a coincidence—images are useful for drawing up the subtly of our prereflective experience. In describing the power of systems to influence and limit human behavior, he offers the fable of the fish tank, entitled, “Burnout.” It begins with the memorable line, “Once upon a time there was a scavenger fish that lost its taste for shit.”¹⁶ The image of the fish tank links particular fish with particular behaviors and also with each type of fish’s role in the system. Some fish move in schools together; others are loners; some have more or less authority; but all rely on the whole system of the fish tank. The scavenger fish “knew its place, the bottom, never let things pile up, never rose to the surface unless some debris had failed to settle, and, even as more and more fish were added to the tank, never, absolutely never, tired of taking crap from the others.”¹⁷ The scavenger fish keeps the tank clean of the symbolic emotional waste, feeding on it in some sense. The other fish do not see the scavenger fish’s role in this way; they might not think much about the scavenger fish at all. Like all parables, the fish tank is multivalent, but the fish may well stand in for any family or church member who is reliable and reliably able to take abuse without reply.

When the scavenger fish loses the taste for shit, the whole fish tank is affected. The point of the parable is that our thinking of a person’s habits is insufficient without understanding its role in managing the system. Here, the fish who reliably cleaned up and accepted the negative emotional life of the other fish stops, and the effect is on the whole system. In a church, if the administrator cleans up the emotional mess of the staff and members, but then stops, the system does not automatically compensate and begin taking care of their own anxiety. Friedman describes how each type of fish responds to the stress of the changed environment according to

¹⁶ Edwin H. Friedman, *Friedman’s Fables*, 1 edition (New York: The Guilford Press, 1990), 181.

¹⁷ Friedman, 181.

their role—panic, a sense of release, a desire to over-function, incredible aggression, and so on. Aware of the scavenger fish's role or not, every individual fish faces a heightened level of toxicity, including from their own waste, without the scavenger fish. The new configuration disrupts the whole, not simply the immediate relationships. The fish tank serves as a metaphor for the emotional systems we all occupy. When the sister who accepts the family's anger at one another stops; when the administrator who always covers for the abusive faculty stops; when the assistant clergy is no longer willing to listen to everyone's complaints about the head clergy; the disruption extends far beyond the immediate circumstance. The simplest way to reestablish equilibrium is to replace the individual in the scavenger role rather than find more effective ways to share the burden of emotional cleaning.

Friedman describes the way to become aware of this systemic oppression as self-differentiation, the process of remaining connected to a system but not determined by it.¹⁸ The idea is that individuals who can be both in and not of the system have the greatest capacity to change it for the better. Symptomatic of good self-differentiation is a non-anxious presence (a rather overused term in churches, following its popularity in systems theory), a way of being invested in a community without being determined, or oppressed, by it. Friedman argues that this skill, being a non-anxious presence, is crucial for working effectively to change not only the symptoms of dysfunction in a congregation but also the deeper, underlying causes. A fish in the tank who can endure the increased toxic waste without responding automatically by finding a new scavenger fish can find a more sustainable solution.

The parallels between the freedom that Teresa is describing in detachment and Friedman's concept of self-differentiation highlight what the ethics of no-self practice look like. Friedman's work is not consciously aimed at no-self practice, but its strategies and outlook are

¹⁸ Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 27.

consonant with many of no-self's elements. Friedman worries that focusing on the act of choice or even on the cultivation of virtue (particularly through a narrative of psychoanalysis) never quite reaches the type of scrutiny needed for understanding the complex interaction of persons within a system. As members of many systems at the same time, we are being shaped in ways of which we may be only dimly aware, and responding with genuine deliberation and feeling to problems we continually recreate. We find another scavenger fish rather than wonder about the structure of the relationships within the fish tank. Cultivating selflessness in no-self practice grants something akin to the self-differentiation that Friedman sees as so necessary for healthy transformation in a system.

Teresa is clear, too, that becoming freer in this way does not grant absolute freedom in the sense that every idea becomes available, or that reality begins to bend to desires. The sister in the final image of freedom within the castle does not, for example, gain the ability to transform into a bird and fly away from the terrible community, and she does not gain an endless pile of resources for founding monasteries. She must still work within them. Selflessness is not a sorcerous ability to summon change by personal fiat, nor is it omniscience. Rather, its energized commitment to overcome oppression provides increasing flexibility with what is present.

However, as something of an asterisk, it is striking that both Teresa and Buddhaghosa take supernormal experiences and powers to be characteristic of the process of becoming selfless. Both, in fact, devote whole chapters to the topic. However we understand these sections, we should note that both thinkers see something about the freedom of selflessness that seems to make reality flex, at least to our more mundane-shaped minds. As odd as we might find these sections, we should understand that the kinds of changes they discuss seem designed to make the miraculous seem plausible. Perhaps the ability to levitate is, on the whole, less miraculous than

completely reimagining our place in the world ecosystem as a whole species. Bilocation, one power that Buddhaghosa discusses, sounds useful to an overwhelmed parent and student, but it may be even more miraculous to cultivate societies that would surrender degrees of comfort for the needs of fellow human beings. Moreover, we should note that while both thinkers dedicate space to reflect on the role of supernormal powers, both also come to the conclusion that they tend to distract from no-self practice. Supernormal powers, sometimes paradigmatically, reinforce the paradigm of self-mastery. This certainly seems true with Teresa's reputation. She remains better known for her intense experiences than the nuanced skepticism of their importance that she traces in *Interior Castle*.

Being free has a more negative (as in apophatic, not 'bad') presentation in Buddhaghosa's thought. He almost always uses the word 'free' in the sense of being liberated from something—free from fear, free from suffering, free from imperfections, and so on. In its most complete form, the freedom that characterizes the fruition of no-self practice is the freedom from suffering, where no aspect of experience oppresses another. We easily understand this in relationship to pain—the intense burning itch of poison ivy, or the throbbing of a stubbed toe, has a remarkable way of relativizing and ruling over the pleasant taste of tea, the cool air on a mountainside, or anything else we may experience. Buddhaghosa argues that this is the case with pleasure as well. To enjoy something is to know that it will end, fade, not be repeated as we would like. Every sunset is tainted by the awareness of its end and its unrepeatability, even if we usually deal with this loss through denial. Due to the way that desire and fear shape mental constructions, suffering affects all of our experiences. Becoming selfless means inhabiting mental constructions differently, becoming neutral to them in such a way that pleasure, pain, ideas, and perceptions no longer oppress.

Although this may seem obvious, we should reiterate that Buddhaghosa's point is not that a single, perfect self is no longer affected by the suffering that characterizes experience. Realizing selflessness is not like becoming waterproof, where things no longer penetrate a solid, tight core. Indeed, to choose one aspect of human existence—the mind, for example—and treat it as the very core of selfhood is to guarantee oppression. That core must rule or be ruled. This is one of Buddhaghosa's most central insights in interpreting the Buddha's teaching. As discussed in the previous chapter, Buddhaghosa's argument against this idea of a core of self that rules all other parts is primarily experiential. We do not determine reality by our wishes. Buddhaghosa argues instead that we must wrestle with the strange tangle of agency and patiency that characterizes experience, one that does not admit of a single, defining champion. As Maria Heim takes her book's title from Buddhaghosa's writing, mind is not dominator of things but the forerunner of all things. Mind pokes ahead, gathers elements in intention, holds them together, but mind is not the sole determiner of experience.

To return to Buddhaghosa's central image, the point of engaging in the pathway is so that experience can become untangled, with one strand no longer covering or controlling the others. Each thread of experience—the many strands perception, fibers of understanding, filaments of feeling, and so on—affects the others, and is affected by them, but they no longer thwart one another. The economic system of desire that needs overturning, the one with ignorance at its root, shapes the whole of experience in such a way that every mental construction leads to suffering, both the painful and pleasant ones. To become selfless is to no longer define the self in terms of a single strand or construction of experience.

Buddhaghosa's emphasis on the phenomenological analysis of experience seems to privilege the cultivation of selflessness as a personal endeavor, the striving of individual monks

to reshape their experience of the world. Read with Teresa, the social and political implications of Buddhaghosa's careful phenomenology are more evident. At times, the translation of *dukkha* as 'suffering' or 'pain' is misleading. Buddhaghosa's characterizing of suffering as oppression reveals a much wider scope of what is at stake in the term. The issue at the heart of suffering is not unpleasant feelings but domination. This is true at the level of the individual, as Buddhaghosa argues, in the dominance of the different elements of experience, but it is also true of cultures and institutions.

Buddhaghosa's treatment of the public implications of the topic is easy to miss because the structure of *Path of Purification* revolves on the metaphor of an individual's development of virtue, concentration, and understanding. The oppression of outside cultures and institutions does, however, come up periodically in the text, like the previously discussed section on the eighteen faults of a bad monastery.¹⁹ Read together, the first seventeen faults offer an amusing and poignant portrait of the difficulties of community life. Monasteries that are too large attract monks with conflicting aims, and no one can seem to keep the floors clean.²⁰ Problems also arise with the buildings. If a monastery is too new or too old, the monk has to spend too much time building or maintaining the facility.²¹ If a monastery is too famous, the public constantly interrupts meditation.²² If it is near an unstable border, invading armies and fickle kings pose a problem.²³ If too near a seaport, noisy traders interfere with the necessary silence.²⁴ If the resident monks are jerks (or "incompatible and mutually hostile," as Buddhaghosa categorizes them), they compete for who counts as a true monk and dismiss one another's efforts,

¹⁹ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. IV, 2.

²⁰ Buddhaghosa, chaps. IV, 3.

²¹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. IV, 4–5.

²² Buddhaghosa, chaps. IV, 10.

²³ Buddhaghosa, chaps. IV, 16.

²⁴ Buddhaghosa, chaps. IV, 15.

undermining everyone's work.²⁵ Each problem is a problem of oppression, where the needs of the monk are squeezed out by the dysfunction or needs of the community. Even a monastic community, a place of refuge for a monk, may as an institution perpetuate the suffering of individual monks. The point of view in the writing of this section is that of a monk, desperate for quiet and focus, who finds the monastery a more troubled location than any space previously inhabited as a lay house-holder. Given the poignancy of the descriptions, I suspect Buddhaghosa is writing from at least some personal experience.

Because Buddhaghosa writes this section from the perspective of a monk looking for a place to live rather than from the perspective of a member of the institution looking to improve it, its cultural and political implications are easy to miss. The section could be read rather like reviews of restaurants, giving the monk a way to choose among available monasteries. Yet, like Teresa, Buddhaghosa is concerned with the way the selfless inhabit and respond to institutions, and read with her texts, the social dimensions of oppression become more evident. Where Buddhaghosa imagines that a monk would be more or less free to choose among monasteries, Teresa never imagines that her sisters would have the freedom to choose among monastic communities. This difference makes Teresa think more closely about the way a sister can inhabit a mediocre or even threatening community, while Buddhaghosa is less inclined to reflect on the way a monk might dwell in a non-optimal monastery. Nonetheless, Buddhaghosa is deeply invested in monasteries in general, and so he describes a negative image of what the selfless monk's freedom enables in regard to responding to institutions and communities.

Some degree of freedom helps the monk identify the faults of the monastery. Each fault oppresses, squelching the monk's developing capacity for virtue, concentration, and understanding, by some characteristic that *seems* to contribute to realization. A famous

²⁵ Buddhaghosa, chaps. IV, 14.

monastery seems like it might be helpful because surely, we may think, that fame grows from excellent teaching. A large monastery seems like it might be more pleasant living with its greater wealth. Nearby places of interest, like seaports or fruiting trees, seem like they would be helpful in providing support to the monastery. Each of these seeming virtues is only visible to a monk who has begun to see with the shifted perspective characteristic of a changing understanding. In other words, identifying the root faults of monastic communities and institutions depends on the capacity to see their true roots. Replacing the leadership of a large monastery will not fix the problems that derive from its size. Blocking the view from the monastery to nearby attractions only hides the problem. The freedom of selflessness is, according to Buddhaghosa's description, the capacity to dig deeper into the defining faults of the community. Freedom means the ability to notice and oppose oppression within and without.

Resizing the self

This freedom, which increases by degrees and grants access to the way that our attachments and self-perception serve as root causes in systems and in our lives, is what thinkers like Rowan Williams and the Dalai Lama see as so helpful in contemplative practice. Recalling Alice's trip down the rabbit hole, she serves as an impediment to overcoming her problems, and only by carefully resizing herself can she avoid drowning in her own tears and fit through the right door. The obstacle to her problem is herself.

No-self practice diagnoses the problem with the self as oppression, the privileging of one element as a determining factor. For a crass illustration of the point, consider the adage about how the world looks to someone holding a hammer—everything starts to look like a nail. Once the self is taken to be a certain way—for example, the essence of human life is its ability to choose regardless of circumstances—the image becomes determinative at a profound level,

shared and taught as the natural way to be in the world. These images are the pernicious, pre-reflective images that govern our engagement with the world in subtle ways. Reducing human ethical life to choice alone, tied to a particular vision of autonomy, offers not only a compelling image that steers reflection, as Murdoch argues, but a whole system of engagement that satisfies without addressing the root concerns. Like the money-changer, we imagine ways to flourish in a complex system without noticing that the complex system itself locks distortions in place. Even our general way of experiencing the world can be inflected by oppression.

One of no-self practice's most profound lessons is that the oppression happening outside of us is bound to one happening within us, and that the way to repair either may depend upon engaging both interior and exterior oppression. The student monk in Buddhaghosa's text, for example, cannot simply meditate himself out of a bad monastery, recreating the whole place as good purely through an act of imaginative will. Its oppressions afflict him—he has no hidden self that can remain free of its demands. The lack of good friends makes the experience unbearable and unlikely to continue. Clearing interior oppression requires changing, in this case, geography and community.

Yet, the strength to challenge exterior oppression requires interior awareness, particularly awareness that oppression is happening. Teresa writes of her enthrallment to half-learned spiritual directors, certain that their diagnosis of her visions as demonic was right. She writes, "I afterward found myself so oppressed by them all, while they thought they were doing good, that I didn't know how to defend myself or what to do."²⁶ She internalizes that self-hatred until a series of good friends help her see more clearly that her experiences mean something more than her former spiritual directors could see.

²⁶ Teresa of Avila, "The Book of Her Life," in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Vol. 1*, trans. Otilio Rodriguez and Kieran Kavanaugh, 2nd edition (Washington: Ics Pubns, 1976), chaps. 39, 18.

The idea that internal and external oppressions connect is something that we understand readily at a conceptual level, and yet, as no-self practice points out, knowing that they connect is not the same as having gained existential understanding. For example, knowing that abuse cycles through generations of a family is not the same as stopping that cycle, which requires a shift in exterior and interior circumstances. Interrupting a cycle of abuse is about more than making a different choice.

Teresa and Buddhaghosa's treatments of selfless freedom reveal more concretely some of the characteristics of why selflessness resizes the self in this way. Selflessness is not a radical devotion to another, like a parasite to a host. Nor is it the kind of attitude an empire desires from its colonies—indeed, quite the opposite. Rather, it is a way of learning to see the subtlest, co-creating connections between self and world. No-self practice resizes the self by working through deliberate, committed strategies to discover the deeply held understandings that lock a particular understanding of selfhood in place. Through steady detachment and phenomenological attention to the elements of experience, the perception of problems changes the available responses. Contemplative practice looks promising as a way of addressing ethical problems precisely because it attempts to reshape awareness at a deep level of understanding.

Freedom, then, is the aspect of selflessness that seems so useful to cultivate through contemplative practice because it resizes the self in order to face quite difficult systemic problems. However, interwoven with freedom are two more obviously religious aspects of selflessness that receive far less overt attention in the more public writings of religious leaders who, after all, are trying to appeal to a secular audience. Yet, for both Teresa and Buddhaghosa, the connection with something beyond being, and the communities that support and teaching this

transformation, are sine qua non, and if we are interested in the ethical possibilities of no-self practice, we need to understand why.

Seeing Beyond Being

As both Teresa and Buddhaghosa conceive of no-self practice, its crucial moment of transformation occurs in the contact with ‘something’ beyond being, experienced as a sculpting of the self. With the perception of God in the center room, understanding the threads that make up experience through the faculties becomes simpler. Recall that their metaphors of this contact move in divergent ways; to speak of ‘contact’ strains Buddhaghosa’s ways of talking about the process, even if Nibbāna has a reality untouched by existence. Buddhaghosa prefers perceptual metaphors. With equanimity developed toward mental constructions, the faculty of perception in the mind ‘sees’ a land beyond the sea, and with that land in sight, the sea is far more easily analyzed.

What they share in common, in other words, is the sense that something beyond being is what enables no-self practice, and here, it ‘enables’ in two senses. First, the tangled threads of human experience become easier to follow in light of Nibbāna. The point here is somewhat similar to Plato’s well-known image of leaving a cave and returning. The shadows of a dim fire are so much more obviously shadows to someone granted a vision of the sun. The inflection of ignorance on the dependently arising elements of experience is so much easier to follow for someone who has seen something untroubled by suffering and ignorance; the dangers of attachment are much more evident to someone who shares an interior room with the divine. The Unsigned, what is beyond being, serves a clarifying function that is not, for either thinker, replaceable.

Second, what is beyond being enables no-self practice by making it *worth* the pain and disorientation. Going forth into homelessness is often described in glowing terms as a nearly heroic act, but Buddhaghosa is careful to describe the process as difficult. Being a monk is hard work. Detachment of one's self-identity from each particular thing is a painful process. Conceptually, we may embrace the idea of recognizing the partial control we have over the world; existentially, we are more likely to take refuge in every shadow of autonomy along the way. Teresa and Buddhaghosa are careful to describe the practice of no-self as difficult, even painful.

They are also both careful to describe why the process is worth the difficulty. To say that a feeling of peace waits at the end of no-self practice is only a tiny fraction of the story. What makes detachment worth the process for Teresa is God; what makes going forth to homelessness worth the process for Buddhaghosa is Nibbāna. I find it hard to imagine that Teresa could imagine counseling detachment for anyone who did not see full, loving union with God, however dimly understood, as the end of the process.

Part of what the Dalai Lama's forays into secular ethics are missing is this element, this capacity to 'see' beyond being as a dramatic conclusion that redefines the process, and he is not alone in trying to adapt some of the learning of no-self practice for a more secular audience. I am not arguing that no-self practice has nothing to contribute to secular ethics, but the translation from a religious context to elsewhere is missing something vital, that something that enables a person to endure and discover things in this process. If what the ecological crisis requires, for example, is a radical revisioning of human life that sees us as one element of what is 'natural' (the very idea that we exclude ourselves from what is 'natural' is symptomatic of how deeply we imagine our freedom from the world), then we will need something that enables us to face that

new reality. We will need something that energizes our commitment to uncover the dependent, animal parts of ourselves. Again, this shift is not miraculous—other human civilizations have conceived their role in the universe quite differently from what we have come to assume is a superior vision. However, that shift is hard, painful, and it is even more painful to realize that many of our best ideas remain mired in a paradigm that imagines us as profoundly distinct from the world.

What remains lacking in attempts to translate contemplative practice into ethical practices useful for our contemporary concerns is this radical, even strange element. No-self practice requires a commitment to not oppressing the elements of human life, including the claim that something beyond being impresses itself upon the right kind of understanding. Learning meditation as an anxiety reduction strategy is incredibly valuable, as no end of phone apps reminds us, but the sense that contemplative practice equips individuals for resistance to consumerism is only a small view of a much larger process.

Community: The Fruit and Cultivator of Understanding

Connected to what is difficult in contemplative practice, community emerges not only as the context for the learning of no-self practice but also as its support, and communities have a particular role in connecting ethics and no-self practice. Even as the freedom of selflessness frees the monk to see the faults in the system, only the monastic community can teach and support the monk on the way to selflessness. The process is not only hard-won in terms of phenomenological analysis of experience, or careful detachment from all kinds of false identification, but also interwoven with being a member of a certain kind of community. No-self practice is not an individualistic style of personal piety. It emerges together with the laboratory of the monastic community.

However, Teresa and Buddhaghosa, both of whom wrote their texts as monastic manuals and see no-self practice as paradigmatically monastic, also see it as available more broadly to those lay people connected to a community. While each is writing to a specific community of monks and nuns, both also include references throughout their texts to those lay individuals who also participate in no-self practice. Buddhaghosa intentionally includes “clansmen” (*kulaputta*) among those who benefit from instruction in the highest forms of meditation, a need they presumably would not have if the highest forms of meditation were reserved for monks.²⁷ Teresa reminds her sisters that “the whole affair doesn’t lie in whether or not we wear the religious habit but in striving to practice the virtues, in surrendering our will to God in everything, in bringing our life into accord with what His Majesty ordains for it, and in desiring that His will not ours be done.”²⁸ In other words, the essential work of monastic life does not require a cloister, but it does require the support of teachers, friends, and colleagues. Community, in these cases, is frequently characterized as monastic but not restricted to that context.

A short anecdote may, too, help explain the importance of community in no-self practice. In attending a conference on Teresa of Avila, I was particularly struck by the presentation of a group of Discalced Carmelites, the religious order founded by Teresa and John of the Cross. Their presence at a primarily academic conference was somewhat unusual but welcome, as many conference participants acknowledged, and the conference organizers hoped (admirably, I think) to offer a view of Teresa’s thought from those who studied her writings primarily as practice texts.

During one of their presentations, an offhand comment by Sr. Jo Robson during her introduction to the need for dialogue between academic and practice-oriented readings of Teresa

²⁷ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. V, 42.

²⁸ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, bk. III:2.6.

struck me as particularly important. She remarked that an invitation to her and the other nuns, as representatives of the communities that Teresa labored to found, seemed appropriate since Teresa was above all concerned with the creation of such communities.²⁹ Her comment seems remarkably on point. Despite the numerous ways Teresa's works are read and engaged, very few directly engage Teresa's ideas about community, despite the fact that Teresa gave her later years to the political and ecclesial struggles necessary for founding monastic communities. Even her writings converge on this point. *The Book of Her Foundations*, which concerns the creation of these communities, both records and reflects on the spiritual struggle of real estate and bureaucracies, and *Foundations* is likely the least read of her longer works. However, her longer texts universally take as their primary audience these monastic communities, with each text concerned to offer guidance for shaping the interior life within these communities. Where *Foundations* analyzes the economic and authoritative forces that shaped the process of founding the order, *The Way of Perfection* and *Interior Castle* offer theological reflections of the internal economy and authority of these communities while gesturing to their wider context. To the extent that *The Way of Perfection* and *Interior Castle* describe methods of prayer for individuals, those methods serve to build the kind of communities that Teresa founded and supported.

At the same conference, Sr. Philomena shared an anecdote about teaching *The Way of Perfection*, a book ostensibly dedicated to prayer, to novices within the community. After a bold promise to write about prayer, Teresa then seems to digress for the first third of the book, spending time discussing the practices that accompany prayer in the community, the various temperaments that affect prayer life, and even a long excursus on the symbolic meaning and role of water, all before arriving at prayer. Sr. Philomena expressed with good humor the great

²⁹ Peter Tyler and Edward Howells, eds., *Teresa of Avila: Mystical Theology and Spirituality in the Carmelite Tradition* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), chap. 10.

impatience felt by all novices for Teresa's meandering style, and yet Philomena also affirmed the ways that these earlier chapters both form and discuss community. Beginning the practice of detachment, which is much discussed early in *The Way of Perfection*, hinges on connection to community.

While scholarship on Teresa has made admirable strides in seeing the tensions throughout her writing in an environment that was hostile to her as a woman, we should continue to attend more closely not only to the fault-lines and politics of the wider institutional community but also of Teresa's careful focus on the monastic community. Judging from her actions, she saw her success in the successful founding and functioning of small, dedicated communities. This emphasis on the role of community is not parallel to the development of no-self practice as the way toward union with God; it is intertwined with it.

Again, the route through Buddhaghosa's writing proves useful for understanding the interplay between community and ethics. His most intriguing analysis of the topic in *Path of Purification* is easy to miss because of its stylized brevity, and describing it requires some contextualizing. The section appears in the last section of the final full chapter, and in it, Buddhaghosa describes the ethical benefits of developing understanding. The length of the chapter, however, belies the complexity of what Buddhaghosa is writing. Buddhaghosa often operates through lexical and etymological analysis, and once a term is defined earlier in the text, he assumes that the definition remains relevant later. By the time he reaches the final transformation of understanding, his language so resonates with earlier analyses and treatment of words and themes that, at moments, it reads almost like a code.

The context for his ethical reflection occurs within a list of the fruits of understanding, with the ethically relevant section arriving last as a very brief finale. The penultimate fruit of

understanding, the cessation of consciousness, receives the longest explication of any term in the chapter because this is its first important occurrence, and the cessation of consciousness serves as the context for the ethical analysis in the final term.³⁰ Also, in describing the ‘cessation of consciousness,’ Buddhaghosa seems very aware that he is now describing something contentious. After all, what good could possibly come from an unconscious life? Buddhaghosa explains that he means the realization of complete selflessness, a way of marking the continuing life and perception of a person but also its radical discontinuity from what we normally understand as conscious life. Cessation represents a type of present awareness completely without mental constructions,³¹ which suggests a life beyond desire, intent, and energy.

Paradoxically, and perhaps opposite what we bring to mind when we imagine the cessation of consciousness, it is only one fruit of fully developed understanding, and the other results of cessation need to be balanced against the attempt to imagine a fully realized life without mental constructions. The first fruit, called the removal of defilements, is the perfect awareness that all things depend upon each other. It is the perfect, existential realization that allows no element of experience to oppress another, and it is the end of the inflection of ignorance on dependent origination. Buddhaghosa notes that it is also the fully realized ability to recognize name-and-form.³² The second fruit is the early and increasing perception of Nibbāna with its accompanying bliss and peace.³³ The third fruit is the cessation of consciousness. Thus, whatever cessation entails, it does not interfere with an awareness of the world’s interdependence and the perception of Nibbāna.

³⁰ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. XXIII, 17.

³¹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXIII, 51.

³² Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXIII, 2.

³³ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXIII, 3.

The fourth fruit is concerned with ethics. He calls this final result of no-self practice the “worthiness to receive gifts.”³⁴ Buddhaghosa continues. “For, generally speaking, it is because understanding has been developed ... that a person ... is fit for the gifts of the world with its deities, fit for its hospitality, fit for its offerings, and fit for its reverential salutation, and an incomparable field of merit for the world.”³⁵ This list seems at first glance like a collection of praiseworthy results of developing understanding, but as is characteristic of Buddhaghosa’s style, he has compressed and collected more complex technical terms.

This precise list appears earlier in the text in expounding the strengths of the monastic community as a meditation subject. Buddhaghosa lists these same qualities as the reasons that the community makes a worthy subject of meditation.³⁶ Much as the section on the divine abidings has ethical importance beyond its role in becoming a meditation subject, the section on the monastic community links to fully developed understanding as another crucial ethical development. Indeed, much as love and death are fruitful sources of reflection for nearly everyone and so their importance as meditation subjects extends far beyond explaining their role in developing concentration, the role of the monastic community is ethically vital. The ‘worthiness to receive gifts’ is more than a general benediction over how great those are who obtain fully transformed understanding. It is both a vocational call to those with transformed understanding, and a picture of the community’s role as the laboratory of no-self.

Being fit for gifts, or more literally for sacrifice, is the state of being able to turn sacrifices into something much more fruitful. Buddhaghosa overtly compares the fitness of the monastic community for gifts to the fire of brahmanic sacrifice. If, he argues, burning sacrifices in the fire of brahmanic ritual can bring good results, how much more can gifts brought and

³⁴ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXIII, 53.

³⁵ Buddhaghosa, chaps. XXIII, 54.

³⁶ Buddhaghosa, chaps. VII, 89ff.

given to Noble Ones³⁷ (who presumably have access to a much greater scope of reality than local divinities) also produce “great fruit?”³⁸ Buddhaghosa expands on the way in which a gift in this context can produce many more gifts under the term of ‘incomparable field of merit,’ to which I will turn in a moment. Here, his emphasis is on the present and encounterable reality of people whose attention is worth more than standard sacrifices to divinities. He echoes this sentiment in the epithet that describes the selfless as ‘fit for offerings’ more generally, which Buddhaghosa explains means that they are able to purify and make great fruit of an offering given in hope of a better world to come.³⁹

One way to trace Buddhaghosa’s claim here is in its ontological and metaphysical implications, directly linking the Buddha’s original disciples and the advanced teachers who attain status as a Noble One with someone that a young monk might in fact meet. The linking of beginners with the most advanced monks builds Buddhaghosa’s agenda of encouragement, a theme he returns to throughout the text. A beginning monk’s experience is intertwined with those who can see Nibbāna, even if the monk has only just arrived at a community. The commitment to encouragement echoes the importance of community in the cultivation of selflessness.

However, the term also bears ethical significance through what Buddhaghosa means by describing them as ‘fit.’ What makes the selfless ‘fit’ for gifts is that, like the deity that receives the sacrifice in the flame, the selfless Noble One can use that gift more effectively for the giver. Again, this point can be taken ontologically—the selfless Noble One can see the threads of causal actions more clearly and can use the gift for the benefit of the giver and the world—but it also connects to ethics through the anthropology it presumes.

³⁷ A Noble One (*arya*) is one who can perceive Nibbāna and so now has a destiny ending in Nibbāna. Depending on the type of Noble One—there are four—this can range from in 7 rebirths to in this life.

³⁸ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. VII, 95.

³⁹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. VII, 97.

If behaving ethically is fundamentally a question of making the right choices, as Iris Murdoch argues is a thematic problem in Western philosophical ethics, then presumably everyone has the same access to being moral. However, as Buddhaghosa's argues, if being moral depends upon the habits and entanglements that define a person, then some people will be able to accomplish good things more effectively. The limit case of this for Buddhaghosa would likely be the Buddha, whose vows, kamma, and insight lead him to accomplish far-reaching, supernormal goods. However, even in the case of the selfless, they are simply better prepared, or 'fit,' to see how a good might be accomplished than another.

This fitness is not a function of circumstance but of perception. If I happen to be in the right place at the right time to, for example, pull a person from a burning car (as a friend of mine once had both occasion and bravery to), the circumstance itself does not provide all that is required. I need to see the burning car and the person in it as a problem that I can solve, rather than have the situation defined by my fear and self-doubt. I need to see opportunity rather than witness tragedy. I need the courage to risk my own life. I need a level of physical ability to lift a person out a car window. Circumstance—happening to come by—is important, but the ability to perceive and act is what Buddhaghosa's is emphasizing as being 'fit' for gifts. To disguise the necessary factors under the term 'choice' elides imagination and perception that need to appear in the same instant as the burning car.

This conclusion that we are not all equally able in morality challenges the way that we often conceive of ethics, particularly in a context which thinks of equality before the law (or even God) as meaning 'equally capable.' Both Murdoch and Heim argue that our choice-oriented paradigm inherently privileges certain kinds of people—at the least, a particular way of being rational and assumptions about independence that tend to privilege a certain selection of human

beings. However, neither Murdoch nor Heim dwells much on the implication of a less choice-oriented paradigm for thinking about ethics, namely, that some people—the selfless, or arahants, or saints—are better prepared to act on the gifts that come their way. Rather than seeing ethics as a preliminary practice, Buddhaghosa is arguing that the *most* ethical people are those who see furthest and most clearly, namely, those well-advanced or even perhaps perfect in no-self practice. These most advanced, too, may not be recognized by society or institution—selflessness is not the same as being recognized as such. We can think of Howard Thurman or Sojourner Truth in this vein.

Morality, in this perspective, is neither a binary choice of whether to follow duty, nor the mathematical balancing of utility. It is partly about virtue, the building up certain kinds of habits and virtues that equip a person to respond well in various situations, but morality is also about perception and sensitivity—to contexts, particular people, and the limits of virtues. In other words, no-self practice is always pressing the question of what precisely we mean by ‘human’ when we talk about human flourishing because our habits and ideas about humanity never access its full diversity.

As useful as Buddhaghosa’s analysis is for thinking about human life in a more complex way, it is even more useful for thinking about human life in an unfinished way. He is as interested in describing the postures, practices, and attitudes that allow us to continue to refine our understanding of human beings as he is in a particular picture of human life. As Heim and Ram-Prasad argue, contemplative practice takes the place of a metaphysical picture.

Seeing the ethical implications of claiming that the Noble Ones are fit for gifts provides further challenge to the idea that Buddhism writes little on ethics. The problem is not that ethics are dispensed with at the end of the section on virtue (*sīla*) but that each transformation of

personhood in the realization of no-self is taken to have vital ethical implications. Moreover, describing the selfless person as fit for gifts grants them additional ethical responsibility. The process of no-self practice grants them increasing investment (even if the investment is also detached) in other human beings. Because they can see further and more clearly, they can act skillfully. Also, against the idea that Noble Ones are rare, Buddhaghosa further seems to assume that people of this advancement are not uncommon. He seems to expect that, like a petitioner can always find a brahman's fire if one is needed for sacrifice, a searching monk can always find a Noble One if he has need to give or seek clarification. The process of becoming selfless particularly disposes the Noble Ones to leverage gifts effectively, and the ethical role seems to be tied fundamentally to being a Noble One. Any of them could help.

We see, then, the way in which being fit for gifts connects to two ethical themes. To adopt a phrase that Buddhaghosa uses when writing of hospitality, the selfless are both “fit to be given to ... and ... fit to receive.”⁴⁰ First, being fit for gifts indicates something about the nexus of factors that constitute personhood. It echoes the sense that the selfless are better able to perceive the subtle systems at play, but the emphasis here is on the effectiveness enabled by their awareness of the structures of experience. Buddhaghosa argues that seeing this way enables the selfless to see and accomplish more with the same material and circumstances. The virtue of those who are more selfless is better deployed and so more effective. Second, being fit to receive gifts indicates a responsibility felt by the selfless to be available for the good things that they can accomplish. The selfless do not stand outside of ethical considerations; rather, their effectiveness at seeing and creating skillful actions places them in a leading ethical role, partly as paragons and more often as midwives of transformation.

⁴⁰ Buddhaghosa, chaps. VII, 96.

At the same time that an arahant becomes fit for gifts, they learn to be fit only from the Buddhist community, the *saṅgha*, but also only as *part* of the *saṅgha*. As mentioned above, the longer analysis of these epithets originates in the section devoted to taking the *saṅgha* itself as a meditation subject. Like the divine abidings, the community can serve as a meditation subject only if the individual has real, particular experience of the community. At the same time that the community as a meditation subject refers to the very first of the Buddha's disciples, the knowledge of those individuals can only come by interacting with the present, embodied community. Imagining the original disciples utterly distinct from the present community is a fantasy. Becoming an arahant thus requires both continuity with the early disciples but also with the contemporary community. Indeed, much as the divine abidings require practice on real relationships and not imagined ones, the meditation with *saṅgha* as its subject requires practice on a real, doubtlessly imperfect, community.

Buddhaghosa describes the *saṅgha* as a whole as those on the good, straight, true, and proper way.⁴¹ By these terms, he explains, he means that this community listens to the Buddha's teaching (*Dhamma*); that it aims for Nibbāna; that it keeps the *Vinaya*, the monastic rule of life; and crucially, that every monk, from the arahant down to the new student, all share this one path.⁴² The community is the space where individuals learn the Buddha's teaching and practice its virtues, and it is the space where every stage of this development is shared.

Practically, this description of the community indicates the way that, more than a tutor or a laboratory, the community creates space for its students along the path to cultivate the needed habits and perceptions that interrupt the oppressions that affect human experience. The community cannot force students to this work—that would be a type of oppression. The

⁴¹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. VII, 89.

⁴² Buddhaghosa, chaps. VII, 90–92.

community provides the opportunity for cultivating equanimity and love, the commitment and energy to engaging no-self practice. Love is not merely learned in the community; also, the community's love itself the individual, connecting without determining.

This portrait sounds rather idealized, and so some caution is in order. Most members of monastic communities that I have known over the years, Christian and Buddhist, speak eloquently of the failures and mundanity of monastic life. Even the written rules governing monastic life the *Vinaya* and *Benedict's Rule* advise against idealizing monastic life. Also, Christian and Buddhist monastic life are hardly identical. However, my intention here is not to offer an idealized account of monastic life but rather point out its intimate connection to ethical life in no-self practice. For both of these thinkers, no-self practice is imaginable outside of a monastery but not outside of a supportive community.

To ignore the role of the community, even if it often fails to live up to the full potential of its role, is to miss what Buddhaghosa sees as essential to learning no-self practice. The essential quality of the community is not that it happens to have the books that describe the practice but that it enables and undergirds its realization. Interestingly, Buddhism has a tradition of a more individually focused enlightenment, usually attributed to striving through previous rebirths, in Paccekabuddhas. Buddhaghosa refers to, and obviously seems very familiar with, the topic of Paccekabuddhas throughout the text but does not examine their practice systematically. The implication is that the arahants need not only the Buddha and the Buddha's teaching but each other, as is reflected in the traditional formulation for 'taking refuge,' the flexible ritual for becoming a Buddhist where a person takes refuge in the Buddha, his teaching, and the community. The community that follows the Buddha's teaching, a community that is paradigmatically monastic but not necessarily so in every case, provides the training, practice,

and actual relationships (including the good friend and teacher) who make no-self practice possible.

Returning to the other significant terms for ethics and community, the ‘fitness of hospitality’ might seem at first glance to be a financial consideration in favor of Buddhist monasteries, which it surely in part is, to welcome, feed, shelter, and pay for monks, much like the Buddha and community are welcomed throughout the teachings of his life in the *suttas*. However, Buddhaghosa’s emphasis is not on the ongoing economic success of monasteries but more directly on the selfless being seen as lovable. Hospitality, he writes, is what is offered to anyone whom we love, “dear and beloved relatives and friends who have come from all quarters.”⁴³ The selfless are particularly fit for hospitality because they are “encountered after an interval between Buddhas and possesses wholly endearing and lovable qualities.”⁴⁴ The selfless need to evidence loving qualities to such a degree that the lay community sees them as lovable.

Being “wholly endearing and lovable” might sound like strange ethical advice (although, interestingly, Murdoch also argues for the importance of these virtues), but the point here is that much as the selfless need to use their well-trained sight for the good of others, they also need to be appealing. While ‘endearing’ can be thought of entirely as a way of preserving various monastic institutions, the reference to the selfless within the monastic community as intercalary blessings between Buddhas is a reminder that they are the only teachers of Nibbāna available for most people; if the lay community finds the monks unpleasant, this perception ends not only the institution but the community best equipped to teach.

In other words, what looks like a perk of understanding (having a free place to stay as a monk) is in fact another ethical obligation. The monastic community must do more than

⁴³ Buddhaghosa, chaps. VII, 96.

⁴⁴ Buddhaghosa, chaps. VII, 96.

privately ‘live’ in the divine abidings as a way to enjoy the world differently. The selfless must also be *seen* themselves as endearing and loving.

Again, in a context more accustomed to thinking of ethics as a democratically shared autonomy, the need to appear loving may sound odd (especially if we think of love in terms of duty). Buddhaghosa’s argument is that if we take the wider context of factors that determine and shape personhood, we must also take into account the context of human beings who are the audience of the community. Love fails to be love when expressed in an unlovable way.

If this ethical admonition seems to encourage faking illusory endearing qualities, a Christian analogy may help. In the Deutero-Pauline text Ephesians, the writer encourages the community to ‘speak the truth in love’ to one another.⁴⁵ In Ephesians, both points of the process matter. What is spoken needs in some way to be true, but if the hearer is to understand that truth, it must be spoken in a way sensitive to the capacities and context of another. W.H. Vanstone, the Anglican theologian writing in the 20th century, differentiates this attention to the hearer by connecting it to grace or graciousness as opposed to goodness,⁴⁶ and the distinction is helpful here. To be gracious is to pay attention that a good action is *received* as something good or desirable. Buddhaghosa is arguing that the selfless need to be not only good to others but *gracious* to them. Being fit for hospitality means taking account of the context and the recipient of a good act.

This idea that the goodness of an act depends in part on its receiver is partially baked into the idea of *kusala* or good actions, as the word *kusala* implies skillfulness, and the theme is more pronounced in the idea of *upaya*, or skillful means, as ways of teaching the Buddha’s Dhamma that are appropriate to diverse contexts. Note, however, that Buddhaghosa thinks about this

⁴⁵ Ephesians 4:15

⁴⁶ W. H. Vanstone, *Fare Well in Christ* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1997), chap. 1.

skillfulness in ethics as a question of *hospitality*. More than skillfulness in a single context, the arahant needs to create a space of welcome for diverse human beings. The degree of graciousness and welcome in that shift emphasizes the need of the community not to be clever but, as Buddhaghosa describes, wholly endearing and lovable.

The consequence of needing to be hospitable is that goodness is recognized as yet another potentially oppressive condition. This might sound surprising, for all that Teresa makes a similar point about good actions reinforcing the paradigm of self-mastery. Vanstone reminds that the goodness we claim to like in theory may cause us trouble existentially;⁴⁷ expressions of goodness may be attempts to humiliate, self-aggrandize, or even victimize. The need to attend to hospitality, to be wholly endearing and lovable, is an ethical claim about how we are toward one another. In a paradigm that only considers the ethical implications of choice, the receiver never even enters into consideration.

Continuing through the epithets that Buddhaghosa attributes to a fully transformed understanding, he includes being fit to receive reverential salutation, a respectful greeting made by raising both hands, palm together, above the head, but he interprets it not as a local or parochial claim of interest to the monastic community but as “worthy of being accorded [the greeting] by the whole world...”⁴⁸ While his brief description of this fruit of understanding might seem only like a comment on the superiority of Buddhist practitioners (which it surely is, at least in part, much as similar claims appear elsewhere from the diverse religious traditions of India and south Asia), we should also note that what could be taken as a local custom is explicitly understood as a commitment to the world. The audience of the community is not restricted to those who come to bring gifts or look for teaching. The commitment to support

⁴⁷ Vanstone, 10.

⁴⁸ Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 2011, chaps. VII, 97.

communities where the selfless are trained does not obviate the commitment of the selfless to the ‘whole world’ (*sabbaloko*).

Being fit for reverential salutation thus comes to fit more neatly with the following term, being an incomparable field of merit for the whole world, through its wider focus. With the image of a merit field, Buddhaghosa is working with a metaphor closely connected with the Buddha, but his own reflection and treatment of it is revealing. He writes, “[J]ust as the place for growing the king’s or minister’s rice or corn is the king’s rice-field or the king’s corn-field, so [those who have received the fruits of understanding are] the place for growing the whole world’s merit. For the world’s various kinds of merit leading to welfare and happiness grow with the [selfless] as their support.”⁴⁹ The implication of the image is that much as the king grows rice beyond his needs and shares that food with the kingdom, so the selfless as paradigmatic members of the monastic community produce more merit than they could possibly use for the good of the world.

Note, too, that in the logic of the image, the selfless play the role of the field itself rather than the king. They do not use another person’s labor to produce their and the world’s food; rather, their very presence fertilizes and fosters the growth of the actions of welfare and happiness by others. Indeed, the image of fertilizer is suggestive here. When good actions are accomplished within their influence, the effects are increased. This fruit of understanding is complementary to being fit for offerings, but the process is different. Rather than surrendering a good to the selfless who can use it more effectively, good actions done within their presence are multiplied.

⁴⁹ Buddhaghosa, chaps. VII, 98. In the section on meditation, Buddhaghosa is discussing taking the Community (*Saṅgha*) as a meditation subject. For ease of seeing how Buddhaghosa applies these earlier descriptions to those who have received the fruits of understanding, I have replaced the terms ‘community’ for ‘those who have received the fruits of understanding’ and ‘selfless.’

Again, Buddhaghosa's point here could be taken as a metaphysical or ontological one—the selfless have a different relationship to the causality of experience that allows them to multiply the grains and gains of good actions. However, his perspective on fruit bat metaphysics suggests a more ethical reading of being fit for offerings; the same theme also suggests a more ethical reading here. The emphasis of a more ethical reading is not on the supernatural ability of the selfless (Buddhaghosa, as mentioned before, both categorizes and downplays the importance of supernatural powers) but on the way that their presence grows merit for the whole world.

This effect might sound near-magical, but we do have ways recognizing a similar set of skills, although we leave them undefined. Consider the teacher in the film *Dead Poet's Society*.⁵⁰ In the film, the Robin Williams's character John Keating is able, through his presence and skillful teaching, to bring about a social field where the students are able to create art, gain self-knowledge, and accomplish goods that otherwise would never have occurred. This trope in the film, a teacher whose presence is transformative (rather than a similar but problematically different trope, that of the teacher who goes out to save the children of the bad neighborhood), is immediately recognizable to us. A skillful mentor creates a space for profound learning and transformation. This trope works in part because many students, at some point in their careers, encounter a teacher, coach, or mentor whose presence catalyzes the development of those around them. This image, the transformative teacher, is cousin to Buddhaghosa's metaphor, and it can grant us a sense of what his descriptions look like ethically. As fields of merit, the selfless create spaces where the good actions of individuals bear fruit far beyond what seems possible. Their presence makes being good easier.

⁵⁰ Peter Weir, *Dead Poets Society*, Streaming, Comedy, Drama (Touchstone Pictures, 1989), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097165/>.

Far from being a metaphysical gesture toward a magical relationship to causality, serving as a field of merit for the world is a way of highlighting both the ethical responsibilities and the actions of the selfless. This final fruit of understanding expresses the commitment that arises with the realization of Nibbāna to improve the welfare and happiness of the whole world, which ultimately ends, the longest run, in Nibbāna.

To summarize Buddhaghosa's claims, the total picture being described here is of a community with a wide ability to attend to different elements of human life, sensitive to the needs of the people that it works with, dedicated to a wider public beyond itself, and conscious of creating non-oppressive spaces of transformation for its members and those beyond. In other words, densely encoded in these descriptions of the fruits of understanding is a full ethical vision of communal no-self practice. Rather than a selfish phenomenon, no-self practice is community-supported and -centered. As the home of friends, the laboratory of learning, the opportunity for cultivating the different aspects of love, and the example of what is endearing, the community is intertwined no-self practice.

What is 'good' about no-self practice?

Being heavenly-minded in the sense of no-self practice thus offers several contributions to ethics. First, no-self practice emphasizes the process of transforming perception as a foundational part of ethics. In addition to a complex, interdependent picture of human flourishing, no-self practice stresses the importance of the shape of our attention. If we see things only as triangles, we will be unaware of circles; or more concretely, if we see ourselves as removed from the natural world rather than an expression of it and companion with it, then we will struggle to balance an ecological system with one of its biggest pieces, human beings, always missing. Our perception oppresses our experience at a pre-reflective level, and only deep-

seated changes in our understanding can overcome that oppression. No-self practice is not alone in bringing focus to the importance of perception and awareness for ethics, but no-self practice does particularly foreground this dimension of ethical life.

Connected to this first point, the transformation of perception requires pushing beyond what we normally mean by perception at all—‘seeing Nibbāna,’ or being engraved by God. This radical shift suggests that these religious traditions see something as particularly spiritual in this process, but as the disparity between Teresa and Buddhaghosa suggests, even the word ‘spiritual’ is problematic that something outside being has a shaping role. Iris Murdoch discusses a secular variety of this idea in the final chapter of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, where she muses on the possibility of doing theology without God while maintaining the inspirational importance of God.⁵¹ However, the importance of seeing something beyond being does mean that attempting to separate the practices of no-self from their central core may be only partially effective. For this reason, arguments to translate religious practice into secular ethics would do better to include the encounter with something beyond being, perhaps thinking more richly about its translation or about re-presenting these treatments of God and Nibbāna.

Second, no-self practice encourages the constant revision of ethical dilemmas through different understandings of personhood. Using the image of resizing the self, no-self practice is concerned with the process of comparing elements of human life to the shape of a perceived dilemma. It emphasizes the receiver of the good, or even an observing public, as vital parts of the equation, as well as the system that has framed the dilemma. The ethics of no-self practice is holistic both through its concern not to oppress elements of human experience but also through its incorporation of a wide diversity of factors in understanding the context of a problem.

⁵¹ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 512.

Consider, for example, the example of the trolley problem, a thought experiment that has wormed its way into other disciplines and into pop culture as a way to think about ethics. The problem has several variations, but in its simplest formulation, it asks us to consider whether to leave a runaway trolley alone, which will prove fatal for five people, or throw the emergency switch to send it on another track, which will prove fatal for one person. The dilemma is designed to highlight, among other things, the difference between thinking in terms of deontological choice or consequentialist choice, but the dilemma takes for granted that the locus of ethics simply is a lever-flip, a choice. No-self practice presses the question that the dilemma disguises: what systems led to this impasse? If we approach systemic problems like the ecological crisis from the point of view of the trolley problem, we utterly fail to understand the way our framing of agency and the world has created only varieties of failure.

Third, this holistic emphasis within no-self practice leads to a far more serious incorporation of the community as a vital part of development. The weight placed on communities is akin to systems theory, a way of thinking about individuals as interconnected nodes within a system rather than atoms linked by extraneous bonds. The effect of this holistic emphasis on community is to push the boundaries of our individual-focused ethics, but not in the direction of shared identity so much as in the direction of interrelatedness. Becoming good requires something more than perseverance and a good teacher; it also entails being part of something already on its way to becoming good.

Fourth and finally, after seeing Buddhaghosa's description of the most fully developed aspects of ethical life that are cultivated as part of no-self practice, we need to recall that while the ethics of no-self practice become clearest among those who become most sensitive, its insights are available all along the path. In other words, no-self practice is not simply the ethics

of the perfect, a point to which Teresa and Buddhaghosa frequently return. Teresa suggests that most her sisters will reach at least the fifth set of rooms in the interior castle, and this is the place where God begins to be experienced directly for the first time, somewhat akin to the ability to see in a Nibbāna-way for the first time. More crucially, even a slight inward turn—learning to breathe mindfully, or turning toward prayer—offers a much richer awareness of the way that agency is being framed by the systems surrounding it. Even little virtue, or a little critical distance, offers a clearer view of the tangle of experience. The oppression that inflects experience is related to the oppression of systems and institutions, and our ability to become conscious of any degree of oppression offers a measure of freedom on both sides of the equation.

Conclusion

“It was so long since she had been anything near the right size, that it felt quite strange at first, but she got used to it in a few minutes, and began talking to herself as usual. ‘Come, there’s half my plan done now! How puzzling all these changes are! I’m never sure what I’m going to be, from one minute to another! However, I’ve got back to my right size: the next thing is, to get into that beautiful garden—how *is* that to be done, I wonder?’¹

I began this project with the image of Alice who, having first entered Wonderland, struggles to find the right size for her self so that she can continue on her journey. Partway through her adventure, after reflecting on the nature of self-transformation with the grumpy caterpillar, she gains some aptitude for controlling her size. Her growing skill at changing sizes allows her to continue on her trip and to consider, for the first time, how she might best experience the strange and wonderful beauty around her. Changing sizes is more than a plot point in the book; it represents the various ways that constructed agency creates problems, opportunities, and even awe. Carroll concludes Alice’s story by praising the importance of remaining connected to one’s “child-life”² by learning to transform in size, from child to adult and back again, so as to engage the wonder available in any present moment.

Contemplative practice promises to do something similar, and one of its most intriguing varieties is no-self practice. As I have argued, no-self practice follows the commitment to allow no element of life to oppress another. Through the work and support of the community, no-self practice seeks to work through both conceptual and nonconceptual approaches to increase awareness, even and especially of those subtle oppressions which limit our ability to respond to complex, systemic oppression. What we see outside of us is always connected to what is happening inside of us, but both dimensions of oppression can be incredibly subtle. Through

¹ Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland ; & Through the Looking-Glass*, 41.

² Carroll, 104.

mind-altering imagery, a desire-centric approach to knowledge, phenomenological analysis, prayer, and meditation, no-self practice seeks to expand what we can see. In this expansion of sight, a delicate shift in awareness occurs through something beyond being that provides a new, deeper level of insight.

Here, I want to offer a few concluding remarks on the value of no-self practice for ethics and for theology, partly in summary and partly gesturing beyond the limits of this study. I begin with the usefulness of no-self practice for questions around justice and identity. Second, I address the role no-self practice might play in church congregations. Third, I return to the importance of friendship for no-self theology.

Working Toward Identity and Justice

It may be surprising to discover that Christian theology has within it a no-self tradition. The pervasive idea of an immortal soul, although present as only one of the ways to conceive of identity in the bible and in Christian tradition, carries a heavy cultural weight that currently tends to choke out alternative ways of thinking about identity and human life. Seeing another position within the tradition may seem either strange or, at least for some of us, a relief. No-self practice also calls attention to what an immortal soul may mask, namely, a subtle desire to stand outside and undetermined by experience without facing its interconnectedness.

Although outside the scope of this project, no-self practice's treatment of identity and the soul leaves it open to ways of thinking about selfhood in conversation with other kinds of analysis, like that being explored in neuroscience. No-self practice strikes a balance between rejecting both an 'overlord' element as the determining factor of human life, while also rejecting reductive explanations of human life that foreclose on what counts as human experience. This suggests an interesting shared ground—thinking of human life and even the soul as constituted

by a diversity of elements without recourse to an immaterial, unchanging governor. Identity, then, is about something more than a process of discovering or controlling a hidden core of personality.

In a very practical way, no-self theology provides a more comprehensive way of thinking through and engaging in the Christian practice of discerning identity and vocation. While the term ‘discernment’ has been somewhat coopted by the ordination process in various denominations, the more general sense of discernment has regained some ground as a way for individuals and communities to think about God’s call to them.

Many discernment processes work by looking for the hidden but unavoidable work of God in an individual life, or, as Parker Palmer describes it, we cannot avoid doing.³ Rowan Williams characterizes this approach as rather like looking for the excess or residue within our lives, the dimensions that remain even when all other parts are exhausted.⁴ Note that this approach can easily be grasped in the wrong way by conflating the inescapable dimension of personhood with a fixed soul or identity. Practically, this way of thinking about discernment nearly always results in the creation of autobiographies, thinking or even writing about human life as a narrative whose meaning may be partially unknown to its leading role. By writing the narrative, the returned themes and inescapable calls may become visible.

No-self practice offers an interesting perspective on this creation of narrative, including the sense that it can be grasped in the wrong way. On one hand, no-self practice welcomes thinking of life as changing, rich diversity; on the other hand, no-self practice counsels skepticism about whether any essential quality should be understood as defining for a whole human life. Frederick Buechner offers this influential description of Christian vocation

³ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 1 edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

⁴ Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 1st edition (Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1995), 147.

understood as a singular, fixed identity. “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”⁵ The idea here sheers away context from both personhood and world.

The practice of no-self theology critiques this approach and adds something as well. It critiques this approach by pointing out that conceiving of human life in terms of a single vocation is inadequate and also misleading. Human lives have more than one set of factors, and recognizing one's deep gladness may depend on many factors—a distribution of resources that allows for the pursuit of that gladness, for example. More pressingly, this way of thinking about human life as trying to find one's role within a divinely directed play occludes the way it oppresses human life. We would do better to think of vocations, plural, within particular contexts and times of life.

No-self practices add something to the narrative analysis of human life for its residual, inescapable desires by pointing out that God may be experienced in human life not like a plot's arc but through transformed perception. Practically, this means that God speaks vocationally precisely *in* the way that we do things and not only as we appear once we have exhausted ourselves. Adverbs, understood metaphorically as the conditioning factors that shape actions, tell more of the story than the verbs. Adverbs, more than verbs, can reveal oppressed dimensions of personhood (do we engage gladly, reluctantly, angrily, despairingly, quickly, or simply?). Also, thinking of the use of these vocational exercises for ordination processes, no-self practice underscores the need for analysis at every level, including what often remains unstated in vocational autobiographies, namely, that many authorities shape the possibilities of the story. Not every residue of a narrative is usefully thought of as God at work. What we cannot help

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, Revised, Expanded ed. edition (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperOne, 1993), 118–19.

doing may also simply be a failure to imagine an agency larger than the one society has presented; what we cannot move past may be a terrible fear arising from trauma. What we cannot help doing may also be thought of as an oppression, one of Teresa's sure signs not of God but that something in the reflection has gone awry.

No-self theology offers a first-person resource for those who engage the underlying issues that define problems of justice and identity. Implicit in the turn to contemplative practices is a critique of how we grasp the truths of our present justice—even in places where we grasp the truth, we are holding it by the wrong, even dangerous, end. No-self theology seeks to address this issue by undermining the implicit oppression that occurs at a subtle level of our pre-reflective experience. The way that we inhabit our ideas matters as much as the ideas themselves. No-self theology thus matters for questions of justice and identity because it foregrounds the subterranean desires that are shaping our experience, both what we conceive of as problems and what we conceive of as possible. Breaking the enthralling structures that oppress ourselves and others is the actual 'practice' of no-self practice.

Interior and exterior oppression connect within us. No-self theology is not the only perspective to make this point—Thandeka's *Learning to Be White*⁶ comes immediately to mind, and it takes a psychological approach for a similar conclusion about internalized oppression—but of particular importance to no-self theology is that our capacity to notice either interior or exterior oppression depends on our ability to see *both*. Lewis Carroll's Alice faces oppression inside (drowning in her tears) and outside (crammed and cramped into a hall with no hope of fitting through a door), and she can only face each new challenge by seeing how her body and the environment interact. In Teresa's writings, the capacity to find union with God despite a bad monastery, and the capacity to change the structure of a bad monastery, emerge from the same

⁶ Thandeka, *Learning to Be White: Money, Race and God in America* (Continuum, 2000).

process of detachment. In Buddhaghosa's thought, literally everything worldly is inflected by the ignorance that perpetuates the suffering gathered in mental constructions. No-self practice works by cultivating desire and mental flexibility in a holistic way to overcome both interior and exterior oppression.

In questions of justice and identity, the answer of no-self theology is to work through tactics of detachment and love that equip individuals and communities to face the long work required for a transformed vision and enriched imagination. I am reminded of a phrase from the *Book of Common Prayer* that petitions God to encourage us to 'make no peace with oppression.' No-self theology is the insight that the process of peace without oppression requires a profound investigation into the dynamics that shape us and the world we see. Its first-person perspective challenges the idea that an *idea* is what will do away with the half-accepted oppressions that define so much of life.

Note that the perspective of no-self theology is not against political organizing or taking immediate steps to seek redress, equality, or any of our other values—indeed, no-self theology often favors these steps. Neither Teresa nor Buddhaghosa imagines that sitting alone in a cave, navel-gazing, is the way out of oppression. Community life, tense relationships with other people, and reflective activities are the far more common tools for both thinkers. Loving-kindness meditation depends upon the ongoing work of trying to be kind to the people who are encountered every day. Political organizing is, from the viewpoint of no-self practice, one potentially fruitful strategy for coming the root of our problems, and action against injustice may be exactly the lens we need in our inner life. No-self theology warns that no political solution can be perfect, but pursuing better solutions can improve *us*. Removing the financial burden of bail

for small criminal accusations would succeed in freeing many who do not belong in prison,⁷ but it would hardly dent the full and complex phenomenon of mass incarceration in the United States, where racism and economic interests have combined to distort society.⁸ Starting somewhere, however, if taken like the fruit bat on the tree looking for the right fruit, subtly shifts the work for justice closer to its roots in human desire.

More Mundane Oppression: Recovering Church Interiority

What no-self theology suggests, and what both Teresa and Buddhaghosa imagine, is that we need friends and communities that engage in no-self practice. No-self practice is inseparable from the kind of support that makes such disorientation worthwhile until and alongside the joy that comes from seeing the Unsigned. Much as Teresa and Buddhaghosa think of monastic communities as the natural but not necessarily only communities geared toward no-self practice, I think of churches as the natural but not necessarily only communities where no-self practice makes sense. As a priest and theologian, I will add here some insights from no-self practice for the congregation.

Recalling Cynthia Bourgeault's comments about the failure of the church to encourage interiority, we can see a bit more clearly through no-self theology some of the reasons that churches have failed to connect the elements of their practice to questions of meaning. The tactics of no-self theology—detachment, phenomenological analysis, overloading the imagination, reflective work within relationships—are not idea problems that can be overcome by speaking about a new idea. Indeed, many ideas or practices might be taken up as tactics, like coaching within a family system, working to cultivate loving-kindness, or trying to be hospitable,

⁷ "The Bronx Freedom Fund," The Bronx Freedom Fund, accessed October 10, 2018, <http://www.thebronxfreedomfund.org/>.

⁸ Michelle Alexander and Cornel West, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

but no content is determinative for no-self practice because the content is only the gateway. How the community handles or performs teaches as much or more to its members than the content.

A concrete example may help. As a priest, I have attended many conferences, sessions, and courses on the topic of ‘how to pray.’ Although these sessions nearly always strive to be experiential, they are nonetheless taught in what I have come to think of as the ‘buffet style.’ A leader explains and offers each method, usually with sometime to try out that method, so that participants can see which method might fit each person’s taste—not unlike a buffet. While exposure to a variety of methods of meditation or prayer is surely sometimes of help, the very format of the presentation assumes a profoundly consumerist self-understanding reminiscent of Buddhaghosa’s economic metaphor. When prayer is handled in this way as a topic, no-self practice would insist that prayer is being grabbed by the wrong end. Prayer, thought of as the satisfaction of one’s personal style, is rarely going to investigate the nature of that style, much less engage the subtle and challenging questions of interiority and meaning.

Again, drawing on my experience (although I suspect that it is far from unusual), this ‘buffet’ method extends to nearly all Christian formation topics in church life. Rather than addressing underlying issues, every new course serves as a subtle reification of the self-mastery paradigm, whether that course is on the bible, music, child-rearing, or addiction. Ironically, *many* of these courses can serve as an opportunity to move forward when performed as an example of cultivating the desire of the fruit bat. Most often, however, a church community is looking for the right course, or the right topic, or even the right youth minister, but the subtle restraints of the economy of self-mastery undermine any serious shift or transformation. If churches are to untangle their own reliance on the economy of self-mastery, they will need both to become conscious of it and to work as a community to change. Advice from higher up a church hierarchy

may or may not help. I often hear bishops and institutional representatives lamenting the failure of local congregations to become mission-minded rather than maintenance-minded (which has resonance with overcoming one aspect of the self-mastery paradigm), but when churches see those same bishops and institutional representatives acting out of their own sense of self-mastery rather than interrogating their own desires, the conversation is not likely to help. The subtext of the economy is simply too strong unless it is deliberately addressed. Conceptual awareness of distorted desire is not the same as trying to change it.

Teresa and Buddhaghosa describe no-self in the first person because it communicates through performance. A church or other community that serves as a nexus of transformation seems to understand this distinction, and if churches are to become more consciously places of and for interiority, they will need to become more first personal and self-consciously performative. Bourgeault's critique, through the lens of no-self practice, reveals that churches have backed away from the vulnerability of performance, of first person encounter, in favor of the idea of third person spirituality. The buffet-style has become determinative, cutting out any deeper and changing encounter. We need also, like Teresa and Buddhaghosa, to see that the teaching of this transformation can happen in any appropriately dedicated community. In leaving the performance and vulnerability to other communities—like the yoga, meditation, 12-step, and others that Bourgeault names—the church chooses a feeling of self-mastery over the actual, needed change.

If a church congregation or other community genuinely want to escape the cycle of always looking for the new, perfect idea, both Teresa and Buddhaghosa offer suggestions for overcoming the obstructions that keep congregations in place. Above all, Teresa commends perseverance—she is nearly always cajoling, persuading, begging, or scolding her sisters to keep

going. Buddhaghosa offers insightful ways to overcome obstructions in the divine abidings, including using scripture to find encouragement, personal narrative to discover desire, and gift-giving as a way to interrupt old patterns. Filling in the details of these tactics extends far beyond this conclusion, but both thinkers offer compelling ways to decenter the self-mastery paradigm.

The first-person approach in writing no-self practice offers a distinctive gift to the theology of the church in its emphasis on the interconnection among how we write, read, teach, and learn theology. Returning for a moment to Michel de Certeau's work, he offers a distinction between strategy and tactics that offers a useful lens for seeing what no-self attempts to do differently in the first-person style. Strategy, for Certeau, is a heuristic term for referring to those things "that seek to create places in conformity with abstract models;"⁹ tactics are the ways people inhabit places in, around, and despite of strategies.¹⁰

One of his clearest images of this difference comes from his work applying these categories to a physical place, namely, New York City. From the high view of the skyscraper, the city offers an image of itself, "a gigantic mass immobilized before the eyes."¹¹ To be lifted to this height "is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic."¹² To see the city from up high is to see the totalizing whole, but it bears only a strange resemblance to its habitable spaces below. Above, it provides a thematic picture that is an excellent map and aesthetic wonder; below, the picture from above has only a sideways relevance. Certeau writes to

⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall, 3 edition (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2011), 29.

¹⁰ Antonio Eduardo Alonso, "Listening for the Cry: Certeau Beyond Strategies and Tactics," *Modern Theology* 33, no. 3 (March 9, 2017): 369–94, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12333>.

¹¹ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 91.

¹² Certeau, 92.

describe and flesh out some of the grammar of the tactics of the below place, with its haunts of memory in a daily walk, the gravity of locations interspersed by commute, and the reinvention and appropriation of places for new uses. The difference between above and below is a critical one. Describing the architectural planning of the city provides only a glimpse into how it is appropriated as a lived place. To live in New York is quite different from seeing the photo from above.

No-self practice attempts to write theology from the experience of lived tactics, and this is not an attempt to make a damning criticism of every strategic method. Every theological writer worth our time imagines that he or she is writing something that affects our lived experience, and most writers frequently recourse to the display of a paradigm as map for checking our course. Much as maps make the navigation of New York much simpler for a newcomer, most theology sketches a paradigm for making sense of our experience. Augustine reflects on the differences between angels and human beings in *The City of God* as a way to clarify the question of sin. JoAnne Marie Terrell ponders whether the symbolic richness of Christ's blood is an appropriate paradigm in a context haunted by white supremacy and slavocracy. Gustavo Gutiérrez describes the preferential option for the poor as a map of the world as God's sees it, one which should haunt any oppressive culture. These are all powerful reflections in their respective ways.

However, a few writings within theology take a different approach, one that begins from lived space and proceeds through phenomenology or images. Not every example of this writing style is a no-self approach, but each has a resonance with that method. For example, Anselm's ontological 'proof' is better seen as a phenomenological analysis than a proof, a way of breaking down conceptual categories. Pseudo-Dionysius's *Divine Names* work dialogically with *The Mystical Theology*, building up divine names of increasing sophistication and tearing them down,

not as way to reach a final plateau but as an ongoing practice. I am increasingly persuaded that Edward Farley's *Good and Evil* works more like Buddhaghosa's phenomenological analysis, sharpening the attention without recourse to a metaphysics, than an ontological map. Teresa offers an impossible map, stunning the intellect by granting it too much to do and drawing on desires as ways to proceed in theology.

No-self practice offers a way of reading the language of tactics, of living places, as a vital and needed context for contemporary theology. It addresses maps only to problematize them—glowing, crystalline castles of infinite space and tangled knots disguising perfectly blissful emptiness. The problem with using a map in New York—even an up-to-the-minute map offered on our phones—is that it misses so much that it distorts the picture. It does not show where Central Park shifts from neighborhood gathering to tourist spot. It cannot display the history printed in the feet and eyes of its members. It does not explain the felt difference of moving from one block to the next within the same neighborhood, a difference felt in graffiti, the rats, chatter, and scent. Maps highlight landmarks, and any map can be beautiful, but their reference points miss the insight of the walker. The best places within any city are lived within the bounds of a top-down view but never seen by it.

The same is true of theology. No-self practice, as we see in Teresa's writing, shows a way of engaging living space and interiority rather than creating ever more wonderful conceptual frameworks. Her concern, too, is a telling one. She worries that constantly referring back to excellently made conceptual structures interferes with what is truly needed—a careful and caring analysis of how little we know ourselves. She writes from the pedestrian's view in city, not in the sense that her work is unsophisticated but in the sense that it is a view from where we live. She examines that perspective not by checking a theological map but through detachment. Given the

increasing systemic problems which characterize our life, no-self theology offers the ‘tools’ to stop our obsession with tools and begin to work at the muddle we are creating. If Teresa is right, we need to worry less about useful concepts and more about the cultural and religious wallpaper that has become normalized.

Friendship

Finally, no-self practice offers a vital reminder to theology that friendship is not ancillary to the teaching of theology; it is necessary. Performing the practice of no-self means a performance not like that before an audience but rather like we make ourselves available to each other. We learn only from each other. The first-person quality of no-self theology highlights this point. The question of learning theology is one of shifted perception and relationship, not rote technique or data.

Buddhaghosa’s impassioned command to find a friend and teacher, regardless of their title, suggests its importance. Because of the enthralling and painful elements of experience, we easily grasp theology in the wrong way, reifying the very self-understanding which perpetuates oppression. While we may hope to discover the truth through our own cleverness or holy visions, the usual way of finding correction and support is through friendship. For Teresa and for Buddhaghosa, the higher truths are simply inaccessible without friends to point, gesture, and explain ourselves to us, but also with whom to cry and laugh. Buddhism has far more robust ways of thinking about the importance of teachers, and we Christians have much to learn from that approach. Distracted clergy, untrained draftees, and abrasive volunteers often do the teaching within churches, and, in my experience, it shows.

Asking how the academy, or even churches, can take friendship more seriously as characteristic of and not accidental to theology requires a partly negative answer. They cannot

control people into forming relationships—and if they can, this manipulation would be of the worst kind. As Certeau helpfully points out, people do not in fact live in institutions; we live in the space that we own and make. Neither the academy nor churches can create the relationships that make theology a livable place, but they can certainly strangle that space.

If the academy and church hope to facilitate friendships, it will be because they leave livable space. The encouragement of community requires more time than any institution wants to ‘lose’ to such an unproductive endeavor. Friendships do not show up on ordination exams, and reducing them to opportunities for ‘networking’ is truly horrifying. The academy and the church need new ways of seeing their lives, as the changing landscape of theological education suggests. Buddhaghosa’s ethical advice seems appropriate. The academy and the church must find ways to be fit for hospitality, able to appear wholly lovely and endearing, and they must be gracious as well as good. They must be fit for offerings, able to accomplish good with the gifts they receive. However, they must also be fields for the cultivation of merit, ripe and spacious places where others have the space to grow things outside the control of the field that are nonetheless fruitful.

The places where the church is thriving now are those places that have bent the practices of church life—liturgy, outreach, social justice, fellowship, and so on—into occasions for friendship. This shift is not a form of multi-tasking or productivity, and it is not the promotion of the church as a social club; it is a reframing at the base of our understanding that the interiority required by our present needs must be supported by community. Making friends may not be the end of Christian life—although I am reminded Jesus seemed to think so (‘I do not call you servants any longer; ... but I have called you friends’ (John 15.15)). As Teresa describes, discovering who else lives inside of us may foster a friendship of an altogether more radical kind.

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