

# *Via Negativa* in Mahāyāna Buddhism and Gnosticism

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## INTRODUCTION

In *The Gnostic Attitude* Geo Widengren quoted passages from Indian scriptures to buttress his argument that Gnostic religion has an Indo-Iranian background. However, the sources that he drew upon for his comparison of themes and symbols are primarily Hindu; few of his citations involved Buddhist texts.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, he failed to notice the similarities that exist between the Buddhist wisdom literature and the Gnostic tractates.

Edward Conze, a noted specialist in the study and translation of Buddhist wisdom literature (*Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*), discovered a number of themes held in common by Mahāyāna Buddhist and Gnostic texts. He identified eight major correspondences and an additional twenty-three possible correspondences. Among them he lists the decisive role that coarse food and sexual intercourse played in the fall of humanity, the redemptive power of knowledge (*gnosis/jñāna*), the fact that both Gnosticism and Buddhism postulate varying levels of spiritual attainment and aim their highest teachings at initiates, and that both systems differentiate between an active Creator God and a still Godhead with whom encounter is sought.<sup>2</sup> Conze suggested that these similarities might be accounted for by mutual borrowing; a joint, fairly uniform development over time in both Europe and Asia; or a parallel development, Gnosticism being considered as one of the basic varieties of religious experience that could occur at any given

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<sup>1</sup> Geo Widengren, *The Gnostic Attitude*, trans. Birger A. Pearson (Santa Barbara: University of California, 1973), p. 1 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Conze, "Buddhism and Gnosis," in *Further Buddhist Studies* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, Ltd., 1975), pp. 15-32.

time. He found these three hypotheses all equally unattractive and suggested a fourth possibility: a prehistoric *philosophia perennis*.<sup>3</sup> Conze's predilection for the *philosophia perennis* undoubtedly influenced his opinion that the traditions of Mahāyāna Buddhism and Gnosticism are "one in spirit" and that the differences between them are "of a fairly minor order."<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, it is surely possible, as Elaine Pagels suggests, that "what we call Eastern and Western religions, and tend to regard as separate streams, were not clearly differentiated 2,000 years ago."<sup>5</sup>

At the time Conze's claims were made public, nearly fifteen years ago, few of the Gnostic tractates discovered at Nag Hammadi had been edited or translated. The recent publication of editions and translations of these tractates facilitates the comparison of Buddhist and Gnostic themes. This paper is an initial attempt to follow up Pagels' call for a comparative study of the Nag Hammadi tractates and Indian sources,<sup>6</sup> by considering some of the similarities in theory and practice which are present in certain Nag Hammadi texts, in certain Buddhist wisdom scriptures, and in the works of two second to third century C.E. Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophers, Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva. In particular, this paper is concerned with the path of a spiritual elite—the Buddhist nobles (*ārya*) and the Gnostic elect (*perfecti*)—as it leads towards an encounter with ultimate reality through a *via negativa* that repudiates the activities of both the senses and the mind in favor of a contemplative withdrawal.

### THE FALL OF HUMANITY

Both Buddhists and Gnostics take for granted a state of perfection which is luminous, incorporeal, and asexual. Both employ myth to account for the present fallen state of humanity. According to an early Buddhist myth, as the creation of the world began, beings were self-luminous and incorporeal, but when earth formed on the surface of the waters, the bodies of those beings who ate that earth lost their luminosity and became corporeal. Sexual distinctions appeared soon afterward, and with them came lust and

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<sup>3</sup> Conze, pp. 30–31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. xxi.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

sexual intercourse.<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus in *Adversus haereses* 1.30 relates a similar Gnostic myth about the fall of humanity. Adam and Eve had bodies that were originally luminous and incorporeal, but their bodies became dark and material after the fall from heaven to earth. They sated themselves with earthly food, sexual intercourse followed, and Cain was conceived.<sup>8</sup>

While none of the Nag Hammadi tractates contain myths that correspond directly to the one that Irenaeus describes, the same negative appraisal of material form, of eating food, and of sexual intercourse occur in several of the selections in this collection. *The Book of Thomas the Contender* links eating food with the bestial transformation of the body and with the procreation of beasts through sexual intercourse.<sup>9</sup> *The Gospel of Philip* recounts how Adam ate from the tree that bore beasts, became a beast himself, and brought forth beasts.<sup>10</sup> "The body came from lust," *The Authoritative Teaching* says, "and lust came from material substance."<sup>11</sup> Implicit in these Buddhist and Gnostic accounts of humanity's fallen state is the theory that since sensual indulgence brought about the fall, abstention from the pleasures of food and sexual intercourse will enable the aspirant for enlightenment to regain the luminous state of perfection.

#### ASCENDING THE PATH

##### *The repudiation of sensual pleasures*

Buddhists condemn sensual indulgence as being inextricably bound up with suffering. The Buddha in his first discourse informs his disciples that the source of suffering is desire:

Monks, this is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering:

<sup>7</sup> *Aggañña-suttanta* in *Digha Nikāya*, vol. III, ed. J. E. Carpenter (London: Pali Text Society, 1910), p. 85 ff.

<sup>8</sup> This reference and subsequent ones are based upon the translation of *Adversus haereses* found in Robert M. Grant, ed. *Gnosticism* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> *The Book of Thomas the Contender* 139.1–11 in *The Nag Hammadi Library* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 189. Hereafter abbreviated as NHL.

<sup>10</sup> *The Gospel of Philip* 71.23–27 in NHL p. 143.

<sup>11</sup> *The Authoritative Teaching* 23.17–21 in NHL p. 279.

that thirst causing rebirth, accompanied by sensual desire, delighting in this and that, . . . This, monks, is the noble truth concerning the cessation of suffering: the complete passionless extinction of that very thirst, renunciation, abandonment, liberation, and aversion.<sup>12</sup>

Moral behavior constitutes one part of the path that leads towards the extinction of the pain caused by desire. Buddhist codes of moral behavior prescribe abstinence from wine and moderation in the use of food for both the laity and the religious. Moreover, as regards the attitude people should cultivate in respect to food, Nāgārjuna offers the following advice: “By understanding that food is like medicine, use it without desire or aversion.”<sup>13</sup>

The monastic disciplinary rules prohibit monks from engaging in sexual intercourse. Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva discourage even the laity from indulging in this type of sensual pleasure. They speak of women’s bodies as “impure” and “unclean.”<sup>14</sup> People who lust after sensual pleasures seem to Āryadeva akin to worms addicted to eating earth.<sup>15</sup> People who are enlightened do not crave sexual intercourse. “What kind of pleasure could there be,” he asks, “for someone who constantly turns the mind away [from desire]?”<sup>16</sup>

Gnostics, as well as Buddhists, perceive the pursuit of sensual pleasures as an impediment to enlightenment. The fragmentary remains of the tractate *Zostrianos* indicate that the repudiation of sensual pleasures is necessary before entering the path to enlightenment. *Zostrianos*, the text’s narrator, recounts his separation from “somatic darkness and the chaos in mind and from the femininity of desire in the darkness,”<sup>17</sup> which, given the correlation mentioned above between food and sexual intercourse and

<sup>12</sup> *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* in *Samyutta Nikāya*, vol. V, ed. L. Feer (London: Pali Text Society, 1898), 5.421–22; translation mine.

<sup>13</sup> *Suḥṛllekha* vs. 38 a-b, ed. A. Sonam (Varanasi: The Pleasure of Elegant Sayings Printing Press, 1971), p. 37; translation mine.

<sup>14</sup> See *Suḥṛllekha* verses 21 and 25 and *Caruḥṣataka* 3: 18 and 19 in sDe-dGe Tibetan Tripiṭaka bStan-'gyur dBu-ma Tsha (Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 1977), f. 4b; hereafter cited as CS.

<sup>15</sup> CS 3: 2, f. 4a.

<sup>16</sup> CS 3: 10cd, f. 4a, translation mine.

<sup>17</sup> *Zostrianos* 1.11–14 in NHL p. 369.

the body, darkness, and desire, probably alludes to the practice of abstention from food and sexual intercourse as preliminary to the discipline of meditation.

Evidence in the Gnostic tractates for the practice of fasting is slight, even in regard to abstention from animal flesh. Irenaeus in *Adversus haereses* 1.24 reports that many followers of Saturninus abstain from animal flesh.<sup>18</sup> The censure in *The Book of Thomas the Contender* of those “who eat of creatures similar to them” might be taken to indicate that at least some Gnostics refrained from eating animal flesh.<sup>19</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas*, however, seems to present an inconsistent position. At one point in the text, Jesus advises his disciples: “If you do not fast as regards the world, you will not find the Kingdom;”<sup>20</sup> and at another point in the same text he says:

If you fast, you will give rise to sin for yourselves. . . . When you go into any land and walk about in the districts, if they receive you, eat what they set before you.<sup>21</sup>

A possible resolution of this problem is to consider the reference to fasting in the first passage as a synecdoche for the entire practice of rejecting sensual pleasures. The second passage’s condemnation of fasting may be taken to suggest that Jesus’ disciples ought to accept impartially—without the passionate aversion that fasting implies and without the passionate desire that overindulgence implies—whatever food they receive, as do alms-gathering Buddhist monks.

Textual evidence in the Gnostic tractates for the practice of abstention from sexual intercourse is stronger than that for the practice of abstention from food, although this evidence is based upon the tractates’ censure of sexual intercourse rather than on any explicit prohibitions. *The Authoritative Teaching* condemns wine drinking because of its role in seduction. “Wine is the debaucher,” this tractate asserts, for under the influence of wine people leave knowledge behind and descend into bestiality.<sup>22</sup> *The Paraphrase of Shem* and *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* refer to the practice of

<sup>18</sup> *The Book of Thomas the Contender* 139.3 in NHL p. 189.

<sup>19</sup> Grant, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas* 38.18–19 in NHL p. 121.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.16–21.

<sup>22</sup> *The Authoritative Teaching* 24.16–23 in NHL p. 279.

sexual intercourse as “impure” and “unclean.”<sup>23</sup> The Gnostics repudiated the practice of sexual intercourse not only because lust defiles the body, but also, like the Buddhists, they rejected it because of its association with suffering. “As long as the soul keeps running about everywhere copulating with whomever she meets and defiling herself,” *The Exegesis on the Soul* insists, “she exists suffering, her just deserts.”<sup>24</sup> Both defilement and suffering ensue from passionate involvement with the world; and both characterize the inferior realm to which ignorant people are bound.

### *Repudiation of discursive thinking*

Ignorance in both Gnosticism and Buddhism is blamed for the continuation of the transmigratory cycle. According to Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva, the activities that bind human beings to repeated death and rebirth are the result of false conceptualizations (*vikalpa*) that superimpose the notion of duality upon what is ultimately non-dual. These false conceptualizations, linked as they are with proclivity of discursive thought to develop and expand its reach, come to an end only when this conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*) ceases.

Nāgārjuna and his followers use the dialectical method of argumentation and logic to cut through and expose the limitations of discursive thought and language that ensnare their opponents in a net of conflicting speculative theories. Nāgārjuna’s critique of other schools’ philosophical theories is intended to demonstrate the inability of language to express anything that is unequivocally valid, not to supplant one speculative view by another. In the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (vv. 57–63) he develops his method of argumentation in detail. He explains to the opponent that someone who claims names are existent is capable of being refuted, but because the Madhyamaka school does not assert that the name is existent, the opponent’s criticism misses its mark. Since things themselves are empty of any substantial nature of their own (*svabhāva-sūnya*), the names that designate them likewise are empty and being empty are non-existent. However, despite the fact that the language in which the Mādhyamikas fashion their critique of their opponents’ theories is as empty of substantive meaning as

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<sup>23</sup> *The Paraphrase of Shem* 22.1–10 in NHL p. 318 and *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* 93.20–21 in NHL p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> *The Exegesis on the Soul* 131.14–16 in NHL p. 183.

any of the opponents' arguments, nevertheless, that does not impair its usefulness. Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva assert that it is precisely their doctrine of emptiness that renders all their statements incapable of being refuted, for emptiness itself is not another position designed to disprove the speculative theories of others, but rather an antidote whose application cancels out all the ill effects of such theories. Nāgārjuna says:

The Victorious Ones have proclaimed emptiness is that which gets rid of (*nihsaraṇa*) all speculative theories; but they call incurable (*asādhyā*) those who hold emptiness as a speculative theory.<sup>25</sup>

The understanding of emptiness is the means of breaking the bondage of false conceptualizations. At this point emptiness becomes indistinguishable from Nirvāna (*sūnyatām eva nirvāṇam*).<sup>26</sup>

The Gnostic *Tripartite Tractate* condemns "empty speculation" in terms reminiscent of Nāgārjuna's:

Those who were wise among the Greeks and the barbarians have advanced to powers that have come into being by way of imagination and empty speculation. Those who have come from these (sages), in accord with the mutual conflict and rebellious manner active in them (the sages), also spoke in a likely, arrogant, and imaginary way concerning things which they thought of as wisdom. . . .<sup>27</sup>

This text speaks approvingly of those Hebrew prophets who "did not say anything from imagination," but instead "each one by the power which was at work in him, and while listening to the things which he saw and heard, spoke of them in faith."<sup>28</sup> The text extolls visionary experience as a means of receiving knowledge of God; faith in God and his messengers is a prerequisite to visionary experience.

Many of the Gnostic tractates draw attention to the important role of a spiritual guide, the messenger of the eternal Light or the word (logos) incarnate in the form of Jesus Christ, for example, whose directions are

<sup>25</sup> *Mūlamadhyamakakārikāḥ* 13: 8, ed. J. W. de Jong (Adyar: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1977), p. 18; translation mine. Hereafter cited as MK.

<sup>26</sup> CS 12: 23, Sanskrit fragments in *The Catuḥtataka of Āryadeva*, ed. Vidhusekhara Bhattacharya (Calcutta: Visvabharati Bookshop, 1931) p. 163.

<sup>27</sup> *The Tripartite Tractate* 109.25-35 in NHL p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 11.10-17 in NHL p. 85.

deemed necessary for locating the whereabouts of the path. "Do not cease walking in the way of Christ," *The Teachings of Silvanus* advises at one point.<sup>29</sup> Gradually those who travel the path come to understand that the way to enlightenment dwells within themselves. "Walk upon yourself as on a straight road," *The Teachings of Silvanus* urges at a later point in the text, "for if you walk on the road, it is impossible for you to go astray."<sup>30</sup> This road to self-enlightenment leads to the recovery of human beings' original luminous nature before the fall. "There is light within a man of light and he (or: it) lights up the whole world," *The Gospel of Thomas* proclaims.<sup>31</sup> This light, according to *The Dialogue of the Saviour*, is the lamp of the mind.<sup>32</sup> A Buddhist text, *The Perfection of Insight in Eight Thousand Lines (Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā)*, utilizes in a similar fashion the metaphor of light to describe the Bodhisattva:

How do they become the world's lights? Here the Bodhisattvas win full enlightenment and then take away all the darkness and gloom of the un-cognition from beings. . . .<sup>33</sup>

The light of knowledge clears away the darkness of ignorance that characterizes the fallen state of humanity bound to the lower realms. Insight rather than discursive thought is required.

#### *The contemplative withdrawal*

The realm of sensual desire is the lowest of the various levels of existence which both Buddhist and Gnostic cosmological systems postulate. The higher levels of existence, which are incorporeal and asexual, lack the unpleasantness and continual change of the lower realms; they are more stable and hence more highly valued. Release from bondage entails a withdrawal from the sensual realm into the realm of contemplation. "Wherever there is the ultimate teaching (*paramārtha-kathā*)," Āryadeva says, "a withdrawal from activity (*nivṛtti*) is taught."<sup>34</sup> This withdrawal

<sup>29</sup> *The Teachings of Silvanus* 103.12–15 in NHL p. 354.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 106.31–36 in NHL p. 356.

<sup>31</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas* 38.8–10 in NHL p. 121.

<sup>32</sup> *The Dialogue of the Savior* 125.18–19 in NHL p. 231.

<sup>33</sup> Translation by Edward Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary* (Bollinas, Ca.: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), p. 189.

<sup>34</sup> CS 8: 8 in Bhattacharya, p. 9.

initially is from the activities of the senses. In the practice of contemplation, the mind's attention is shifted away from the sensual realm through gradually diminishing the impact of the senses' external stimulation until a mental state of equanimity prevails. The Gnostic tractate *The Paraphrase of Shem* also advocates a withdrawal from the lower realm that directs the mind upwards towards "rest."<sup>35</sup>

The language which the Buddhist writers use in describing the practice of meditative trance states (*dhyāna*), as Robert Gimello points out, "suggests that practitioners ascend from a realm of experience governed by sensuality (*kāmadhātu*) to a realm of the apprehension of pure material form dissociated from sensuality (*rūpadhātu*), to an immaterial and purely noetic realm (*ārūpyadhātu*)." <sup>36</sup> Progress through these meditative trance states involves passing beyond increasingly more subtle states of consciousness. According to the *Great Perfection of Insight Treatise* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*), entrance into the first meditative trance state occurs once the meditator has become free of the disturbances of sensual desires through such ancillary meditative practices as the reflection on the impure nature of the human body (*aśubhasaṃjñā*).<sup>37</sup> The suppression of discursive thinking marks the transition from the first meditative trance state into the second. Next enthusiasm, characteristic of the two previous stages, is eliminated before entrance into the third. Finally even the sensation of happiness that accompanied all three earlier stages is felt to be disruptive and cast aside prior to the attainment of the fourth meditative trance state. All the activities of body, speech, and mind are reduced to a bare minimum in this fourth stage. Only motionless insight (*āniñjyaprajñā*) persists.<sup>38</sup>

Although the fragmentary nature of most of the tractates in the Nag Hammadi collection that concern the subject of meditation precludes any definitive determination of the exact number and nature of the stages involved in contemplative practice, they seem in general parallel to those

<sup>35</sup> *The Paraphrase of Shem* 43.30 in NHL p. 326.

<sup>36</sup> Robert M. Gimello, "Mysticism and Meditation," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Stephen B. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 186.

<sup>37</sup> See Étienne Lamotte, *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse*, vol. III (Louvain: University of Louvain, 1970), p. 1311 ff for references to this practice in Hinayāna and Mahāyāna texts. Hereafter cited as *Traité*.

<sup>38</sup> *Traité* II (Louvain: University of Louvain, 1949), pp. 1023–1032. Compare *Traité* III pp. 1233–1238.

mentioned in the Buddhist meditational texts. These Gnostic works also depict a gradual ascension from a realm of material form to an immaterial noetic realm. Gnostics visualize the soul as being comprised of different layers: material and intellectual. *Zostrianos*, the narrator of the text that bears his name, reports that he "strengthened the intellectual,"<sup>39</sup> for it is this higher portion of the soul that seeks the encounter with ultimate reality. He says that he was "not yet bound in the perceptible world."<sup>40</sup> This freedom from bondage enables him to leave his dark, material body behind and ascend in the company of the messenger of the knowledge of the eternal Light through the heavenly regions. *Zostrianos* passes beyond the pure form of the heavenly Aeons towards the noetic realm of the One. *Zostrianos* and other Gnostic tractates on the stages of meditation describe a progressive withdrawal of the activities of body, speech, and mind. The motion of the body is gradually stilled, that of speech silenced, and that of the mind both stilled and silenced.

### THE RETURN

*The Great Treatise on the Perfection of Insight* insists that love and compassion for human beings are not incompatible with the Bodhisattva's practice of meditation. The text makes the analogy between a person who uses medicine to cure an illness and the Bodhisattva's practice of meditative trance states as a means of purifying moral behavior and perfecting insight. The Bodhisattva knows that all things in the world are empty of any real nature of their own, but because he knows also that ordinary people lack this insight, out of love and compassion for them, he descends from the higher levels of contemplation to return to the sensual realm with the intention of converting all people to the truth of the Buddha's teaching.<sup>41</sup>

After the still and silent encounter with the One, the Gnostic practitioner once again returns to the perceptible realm. The text *Allogenes* ends with the injunction that the knowledge that has been received should be written down "for the sake of those who will be worthy after you."<sup>42</sup> The final fragments of *Zostrianos* also indicate that its narrator wrote three tablets

<sup>39</sup> *Zostrianos* 1.31–21 in NHL p. 369.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.23–24 in NHL p. 370.

<sup>41</sup> *Traité III* p. 1238.

<sup>42</sup> *Allogenes* 68.16–20 in NHL p. 452.

for "the living elect."<sup>43</sup> Two other tractates, *The Three Steles of Seth* and *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, also refer to instruction that has been written down so that it can be passed on to those who are worthy of receiving it.<sup>44</sup> The evidence from these texts suggests that the Gnostic meditator did not strive to remain in a blissful state of communication with the divine reality. He chose instead to return to the world of the "erring multitude," strengthened by the knowledge imparted through meditational practice, with the determination to make the errors of ordinary people known to them and to teach them the truth. It is important to note that the Gnostic practitioner, as well as the Bodhisattva, utilizes the insight gained through the contemplative experience to release others from the bondage of ignorance and not solely for the sake of effecting his own liberation.

The texts depict the Bodhisattva and the Gnostic saviour as guides and teachers, but also as physicians. A Bodhisattva is a skilled diagnostician who provides the proper medication and therapy based upon his skill in diagnosing the illnesses that afflict human beings. Āryadeva utilizes several times this analogy of illness and treatment in his portrayal of the Bodhisattva's career. Like a skillful physician who never lacks patients, the Bodhisattva skilled in the technique of liberation (*upāya*) very seldom lacks those who seek instruction in the Buddha's teaching. Patience and compassion also figure prominently in the career of a Bodhisattva. In the same way as a knowledgeable physician never becomes angry at patient who is possessed by a demon, even though the patient would attack him, the Bodhisattva must combat the affliction (*klesa*) and not the unfortunate individual who has the affliction.<sup>45</sup> The afflictions that torment human beings are the passions of lust, hatred, and confusion. *The Tripartite Tractate* is in agreement with the Buddhists in considering the passions to be a form of illness.<sup>46</sup> Jesus, according to the account in *The Gospel of Thomas*, encourages his disciples to go out among the people and "heal the sick among them."<sup>47</sup> Moreover, in *The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*, when John asks about the skill necessary to heal, Jesus replies:

<sup>43</sup> *Zostrianos* 130.1–5 in NHL p. 393.

<sup>44</sup> *The Three Steles of Seth* 118.10–20 in NHL p. 363 and *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* 61.26–31 in NHL p. 296.

<sup>45</sup> CS 5 verses 9 and 13, f. 6b.

<sup>46</sup> *The Tripartite Tractate* 95.4 in NHL p. 77.

<sup>47</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas* 35.24 in NHL p. 119.

. . . the physicians of this world heal what belongs to the world. The physicians of souls, however, heal the heart. Heal the bodies first, therefore, so that through the real powers of healing for their bodies, without the medicine of the world, they may believe in you, that you have the power to heal the illnesses of the heart also.<sup>48</sup>

This passage suggests that the Gnostic saviour must first acquire skill in the ways of attracting disciples (*samgrahavastu*), as is true in the case of the novice Bodhisattva. Concern with worldly things, the illnesses of the body, for example, prepares the way for healing the illnesses of the heart, the mental suffering that afflicts human beings.

### THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNICATION

The authors of certain Buddhist and Gnostic works shared the difficult task of communicating through language knowledge said to have been revealed in silence. Nāgārjuna, in one of his four paeans of praise (*catuḥstava*), attributes to the Buddha the unique ability to teach the truth without the necessity of using speech:

Lord, not one single syllable  
Do you utter;  
Yet the rainfall of the Teaching refreshes  
All people who are to be taught.<sup>49</sup>

The Gnostic tractates on the subject of the encounter with divine reality, *Zostrianos*, *Allogenes*, *Marsanes*, *The Three Steles of Seth*, and *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, all speak about this encounter as one in which silence reigned. Both Buddhist and Gnostic writers confront this dilemma through the use of paradoxical speech and apophatic language. When *The Perfection of Insight in Seven Hundred Lines* (*Śaptaśātikā-prajñāpāramitā*) says that “the unthinkable cognition is the Buddha cognition,”<sup>50</sup> and *Allogenes* refers to the “One whom if you should know

<sup>48</sup> *The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles* 11.16–26 in NHL p. 270.

<sup>49</sup> *Nirupamastava* verse 7 in the Tibetan text edited by L. de La Vallée Poussin, “Les Quatre Odes de Nagarjuna,” in *Le Muséeon*, New Series XIV (1913), p. 2; translation mine.

<sup>50</sup> Translation by Edward Conze in *The Short Prajñāpāramitā Texts* (London: Luzac & Company, Ltd., 1973), p. 95.

him be ignorant of him,"<sup>51</sup> I suggest that the intention of these two paradoxical passages is not so much designed to express the utter transcendence of the knowledge of ultimate reality as it is to draw attention to the poverty of ordinary language when it is confronted with the task of conveying the richness of the experience of ultimate reality. Moreover, when Gnostic and Buddhist works characterize ultimate reality in negative terms, for example, as "indescribable," or "inconceivable," this apophatic language serves to underscore their belief that ultimate reality is neither expressed nor apprehended through the ordinary operations of speech and mind; but rather, as both Buddhist and Gnostic tractates point out repeatedly, the usual functions of speech and mind become suspended at the instant in which contact with ultimate reality is made. The organs of speech and the mind become silent and immobile; they no longer perpetuate the subject-object duality that distinguishes language and discursive thought.

Does this mean that the knowledge of ultimate reality is so personal, so unique to each individual's experience of it that it cannot be conveyed in any way to someone else? The texts suggest otherwise. Buddhist and Gnostic works indicate that the knowledge of ultimate reality is revealed by stages. The varying levels of instruction correspond to the varying levels of spiritual attainment among those who are to be instructed. Training in moral behavior and meditational practices makes people worthy of receiving this knowledge. It is the responsibility of those who communicate knowledge to gauge the capacity for comprehension that exists among those who desire to listen. When confronted with a student whose intellectual capacity is limited, a prudent teacher restricts his instruction in the Buddha's word to discussions of the virtues of generosity and moral behavior. In much the same manner as Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva emphasize that a teacher must determine whether or not a particular student is the "proper vessel" for the Buddha's profound teaching,<sup>52</sup> *The Gospel of Philip* urges the disciple of God to "look at the condition of the soul of each one and speak with him."<sup>53</sup> Dependent upon the disciple of God's judgement of the intellectual capacity of an individual's soul,

<sup>51</sup> *Allogenes* 59.31-32 in NHL p. 449.

<sup>52</sup> See *Ratnāvali* 1: 74 edited by Giuseppe Tucci, "The Ratnāvali of Nāgārjuna," in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1934, p. 324 and CS 5: 10, f. 6b.

<sup>53</sup> *The Gospel of Philip* 81.6-7 in NHL p. 148.

either elementary instruction or the complete instruction will be given. *The Teachings of Silvanus* offers similar advice:

And a foolish man does not guard against speaking [a] mystery.  
A wise man, [however], does not blurt out every word, but is discriminating towards those who hear.<sup>54</sup>

In each case the instruction should be tailored to fit the needs and capabilities of the individual. The teacher is advised to exercise discretion in passing on the most profound instruction.

The method of instruction and the language used to communicate the instruction, if they are to be effective in releasing human beings from the impediments—both moral and intellectual (*kleśāvaraṇa*, *jñeyāvaraṇa*)—that obstruct their understanding of ultimate reality, must take into account worldly convention in the beginning stages of instruction. “Just as it is impossible to make a barbarian understand through a language that is different [from his own],” Āryadeva points out, “similarly it is impossible to make an ordinary person understand [ultimate reality] without reference to worldly things.”<sup>55</sup> While the use of conventional expressions, the names and images of things in the world, is recommended as an aid in introducing the Buddha’s word to ordinary people, it is not intended to hypostatize the things to which these conventional expressions refer, for Mahāyāna Buddhists hold that worldly things do not exist in reality. Language is of practical value only as a means by which the path leading to the realization of ultimate reality can be indicated.

The necessity for communicating the Buddha’s word in terms that could be understood by ordinary people led some Buddhists to distinguish between two levels of truth: conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*). An excerpt from *The Scripture on the Introduction to the Two Truths* (*Satyadvayāvātārasūtra*) clarifies this distinction:

Devaputra, if the ultimate truth in reality were to have the nature of the corporeal, verbal, and mental realm, then it would not be counted as ultimate truth. It would be just conventional truth. However, Devaputra, the ultimate truth surpasses all worldly convention, is without qualities, unborn, unceasing,

<sup>54</sup> *The Teachings of Silvanus* 97.11–16 in NHL p. 352.

<sup>55</sup> CS 8: 19, f. 9b; translation mine.

free from what is nameable and the name, and free from what is knowable and the knowledge of it.<sup>56</sup>

The conventional truth is expressed through ordinary language and thus reflects the way ordinary things in the corporeal realm appear to ordinary people, while the ultimate truth reveals things as they really are (*yathābhūtam*) and thus is beyond the confines of discursive thought and ordinary language. Ultimate truth is accessible to the “nobles” through their own personal realization (*pratyātmavedya*) of the emptiness of worldly things. However, as Candrakīrti indicates in *The Introduction to the Madhyamaka (Madhyamakāvatāra)*, there are not two separate truths, but only one ultimate truth, namely, “Nirvāṇa which is non-deceptive.”<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, as Nāgārjuna says:

Without relying on worldly convention (*vyavahāra*), the ultimate cannot be taught; without understanding the ultimate, Nirvāṇa is not attained.<sup>58</sup>

This belief that the truth is one but appears in manifold form for the sake of communicating knowledge about it to ordinary people is common to some of the Gnostic tractates also. *The Gospel of Philip* asserts:

But truth brought names into existence in the world because it is not possible to teach it without names. Truth is one single thing and it is also many things for our sakes who learn this one thing in love through many things.<sup>59</sup>

This passage concurs with the Buddhist position that ultimate reality cannot be taught initially without reference to worldly things. Furthermore, *The Gospel of Philip* shares the Buddhist concern over the use of ordinary language to communicate ultimate truth. “Names given to worldly things,” *The Gospel of Philip* warns, “are very deceptive.”<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, the intention of both the Buddha’s and God’s disciples is to convert people to the truth and the truth cannot be introduced without

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, edited by L. de La Vallée Poussin (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag 1970), pp. 110–11; translation mine.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119; translation mine.

<sup>58</sup> MK 24: 10p. 35; translation mine.

<sup>59</sup> *The Gospel of Philip* 54.14–18 in NHL p. 133.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.24–5 in NHL p. 132.

resorting to names and images. "Truth," *The Gospel of Philip* reminds us, "did not come into the world naked, but came in types and images."<sup>61</sup> In *The Paraphrase of Shem*, the revealer figure who appears to Shem in the course of a visionary experience tells him that speech must be adapted to the situation at hand:

I spoke according to the language of each. This is my language which I spoke to you. And it will be taken from you. You will speak with the voice of the world upon the earth.<sup>62</sup>

This passage suggests that the language in which Derdekeas revealed the knowledge of ultimate reality to Shem is of a different nature than the ordinary language which human beings use to communicate on earth; yet it suggests also that a translation from the revelatory language into ordinary language, "the voice of the world," is both possible and desirable.

The Buddhist and Gnostic texts cited above stress that language has a dual function: it can point to worldly things that are deceptive and it can point to ultimate reality which is non-deceptive. By pointing out the deceptive nature of worldly things, by educating people to the folly of attachment to worldly things, the bondage of ignorance that had condemned them to the interminable cycle of death and rebirth is broken. Buddhist and Gnostic texts equate knowledge with freedom, but as *The Gospel of Philip* says, "In fact, he who is really free through knowledge is a slave because of love for those who have not yet been able to attain to the freedom of knowledge."<sup>63</sup> The Bodhisattva likewise is bound by his vow to save all sentient beings from the plight in which their ignorance has placed them. The Buddha's and God's disciples use the medium of speech as a soteriological device to point others in the direction of ultimate reality.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Buddhist's and Gnostic's assumption that *in illud tempore* beings were originally luminous, asexual, and incorporeal, and that this state of perfection can be recaptured, is the motivating force behind the quest for knowledge of ultimate reality. The association, developed in their myths

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.10–11 in NHL p. 140.

<sup>62</sup> *The Paraphrase of Shem* 41.11–16 in NHL p. 325.

<sup>63</sup> *The Gospel of Philip* 77.26–29 in NHL p. 146.

of humanity's fall from perfection, of coarse food and sexual intercourse with the appearance of a dark, material body and the resultant loss of self-luminosity led both Buddhist and Gnostic aspirants for enlightenment to adopt ascetic practices. There is some textual evidence to support the position that the intake of food was restricted and that many refrained from sexual intercourse. Ample evidence suggests the practice of meditation in which the activities of the senses and the ordinary discursive activity of the mind are repudiated in favor of a contemplative withdrawal from the multiplicity of external stimulation towards a still and silent encounter with the one ultimate reality. The disciplined mental faculty, dissociated from the body, and hence darkness, desire, and material form, is able to regain through the practice of ascending meditative trance states the luminous, asexual, and incorporeal state of perfection.

The texts also state that enlightened beings have an obligation to become guides and teachers of those in the sensual realm, and to become healers of the passions that afflict ignorant beings and bind them to the cycle of death and rebirth, a task which requires both compassion and skill in the techniques of liberation. While the texts' occasional use of paradoxical language and apophasis draws attention to language's inability to describe fully the experience of ultimate reality, the practical value of language is stressed repeatedly as a means for pointing out the deceptive nature of worldly things and pointing to the non-deceptive experience of ultimate reality. Guides indicate the direction of the path to those who are deemed worthy, the Buddhist "nobles" and the Gnostic "elect," and this spiritual elite discovers for itself, in Pagels' words, that:

One's own experience, then, essential for spiritual development, provides the basis for receiving understanding about God in negative form. Gnosis involves recognizing, finally, the limits of human knowledge.<sup>64</sup>

In conclusion, the use of the *via negativa*, the way of describing by negation, the talk of emptiness and silence in Mahāyāna Buddhism and Gnosticism, acknowledges the limits of human knowledge; and behind this acknowledgement lies the belief in an ultimate reality that can be known through disciplining the mind, but whose characterization cannot be confined, as *The Teachings of Silvanus* tells us, "to mental images."<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Pagels, p. 139.

<sup>65</sup> *The Teachings of Silvanus* 102.11 in NHL p. 354.

A special way of knowing, the perfection of insight (*prajñāpāramitā*) in the Buddhist texts and gnosis in the Gnostic tractates, is required in order to gain access to ultimate reality. It is this special knowledge that annuls ignorance, or in the words of *The Testimony of Truth*:

As with the ignorance of a person, when he comes to have knowledge, his ignorance vanishes of itself, as the darkness vanishes when light appears.<sup>66</sup>

The texts' negative appraisal of the sensual world and ordinary people's attachment to this realm of bondage, and also of the usual discursive operations of the mind, provides the impetus for a spiritual elite's quest for knowledge, whose power replaces bondage with freedom.

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<sup>66</sup> *The Testimony of Truth* 24.32–25.3 in NHL p. 41.