
BUDDHIST RESPONSES TO
CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Meditation and Prayer: A Comparative Inquiry

Rita M. Gross
University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire

A famous prayer that many would associate with the Christian tradition states: “God, grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change what I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” If I use that prayer, however, I say simply “Grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change what I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Despite the fact that many assume that Buddhists do not send forth such verbal requests, I have no hesitation concerning this modified version of the “serenity prayer” because it has so many Buddhist analogues.

In this paper, I will be concerned with three questions. The first is the correctness of the usual impression that prayer is utterly foreign to the nontheistic character of Buddhism. The second question, based upon a negative answer to the first, asks why a nontheistic religion engages in prayer, given that it seems to imply a recipient or listener. Finally, the most theoretical question and hypothetical question concerns what difference, if any, could be posited in the religious experience of praying theists and praying nontheists. One version of the serenity prayer quoted above calls upon “God,” while the other omits that reference point. That difference in form does reflect major theological differences between Buddhism and Christianity. However, the more interesting question is whether this linguistic shift makes any difference in the experiences of the people praying or in the results of their prayers. Does this serenity prayer have a different effect on me, a Buddhist, than on a Christian, all other things being equal? While empirical studies to test whether differences occur are probably impossible to devise, I would not be surprised to find that these theological opposites mask similarity of experience and results.

Because Buddhism and Christianity often seem to be such different religions, in-depth comparative theological analyses between these two traditions are fascinating. What can seem like a clear contrast one minute becomes a surprising similarity the next moment. Crossovers abound. It seems that Buddhism denies the existence of self while Christianity does not; but then some Buddhists talk of the “big I” and Christian teachings often talk about the necessity to “lose the self” before one can find it.¹

In any college course introducing the world's religions, one would be taught that Christianity is a theistic religion, positing a deity separate from humanity, and that Buddhism is one of the world's few nontheistic religions, denying the existence (or, more accurately, the *relevance*) of any transcendent, external supreme being who created the world and bestows salvation on followers of that religion. But then we learn of Pure Land Buddhism, in which one is advised to rely solely on the Other Power of Buddha Amida to assure rebirth in the Pure Land. And so it goes.

On the surface, it would appear that a theological continental divide looms in the purported difference between meditation and prayer, a theological divide that should make the phrase "Buddhist prayer" an oxymoron and should make Buddhists unwilling to utter something like the serenity prayer. It is often taught in introductory courses in world religions that, because of the theological difference between a theistic and a nontheistic religion, Christians *pray*, whereas Buddhists *meditate*. Often a stark contrast is posited; prayer is verbal, filled with words, addressing another being, whereas meditation is nonverbal, a silent noting of the breath. But that differentiation tells only part of the story. The nonverbal silent meditation that many associate with Buddhism is only one form of Buddhist meditation; Buddhist practice also includes many verbal utterances. Furthermore, when many Tibetan Buddhists use the English language, they use the word "prayer" quite freely. For example, after the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., in September 2001, the Dalai Lama conducted what he called a "prayer service" for the many victims. Thus, it is not so surprising that a Buddhist could feel quite comfortable uttering the serenity prayer without the initial word "God" and feel that it is an effective and meaningful utterance. Nor is it unknown for Christians at prayer to simply give themselves over to a wordless attempt to conform to God's will. Clearly, something more subtle is occurring than a distinction between Christians engaging in word-filled request prayers to a personal deity and Buddhists wordlessly and impersonally noting the breath. No area of comparative Buddhist-Christian studies is more fascinating than that of prayer and meditation. Nor are crossovers more common in any other area of comparative Buddhist-Christian studies.

Even more surprising, many Buddhist religious utterances *do* seem to invoke some presence, some "other" whom one is addressing. For example, consider the following religious utterance:

Hold me with the treasury of your love.
You who are the refuge,
Protect me from the terrifying sufferings of existence, such as
Birth, old age, sickness, death and so on,
And completely liberate all my defilements.²

If one were simply presented with this prayer and asked to identify its source, say on an exam in an introductory religious studies course, the average student could be forgiven for assuming that this utterance is definitely not Buddhist and might perhaps be from the Christian tradition. Even someone reasonably well acquainted with reli-

gious traditions might surmise that this is a Christian prayer, given the clear language of address, implicating a being separate from oneself, and the petitionary character of the statement. Someone well acquainted with the conventions of Buddhist religious expressions might find a clue in the stock phrase “sufferings of existence, such as birth, old age, sickness, death and so on.” These were identified by the Buddha in his first sermon as the first four of the eight types of suffering detailed in the First Noble Truth and are quite common in Buddhist liturgies. Perhaps even more mystifying than a Buddhist prayer that seems to posit a being to whom one could pray is that the fact that the being who has just been petitioned for very concrete and basic benefits dissolves “through non-conceptualization into the state of radiant emptiness” a few lines later in the liturgy.³ What is the point of such seemingly “theistic” language if the deity being invoked does not really exist as such, independently and eternally?

This utterance is indeed from a Buddhist liturgy, and not from a popular tradition in which various “super-human” beings are routinely invoked. This statement is from an esoteric and advanced form of Vajrayana Buddhism, which is adamantly nontheistic and nondualistic in its metaphysics. Such statements lead me to suggest that if one did not know on some other basis that Buddhism is a nontheistic tradition, one could never figure that out from reading Buddhist liturgies, even liturgies that deal with advanced meditation practices. On the contrary, at least in the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition, such liturgies are filled with confessions, offerings, praises, and requests for blessings and many other boons. Thus, the form found in such Buddhist liturgies is at least superficially similar to many familiar Christian forms of address to the deity, despite the theological differences. Why? What is going on? And are the inner psychological experiences of the prayer and the meditator relatively similar, given the similarity of the verbal forms, or relatively different because of the theological differences?

At least three different types of Buddhist verbal utterances, or “prayers,” can be distinguished, and the theology and religious experience connected with these three different forms can provide some clues to discussing the question of just how similar or different prayer and meditation actually are. The first type of Buddhist prayer, somewhat unknown to many outsiders, involves prayer to many relatively existing beings. The second type of prayer involves making aspirations or wishes, in which no one is addressed, but many hopes are expressed. The third, most elusive type of Buddhist utterance comes from the liturgies of Tibetan “deity yoga,” such as the one quoted above. Forms of address in a nondualistic, nontheistic theological context could seem like a theological absurdity. There must be some explanation at the level of religious psychology that justifies using such forms as a “skillful means” to promote spiritual transformation, with the result that these nontheistic *forms* are very similar to their theistic cousins.

The first level of exploration should center on some of the beings to whom Buddhists routinely “pray” and on their existential status. In this case, both the religious forms and the theology, I would argue, are reasonably similar in Buddhism and Christianity. Prayers are addressed to beings experienced as separate from oneself, from whom one asks for various boons and benefits. Even the forms of Buddhism that are

most rigorous and uncompromising about ultimate nontheism have always recognized that super-human beings, invisible to ordinary human vision, do indeed “exist” and can be petitioned, just as believers in deities petition their deities, who are also invisible. Buddhists also believe that petitions to such beings can be effective, can change the course of events, just as theists believe that their prayers have an effect. Furthermore, Buddhists have *always* believed in the existence of such beings. These beliefs and practices are not due to a later degeneration from a pure early form of Buddhism. Otherwise early Buddhists could not have told stories about the historical Buddha being urged to preach his dharma by various divine beings who told him that his preaching would be effective, despite his initial doubts that anyone would understand his teachings.

Only modern North American converts to Buddhism have trouble recognizing the existence of these beings and relating with them, precisely because of the way in which they understand nontheism. North American Buddhists tend to assume that beings whom they cannot access with their senses, beings who apparently have no empirical existence, do not exist in any way and that this is the meaning of “nontheism.” But classically, Buddhist nontheism is not about the *relative* nonexistence of such beings, but about their *absolute* nonexistence. At the level of relative truth, such beings exist and there is no more reason why a Buddhist should not pray, confess wrongdoings, or engage in praise, thanksgiving, and offering liturgies to them than why a Christian would not do the same. And they might pray for many of the same things: reversal of negative fortunes, health, wealth, and well-being in general. That for which a Buddhist cannot pray, but a Christian might, is more ultimate—enlightenment or salvation. There is no possibility of vicarious enlightenment in Buddhism and no deity can confer it, because enlightenment is a matter of clearing away confusion and uncovering one’s primordial pure and enlightened state. However, my impression is that Christians also believe that human *acceptance* of salvation is necessary, that God does not “save” human beings indiscriminately or randomly. And even Buddhists pray that the *obstacles* to enlightenment might be lessened or destroyed.

What does it mean to say that the beings to whom Buddhists pray “exist”? The understanding of “existence” is quite different from that which a Christian would affirm about God. But it is not so different from what a Christian might affirm about the existence of saints or angels. According to Buddhism, deities exist in the same way that we humans exist. To ourselves we feel very real, but analysis clearly demonstrates that there is no substantial, lasting, permanent self. In the same way, deities can be encountered, but analysis finds no grounds for positing a truly external, independently existing deity. Instead, everything consists of a matrix of interdependence and is, therefore, empty of inherent existence. But that does not mean that things are altogether, utterly nonexistent. In fact, such nihilistic interpretations of emptiness are considered to be extremely dangerous spiritually. For us, what is important is that such beings exist independently of us ordinary, unenlightened human beings. We do not think them up any more than we conjure up our own relative existence. So long as it seems to us that we exist, they also exist and they can be of help or hindrance to

us. For a person who still believes in his or her own ego, his or her own existence, as do all unenlightened beings, to declare that saints, angels, and inhabitants of traditional Buddhist universes do not exist is merely a matter of confused understanding.

However, in a Buddhist framework, such beings do not exist independently of the insight of an enlightened being, who can see them for what they are—ultimately nonexistent as independent beings. Thus they are denied the total independence that Christians posit of God. It would seem, at least vis-à-vis human beings, that saints and angels exist in the same way. They do not exist independent of God, but they do exist independent of human beings, just as do the myriad nonhuman, nonempirical beings who populate any traditional Buddhist universe. Only when we truly understand our own emptiness, our own lack of inherent existence will we truly see that deities do not inherently exist either. Until then, we might as well pray to them, and Buddhists do. There seems no reason to assume that the inner experience of a Buddhist petitioning for general well-being or for help on the spiritual path is significantly different from that a Christian praying to God or the saints for similar things.

Buddhist prayers to such relatively existing beings are only the most mundane form of Buddhist prayer. Buddhists also routinely make utterances in which they wish for many positive things: the well-being of all sentient beings; the fulfillment of the vision of a great teacher; or our own ability to gain wisdom and compassion, so that we could be truly helpful. This kind of utterance is often called an “aspiration” because it expresses ideals or goals toward which we are striving. In Buddhist terms, the serenity prayer, minus the single word “God,” would be an aspiration prayer, which helps explain why it is so unproblematic to Buddhists. A famous Buddhist aspiration prayer comes from early Buddhism and is widespread in the contemporary Buddhist world. Often called the Four Immeasurables or the Four Divine Abodes (a literal translation of the Pali), the request is as follows:

May all sentient beings enjoy happiness and the root of happiness,
 May they be free from suffering and the root of suffering.
 May they not be separated from the great happiness devoid of suffering.
 May they dwell in the great equanimity free from passion, aggression,
 and bewilderment.⁴

These four are also known simply as friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, considered to be the enlightened or useful emotions. Other common aspirations express the wish for one’s own progress on the path and eventual enlightenment. For example:

Through all my births may I not be separated from the perfect guru
 And so enjoy the splendor of dharma.
 Perfecting the virtues of the paths and stages,
 May I speedily attain the state of Vajradhara [ultimate enlightenment].⁵

Another variant of this theme is the “dedication of merit.” Again this practice is widespread in Buddhism and is found in the forms of Buddhism least given to dealings

with any kind of super-human, nonempirical beings. Considered to be an essential expression of egolessness or the lack of a permanent substantial self, in this verbal utterance, one gives away any merit that may have accrued due to spiritual practice or virtuous activity, transferring it from oneself to all sentient beings.

By this merit may all obtain omniscience
 May it defeat the enemy, wrongdoing.
 From the stormy waves of birth, old age, sickness and death,
 From the ocean of samsara may I free all beings.⁶

But what is going on in these aspirations? These aspirations are not addressed to the relatively existing beings who receive more mundane requests. In fact, there is no “you” to whom they are addressed, only an “I” making the aspiration and recipients of the wishes expressed in the aspiration or dedication. Buddhists do not believe that there is an all-powerful being who could make these things happen independent of human striving (and probably Christians also don’t believe that these things will happen without human cooperation with the divine). So what is the point? Why bother, if there is no one to whom these requests could be addressed? I have, in fact, encountered religious nontheists from a monotheistic background (Unitarian-Universalists to be more specific) who were uncomfortable with these simple Buddhist aspirations. They were equally uncomfortable with the serenity prayer. Their discomfort stemmed from the fact that, as they saw things, these statements could not be “true,” because there is no being who could hear or react to a dedication of merit, the Four Immeasurables, or the serenity prayer.

At this point, we may simply encounter a basic difference in psychological styles, which is why it is fortunate that there are so many religious paths. Some people simply cannot abide any form of ritual or anything that is not completely rational and empirical. To them, practices like Buddhist aspiration prayers seem “superstitious,” because they could not possibly really magically transform the world’s suffering and confusion. They would probably say that such transformation requires hard work in the world, not prayer, or even mindfulness meditations that focus solely on the breath and the body. These are luxuries that a troubled world can ill afford, they might claim.

Others, however, would point to the effect that utterances such as the Four Immeasurables can have on the one who *says or thinks them*. Whatever else may or may not happen in prayer and religious ritual, well-crafted prayers and liturgies have a clear, demonstrable impact on those who participate in them. Such prayers are about and for the religious *subject*, the person who regularly remembers aspirations such as the Four Immeasurables and fervently, longingly imagines that he or she is able to live out these aspirations fully. Contemplating the Four Immeasurables helps one become a person who can actually manifest them. Phenomenologically, such utterances *are not* primarily for or about a purported listener, the nonexistent or unresponsive God who doesn’t snap his or her fingers and make the aspirations come true, whatever theology may claim.

If this is the case, prayer works, whether or not any external being hears or responds to prayers. Buddhists have always known this, which explains why even Buddhists who believe that the Buddha has passed entirely beyond this realm and does not hear or respond to petitions venerate, bow, and make offerings to him. Such Buddhists know and believe that these behaviors will have a positive effect on their state of mind and their behavior. In a monotheistic culture in which people are more concerned with the existence of God than with the psychological effects of religious practice, such explanations for the effectiveness of prayer are often overlooked and such justifications for religious practices might be denigrated. But for Buddhists, with our intense concern with *method*, with what works to develop and transform people spiritually, the impact of a practice on the religious subject is of utmost importance. Buddhists use aspiration prayers because we are more likely to come closer to the ideals expressed in the aspiration with the prayer than without it. Thought is very powerful in the Buddhist system of things. It is better to wish that all beings were happy than to wish difficulties upon them.

However, such reflections on the reasons to pray are not altogether foreign to a theistic context. Sometimes theists reflect that it really couldn't make that much difference to the Lord of the Universe what people do on Saturday or Sunday, whether they eat pork and shellfish, or whether they pray regularly, correctly, and at the proper times. Such practices are done, it is explained, not because God needs these prayers, but because people need them. People need them to form identity and community, to develop discipline, and to feel connected with the source of life. Theists also will explain that people pray because it is helpful to them. Many theists consider prayer to be a form of spiritual cultivation that transforms the one who prays. That function of prayer is certainly an important dimension of the experience of praying. Furthermore, any thoughtful theist should be repulsed by the portrait of God as a vindictive tyrant who gets so mad at people who do not pray properly, enough, or at the proper time, that it unleashes suffering upon such people as punishment. Even in a theistic context, one would have to argue that prayer primarily benefits the religious subject: People need to pray, but God does not need to receive prayers. Thus, theistic prayer and nontheistic meditation again turn out to be more similar than superficial first impressions might indicate. I would strongly argue that though a theological continental divide looms between the theistic and the nontheistic version of the serenity prayer, the experience of the one who utters the prayer and its effect upon that person are more similar than different.

Much more mystifying in the nontheistic context of Buddhism than prayers to relatively existing beings who can help or hinder us, or expressions of the aspirations of Buddhist meditators, are expressions such as the one quoted earlier:

Hold me with the treasury of your love.
You who are the refuge,
Protect me from the terrifying sufferings of existence, such as
Birth, old age, sickness, death and so on,
And completely liberate all my defilements.⁷

These words are addressed to a visualized being whose symbolic form represents ultimate reality and one's own true being. As already mentioned, that being dissolves into light and space later in the liturgy, so whatever existence is attributed to this being, it is not a conventionally existing, solid being. Even more mysterious to outsiders, the visualization practice involves visualizing oneself as this being. So one is not even addressing a being separate from oneself when one says, "Hold me with the treasury of your love." In fact, in an odd way, one is addressing oneself in these practices—one's true being, not one's private ego, of course. Even in liturgies in which one does not identify oneself with the being who is being visualized, eventually that being dissolves into light, which then dissolves into oneself, usually into one's heart center, again emphasizing ultimate theological nonduality.

The metaphysics or theology behind these practices is too complicated to describe fully in this context. In a nutshell, two points are important. First, everything that could possibly be called upon to indicate that there is no duality of self and ultimate reality is utilized in these liturgies. Second, even more important, the splendid beings visualized in these liturgies represent what we really are beneath our cramped, tiny sense of selfhood imprisoned behind our skin and felt to be desperately separate from the rest of reality. The question of the existential status of such beings cannot be answered by appeal to any conventional category. Like everything else, including ourselves who are not different from these beings, ultimately they are beyond the "four extremes,"⁸ which is what is meant when the liturgy says that they dissolve "through non-conceptualization into the state of radiant emptiness."⁹ Thus, they do not exist in the same way that the deity of Christianity is said to exist, though the assumption that therefore they do not exist is also erroneous. I do not believe that there is a Western equivalent to this "status."

In this context, I am more interested in the praxis, in the intimate, passionate, seemingly dualistic language of address utilized in these visualizations. Why would such prayerful language be employed in such an utterly nontheistic context? These visualization practices and their attendant verbal liturgies are a "skillful method," something designed to propel the practitioner into recognition of reality as quickly as possible. Thus, such practices are in accord with the fundamental Buddhist assumption that our most basic problem and the root of all suffering is ignorance of what really is the case. We tend to take things, including ourselves, for granted and see them as mundane, meaningless, and not sacred. These liturgies and visualizations stir in us the confidence that such is not the case. They serve as a call, over and over, to awaken to the splendid sacredness of the world and ourselves. A traditional analogy may explain the process: A tiger cub has been raised as a lamb; it bleats and eats grass, not knowing that it is a tiger. One day, it tastes blood and recognizes that it is a tiger, not a sheep. The visualizations and the liturgies are the blood, but apparently a single taste is not enough to transform our identity from duality to nonduality. The skillful means is to taste over and over until we get the flavor of things as they are.

Though the dualistic language of address might seem to be "incorrect" or "not true to reality," the more important concern is whether or not it is effective. Because

“truth” is beyond words in any case, Buddhism is willing to use whatever works best to transform the practitioner. There is no question that several facets of our relative existence have great power to move us and to transform us. One is the fact that duality seems real to us, even though we know better, having many times done the analyses that convince us of the error of our conventional belief in duality. By themselves, these analyses do not seem to be able to fully correct our mistaken views. Another facet of our relative existence that is called into service in this type of “prayer” is the effectiveness of words, especially poetic, passionate, intimate words of address. Such language simply appeals to a different level of our being than rational, analytic language, and is much more effective in directing our powerful emotional energies toward awakening. Putting all these together—the seeming reality of duality; the power of symbolic, poetic, passionate and intimate language; and the effectiveness of emotions for transforming consciousness—results in the skillful means of “prayers” such as the one already quoted several times. The only justification and explanation of such practices is that they work. As Chagdud Tulku, Rinpoche, has explained, “Praying to the deity is not a matter of supplicating something outside ourselves. The point of using a dualistic method, visualizing the deity outside of us, is to overcome duality.”¹⁰ He goes on to explain further:

If the nature of the deity is emptiness, you might wonder why we pray at all. There seems to be a contradiction here. How can we say, on the one hand, that there isn’t a deity, only a reflection of our own intrinsic nature, and on the other, that we should pray to it? This makes sense only if we understand the inseparability of absolute and relative truth.

On the absolute level, our nature is buddha, we are the deity. But unaware of this, we’re bound by relative truth. In order to make the leap to the realization of our absolute nature, we have to walk on our relative feet, on a relative path. Because absolute truth is so elusive to our ordinary, linear mind, we rely on an increasingly subtle step-by-step process to work with the mind’s duality until we achieve recognition. Prayer is an essential part of that process.¹¹

Thus, even the case in which the theological differences between Buddhism and Christianity are striking and uncompromising, the forms are more similar than different. What about the experience of a Buddhist doing such a visualization liturgy and a Christian praying? Empirical resolutions of this question are probably impossible to obtain. I *know* when I do this kind of liturgy that I am not praying to an external savior, just as I would imagine most Christians *know* that someone “out there” hears their prayers. However, if that intellectual, verbal part of our multitasking psyche turns off, as sometimes happens, does it *feel* any different?

One might wonder what keeps the Buddhist practitioner from taking these prayers and practices literally and becoming an egomaniac, in which case their effect would be opposite to what is intended. There are two major safeguards. First, the play between form and emptiness is always stressed in these liturgies, so that it would be very difficult for anyone to imagine that the liturgy is about their enduring, solid,

permanent identification with a truly existing deity. That misidentification does not seem to occur. More important, these are esoteric practices, limited to those who have been properly prepared, both in terms of philosophical studies and previous meditation practices. These preparations are critical, for giving people access to spiritual practices that they are not prepared to understand and practice correctly does them no favors. Religious esotericism is criticized in many quarters, but in this case at least, there is no alternative. The psychological and spiritual energies being tapped into are too subtle and too powerful for it to be any other way.

NOTES

1. For an example of the “big I,” see the famous manual of Zen Buddhism, *Zen Mind: Beginner’s Mind*. Suzuki, Shunryu, *Zen Mind: Beginner’s Mind; Informal Talks on Zen Meditation Practice*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1974), pp. 65–71.

2. From an unpublished Buddhist liturgical text of the Tibetan Nyingma Vajrayana tradition. This quotation is only a single example of a type of religious utterance of which there are countless examples in Tibetan Buddhist liturgies, both esoteric and exoteric.

3. Ibid.

4. A form of this aspiration widely used by Shambhala Buddhist centers.

5. This aspiration is the final verse of a lineage supplication widely used by Tibetan Kagyu Buddhists.

6. One of the dedications of merit widely practiced by the students of Vidydhara, the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche.

7. See note 2.

8. Existence, nonexistence, both existence and nonexistence, and neither existence nor nonexistence.

9. See note 3.

10. Chagdud Tulku, Rinpoche, “Prayer,” *Tricycle*, vol. 9, no. 3 (spring 2000), p. 69.

11. Ibid.