Introduction

If there is any overarching theme to Philip and Carol Zaleski's book Prayer: a History, it is that there is a wide diversity of practices that count as prayer. Their study does an excellent job of considering forms of prayer beyond those known and practiced in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Prayer is far more diverse and complex than my childhood nightly ritual of closing my eyes and asking God for forgiveness. Prayer changes dramatically in form and content depending upon its context in time and space.

Two of those alternative contexts that are the most familiar to me are the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. While one could consider a vast array of religious, theological and prayer traditions in addressing the topic of "interfaith prayer" such an expansive project would be beyond the parameters of the typical Prairie Group paper, and would likely be riddled with so many generalizations as to be of little value. Thus, in the service of richness and depth of exploring this year's topic, while at the same time providing some breadth of comparison between traditions, I have chosen to confine my paper to the two non-Western religions with which I have the most experience and knowledge.

That said, even within the scope of prayer in Hinduism and Buddhism there is a wide array of practices to choose from. What is prayer and what is not-prayer in the context of Buddhism, for example? This is not an easy question to answer, and yet one needs to draw some lines, however arbitrary, so that one's paper does not become so thick and dense as to qualify it as a paper weight rather than a study of interfaith prayer. In service to this, I have tried to restrict myself to practices that that tradition would label as "prayer" as opposed to

"meditation." Generally speaking, we can understand prayer as any practice that attempts to connect the adherent to the Holy, whatever that is assumed to be, usually through spoken or silently repeated words; though it may not be exclusively verbal as we shall see. Some verbal liturgical practices, such as reciting or chanting portions of a sacred text or the text in its entirety, are sometimes considered prayer and sometimes considered simply part of a ritual's liturgy. Zen Buddhists frequently chant the Heart Sutra as part of the liturgy in most of their rituals.[1] Yet few Zen practitioners would consider this "prayer" strictly speaking, even though it may be one of the few spoken elements in the ritual. Practices that live in this grey area I have not included as one of the genres of prayer.

Described below are four genres of prayer that are characteristic of both Buddhism and Hinduism. I do not claim that these genres are unique or exclusive to these two traditions, but merely that they are commonly practiced within both. Indeed, some of these genres of prayer are very closely associated with either or both Buddhism or Hinduism. Nor is this list exhaustive; other examples might be lifted up within Buddhism and/or Hinduism. That said, these four genres carry wide currency within those traditions.

Theological Assumptions

One could define prayer as a form of communication with a transcendent consciousness that is aware of our world and in some ways intervenes in our world. This definition of prayer has within it a very specific theological assumption; namely that God exists as a transcendent

[1] Chanting and Temple Rules. Primary Point Press pp.8-11.

being interested in the affairs of humanity. Indeed, it can be said that all forms of prayer have a theological assumption of some sort implicit within them. This is no less true of the genres of prayer presented here. There is a connection, however tenuous at times, between one's theological interpretation of who or what God or the Holy is, and the activities and spiritual practices one engages in to get closer to that sacred reality.

In this sense, Buddhism and Hinduism are no different. The forms of prayer in those traditions are related to their interpretations of who or what they understand the Holy to be. Before launching into differences in how Buddhists and Hindus pray, it is worth noting some of the differences in how they understand the Holy as well. I will hastily concede that these are broad generalizations and exceptions can be found. Nor is this an exhaustive list. With that said, the following theological assumptions can be discerned in both or either Buddhism or Hinduism.

1. ***The God/Goddess is a consciousness that is transcendent from our mundane world, yet cares very deeply for us as individuals***. In many ways this is a theological assumption very close to many Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. The practice of prayer is an attempt to bridge the gulf between humanity and the divine. By being in communication with God or Goddess, their presence is felt in the moment, particularly when one is experiencing suffering or hardship.
2. ***The Holy is a sacred dimension of humanity rather than an independent being***. This is an assumption prevalent among forms of Mahayana Buddhism and other traditions heavily influenced by Taoism. Shunryu Suzuki, one of the most influential teachers who introduced Zen Buddhism to America, called this the "Big Mind" as

opposed to the "Small Mind."[2] "God" then is as aspect of oneself rather than an entity outside of human experience. God or Goddess may be acknowledged as a transcendent being, but is understood as a "skillful means" to direct people toward a deeper understanding of themeselves.

3. ***God(s) can walk among us and be present before our eyes.*** This theological assumption is very prevalent in Hinduism and in heavily Indian-influenced forms of Buddhism. The "real presence" of the Gods and Goddesses can become manifest in our present reality through rituals and images. God can be the ultimate creator and destroyer of the universe, and yet still be present in a humble clay figure created for only a few minutes. Hindus would see no contradiction at all between the two creation stories in the first and second chapters of Genesis. The God that created heaven and earth can very easily become the God that walks with us in the garden.
4. ***God, or better yet, the Holy, has a utilitarian function in everyday life.*** This theological assumption is prevalent in many forms of Chinese and Japanese religion. For example, some religions concern themselves far more with matters facing political and familial leaders than they do about the afterlife. Religion serves the very real and pragmatic purpose of protecting one from misfortune and leading one toward the "right" path of ethical and/or ritual purity. In some cases we might call this "magic."

[2] Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind by Shunryu Suzuki p.33.

As we shall see, depending upon which of these four theological assumptions one has will greatly influence how one "prays." Indeed, each of the following genres of prayer hold these theological assumptions to various extents; some not at all, others in combination. The four genres of prayer in Buddhism and Hinduism that I will examine are: ***mantras, dharanis, darshan,*** and ***gathas.***

Mantras

One form of prayer that is closely associated with East Asian religion are *mantras*. Mantras are a word or short phrase that is frequently repeated. These words or phrases are usually spoken aloud, although they can be recited silently to oneself as part of a meditation practice. Some famous examples of *mantras* include "*Nam Myoho Renge Kyo*" which means "Hail to the Lotus Sutra" a popular *mantra* among the Nichiren School of Buddhism. "*Om Mani Padme Hum*" which was once famously mistranslated at "The Jewel is in the Lotus," is a devotional *mantra* for Avalokitesvara.

Mantras are popular throughout Hinduism as well as Buddhism. There are probably as many mantras as there are Hindu Gods; which is to say thousands. However the most well-known is the mantra "*Om*." Most of the time "*Om*" is simply understood as a sacred syllable and is not translated. Much like how one might end a prayer with "Amen" without fully knowing what "Amen" means, so too do mantras typically begin with "*Om*" and it is left at that. In the mantra "*Om Mani Padme Hum*," "*Om*" and "*Hum*" are sacred syllables that have no

inherent meaning. *Mani*, jewel, and *Padme*, lotus, are two objects associated with, and symbolic of, the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.

However, Patanjali, in the Yoga Sutras, provides a detailed analysis of "*Om*" or more precisely "*Aum*."[3] He says that the first syllable, "A" of "*Aum*" represents our waking consciousness. The second syllable, "U," symbolizes our minds when we are dreaming. The "M" in "*Aum*" is our consciousness when we are in a deep but dreamless sleep or state of unconsciousness. Finally, there is the silence that comes after all three syllables have been uttered. This represents complete and utter union with Brahman, the soul of the universe. So by repeating the sacred mantra "*Om*" or "*Aum*" we are reminding ourselves of how our individual selves merge back into the sacred oneness of the universe.

Some examples of *mantras* from the Buddhist tradition I have already mentioned. One of the most popular *mantras* is "*Namo Amida Butsu*" or "Hail to the Buddha Amida" (*Amitabha* or *Amitayus* in Sanskrit). This mantra lies at the heart of the Pure Land School of Buddhism. Within the Pure Land School, the *mantra* "*Namo Amida Butsu*," is referred to as the "*nembutsu*."

Pure Land Buddhism arose about the same time as Zen and Nichiren. During the Kamakura period in Japan (1192 CE—1333 CE) a reform movement began within Buddhism.[4] Instead of continuing to be an ivory tower religion of the literate elite, there was a desire to "democratize" Buddhism; to bring it out to the masses. Thus different Buddhist schools arose based on which practice seemed to be the most palatable to the general populous. Zen

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[3] The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali by Edwin Bryant pp.105-121.
[4] Foundations of Japanese Buddhism Vol. 2 by Alicia and Daigan Matsunaga pp.6-7.

focused on meditation. Pure Land Buddhism focused on the frequent recitation of the *nembutsu*, "*Namo Amida Butsu*", "Hail to the Buddha Amida."[5] Pure Land Buddhists commented that our world is broken and degenerate. It is not possible, they felt, to achieve enlightenment in such a "dirty" world as ours. However, by praying to Amida Buddha, who lives in the Western Paradise, he would come at the hour of one's death to take the believer to Paradise (*Sukavati* – the "Land of Bliss"). There it would be possible to practice Buddhism in a more conducive environment, and achieve enlightenment.[6] The price of admission to paradise is simply the recitation of the *nembutsu*. This theological assumption behind reciting "*Namo Amida Butsu*" can sometimes closely resemble that of Christians and Jews who pray to a transcendent deity that cares for them as individuals.

The writer and philosopher Taitetsu Unno makes a distinction between two kinds of mantra practice in Pure Land Buddhism.[7] The first kind is what Unno calls "recitative." Recitative mantra practice involves frequent and constant recitation of the *nembutsu mantra*. Masters of the Pure Land School, such as Honen, are said to be able to recite "*Namo Amida Butsu*" about sixty thousand times a day; approximately one mantra a second for every waking moment! Monks would keep track of their mantras using beads to count off and keep track of the number of mantras they would recite. Sometimes they would make up pictures of Amida Buddha on pieces of paper that would have small circles around the Buddha. The devout monk would fill in these circles, much like one might fill in a circle on an SAT test, for every ten

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[5] Pure Land Buddhism is the oldest form of Buddhism in America. It arrived in California with immigrant Chinese workers in the 1850s and 1860s. For a more complete history see How the Swans Came to the Lake by Rick Fields.
[6] Mahayana Buddhism by Paul Williams pp.252-255.
[7] River of Fire, River of Water by Taitetsu Unno pp.29-34.

thousand recitations of "*Namo Amida Butsu*." When the monk died, stacks of these pictures would be burned as an offering to Amida.

Later in the Kamakura period, the monk Shinran reinterpreted the Pure Land School.[8] Much like John Wesley in the Anglican church, Shinran had no intention to start a breakaway denomination. Rather his followers decided his teachings represented a distinct change from the past. The "True" Pure Land School (*Jodo Shinshu*), did not emphasize the quantity of recitations done per day per practitioner. Instead Shinran taught that one recitation of "*Namo Amida Butsu*" was enough.

"When the thought of saying the *nembutsu* emerges decisively from within, having entrusted ourselves to the inconceivable power of Amida's vow[9] which saves us, enabling us to be born in the Pure Land, in that very moment we receive the ultimate benefit of being grasped never to be abandoned."[10] Shrinran is essentially arguing for salvation by faith rather than by good works; in this case the good works being a vast number of recitations of the name of Amida. Instead, Shinran emphasizes the second of Unno's two kinds of mantra practice: the "contemplative."

By repeating the words "*Namo Amida Butsu*" again and again, one begins to let go of their meaning and enter into a state of meditation. Eventually one focuses so intently on the words being spoken that everything else fades from consciousness. In the end there is no

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[8] Matsunaga pp.85-126.

[9] Prior to becoming a Buddha, the Bodhisattva Dharmakara vowed to take any being who was suffering and called out his future name of Amida Buddha, to the Pure Land. This vow is referred to as the "Primal vow of Amida" and is the foundation for Pure Land soteriology. Specifically it is vow 43 in the "Large Pure Land (*Sukahavati-vyuha*) Sutra."

[10] Tannisho by Shinran trans. Taitetsu Unno p.5.

experience of a person saying a series of words. There are only the words themselves reverberating as if on their own. Adherents of the True Pure Land School say that the words "*Namo Amida Butsu*" have a sort of cosmic consciousness to them, and by repeating them over and over the practitioner is tuning themselves to the same pitch as the universe itself; both praising Amida Buddha.[11] Like Zen meditation, the "goal" if you will, is to have an experience where the perception of a separate self fades away by reciting the *nembutsu*.

As we see in the writings of Thomas Merton, contemplative practice is not an abrogation of the self, but rather an expansion of our understanding of who we are. The contemplative aspect of *mantra* practice, be it "*Aum*" or the *nembutsu*, are both examples of what Merton was describing. By chanting a *mantra* we let go of the ego that must weigh and analyze everything, and embrace the "purity of heart [that] is the enlightened awareness of the new man [sic], as opposed to the complex and perhaps rather disreputable fantasies of the 'old man' [sic]."[12]

Dharanis

Dharanis can be found in both Hindu and Buddhist rituals and spiritual practices. It is not always easy to tell the difference between *mantras* and *dharanis*. The term "*dharani*" has received various English translations as "sacred formula" or even "magical spells." Compared to *mantras*, *dharanis* are usually longer and are not repeated as often. Typically there are some portions of *dharanis* that are untranslatable. That is to say that some parts are gibberish in

[11] Shin Buddhism by Taitetsu Unno p.26.
[12] Contemplative Prayer by Thomas Merton p.68.

every known language, and are meant to be so. It is common to find some kind of phonetic similarity or repetition within most *dharanis*.

Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, a Nichiren inspired lay-organization with many interfaith ties to Unitarian Universalism, gives the following definition of *dharanis*: "Dharanis are talismantic formulas. There are four kinds of spells 1. To heal disease 2. To put an end to the consequences of sin 3. To protect the sutras (Buddhist sacred texts) 4. For wisdom."[13] Chapter 26 of the Lotus Sutra, the primary text for Rissho Kosei-kai and influential to most Mahayana Buddhists, lays out a series of *dharanis* to be recited so as to protect the Lotus Sutra itself. The following is a portion of the *dharanis* named in Chapter 26:[14] "Iti me, iti me, iti me, iti me, iti me; ni me, ni me, ni me, ni me, ni me; ruhe, ruhe, ruhe, ruhe, ruhe; stuhe, stuhe, stuhe, stuhe, stuhe; svaha."[15] When I was studying at the Rissho Kosei-kai seminary in Tokyo, I had the privilege of going on a pilgrimage to various sacred sites in northern Japan. Among the people I went with was a Rissho Kosei-kai member from California who would often act as my translator. One day she told me that she and a group of other students who were going on the pilgrimage had spent every evening of the week prior to our departure chanting the *dharanis* from Chapter 26. I asked why this was being done. She said, "So that we will be turbo-charged for our pilgrimage!" That, I suppose, is the California definition of *dharanis*!

Dharanis are usually believed to have some sort of magical effect on the world in which we live. Often they are used when someone is in trouble or facing suffering, much like the use

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[13] Buddhism for Today by Nikkyo Niwano p.391.
[14] There are about five or six English translations of the Lotus Sutra. None of them provide an English translation to the *dharanis* in Chapter 26. Some other *dharanis* can be translated, at least in part.
[15] The Threefold Lotus Sutra trans. Kato, Tamura, and Miyasaka p.331.

of a "Hail Mary" among some Catholic believers. Other times they are seen as a tool for protection and assistance in attaining enlightenment. Kukai, the founder of esoteric Buddhism in Japan (*Shingon*), claimed that *dharanis* were in fact esoteric teachings the Buddha gave his followers. Kukai taught that *dharanis* do have meaning, but only to the Buddha's most advanced students, whose minds are open to the secret truths, would be able to understand them.[16] While this is not a common interpretation of *dharanis*, Kukai emphasized the use of them as a tool for spiritual advancement rather than as simply magical spells.

Dharanis share many of the characteristics of "magical speech" described by Zaleski and Zaleski in chapter 2 of Prayer: a History. They write, "The answer is that hissing, popping, clicking, groaning, and other seemingly inarticulate noises are characteristic forms of magical speech."[17] Speaking of the *voces magicae* they continue, "Making bizarre noises disengages the intellect, eliciting an altered state of awareness, more potent than, though perhaps not different in kind from, the hypnotic effect of ordinary chanting or singing."[18]

The latter statement summarizes well my experience of *dharanis* as a genre of prayer. Indeed, I have had more than one teacher explain *dharanis* with much the same rationale: if your brain doesn't know what it is chanting or singing, then you are not attached to the meaning. This makes room for a religious experience that is something other than purely cerebral.

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[16] Kukai trans. Yoshito Hakeda p.274.
[17] Prayer: a History by Philip and Carol Zaleski p.35.
[18] Ibid p.36.

One of the first practices I learned when I began practicing Buddhism was The Great Compassion Dharani. This was a chant, about a page long,[19] which was sung three times during the temple's usual liturgy. The Great Compassion Dharani is directed toward the Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion, Avalokitesvara, who is believed to be its author.[20] The Dharani itself has a fascinating history in which it had been used as a protective spell in China to ward off suffering and even death, but evolved into becoming a verse of repentance.[21]

One of the few cosmological claims that are nearly universally agreed upon in Buddhism is that the universe is without beginning and without an end. Buddhists believe that the universe has always existed and will always exist eternally, but is by no means static or unchanging.[22] Combine this claim with the belief in reincarnation, and a number of ethical and theological consequences arise. It means, for example, that all beings have been my mother in a previous lifetime.[23] Unfortunately it also means that in previous lifetimes, I have committed an untold number of misdeeds and negative actions that will produce similar negative consequences for me in this lifetime – the law of karma. Having committed these evil actions in a previous lifetime, there seems little recourse for me in mitigating the negative results in my current life. This is hardly fair, since an infinite number of lifetimes would have created something close to an infinite amount of bad karma for myself, over which I seemingly have no control.

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[19] See the Appendix at the end of this paper for the Korean version. Chant regularly if your karma is bad!
[20] Bodhisattva of Compassion by John Blofeld p.116.
[21] Kuan-yin: the Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara by Chun-fang Yu p. 275.
[22] Buddhist Cosmology by Akira Sadakata p.95.
[23] The Tantric Distinction by Jeffery Hopkins p.59.

Enter Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Infinite Compassion, who provides a way out of this unjust cosmic conundrum. Avalokitesvara gives us The Great Compassion Dharani to chant. This Dharani serves two purposes: 1. It wipes clean the karmic slate from my previous lifetimes thanks to the vow that Avalokitesvara made to do this for anyone who recites his *dharani.*[24] 2. It points the practitioner to the path of compassion in the present and in the future. The rationale here is that with my karmic debt paid off, I am now free to live a new life unconstrained from the past. Hopefully, if I have recited the Dharani with an open heart and mind, then I would practice acts of compassion now and in the future out of gratitude to the Bodhisattva of Compassion. This fits with the second definition of *dharanis* that Nikkyo Niwano outlined above.

The "magic" contained in The Great Compassion Dharani will not prevent one from going bald or getting audited by the IRS. Instead it gives an assurance of grace to the practitioner who may be worried about the negative karma they incurred in a previous life. By doing so, it also encourages the practitioner to practice compassion in their present day actions. In this context, one can understand Kukai's insistence that *dharanis* have a spiritual purpose and not merely a magical one. Magic is by no means a bad thing, and would be very attractive to people with a theological assumption that religion has a practical purpose in everyday life. In China in particular, religion's purpose was often protective or to ensure a desired outcome. Buddhism affirms this desire for a pragmatic use of religion while putting a spiritually oriented twist on it. The Great Compassion Dharani lives up to its name in two ways;

[24] Blofeld p.116.

it bestows compassion onto the one who recites it by wiping their karmic slate clean, and at the same time points the practitioner toward living a more compassionate life in the here and now.

Darshan

Mantras and *dharanis* can be found within both Buddhism and Hinduism. There is however, one form of prayer that is perhaps unique to the Hindu tradition: *darshan.*[25]

One of the most striking differences between Hinduism and Western Christianity, particularly Protestant Christianity, is the role of images in communicating to the practitioner something about the Holy. Hinduism communicates its religious symbols and message primarily through a visual medium, whereas Protestants rely upon the spoken "word" of God; either through hearing the Gospels or the preaching of sermons. Hindus primarily communicate about the divine through paintings, statues and even dramas that represent the Gods and Goddesses. For example, the Gods in India do not necessarily have multiple arms or heads in a literal sense. Rather these images have multiple arms in order to hold different symbolic objects in each arm, or to hold a specific symbolic pose (*mudra*).

One of the best known images in Hinduism is of the "Dancing Shiva." In this image, usually a statue, Shiva holds a drum in one hand and fire in the other. The drum is meant to represent the male and female coming together, and therefore is symbolic of creation. The opposite hand holds fire, the symbol of destruction. One of Shiva's feet stamps out a demon of

[25] The Tibetan form of Buddhism is strongly influenced by Hinduism; particularly Shaivism. A form of *darshan* can be found in Tibetan rituals of consecrating statues and paintings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Probably the most celebrated form of Tibetan *darshan* in the West is the "sand *mandala*" in which a bodhisattva or deity, such as Kalachakra, has an image made of colored sand, a ritual is performed, and then the *mandala* is destroyed.

ignorance, that is attached to the circle of suffering and rebirth (*samsara*). The other foot is raised off of the circle of suffering and rebirth, symbolizing the release from suffering (*moksha*) that Shiva brings; hence the final arm points toward *moksha*. All of these symbolic meanings are communicated simultaneously by viewing and reflecting on the image of Shiva.[26]

In Hinduism, the visual is more important than the auditory in communicating about divine matters, and so too in matters of prayer. Darshan means "seeing the divine" or perhaps better, "Seeing and being seen by the divine." Darshan is a form of visual prayer in which the real presence of the God or Goddess is understood to be present in their image, and therefore sees the practitioner.[27] Seeing and being seen by the God or Godddess is the central act and purpose of Hindu devotional worship and pilgrimage.

Clearly there is a theological assumption being made here about the nature of the divine, and its relationship to the human realm. As is usually the case in Hindu theology, this theological assumption can be found in the Bhagavad Gita ("The Song of the Blessed Lord"). The central premise of the Bhagavad Gita is a dialogue between the God Krishna (a form of Vishnu) and the prince Arjuna on the eve of a great battle with his cousins. In the face of having to kill members of his own family, Arjuna is dispirited not only with war but on an existential level with his duty as a prince and warrior.[28] His chariot driver happens to be the God Krishna who gives Arjuna counsel, initially on the ethics of doing one's duty when it is hard, but also includes a whole array of philosophical and theological matters. The centerpiece of these

[26] Hindu Myths ed. Wendy Doninger O'Flaherty pp.173-174.
[27] Darshan; Seeing the Divine Image in India by Diana Eck p.7.
[28] Upon witnessing the first successful test of a nuclear bomb, Robert Oppenheimer said he thought of Krishna's words from the Bhagavad Gita "Now I become death, the destroyer of worlds!" A good example of an ethical dilemma in the face of doing one's duty.

reflections are the descriptions of the various ways (*yogas*) one can connect with God. The one of relevance to our present purpose is "*bhakti* yoga"[29] or the way and practice of devotion to God or the Goddess.

Bhakti, or devotional Hinduism, is a very popular form of worship and spiritual practice for both Hindu priests and lay people. The primary practice of *bhakti* yoga is a ritual known as "*puja*." Puja is a ritual done either at the home or in temples. Sacred holidays in Hinduism usually center around a *puja* ritual. Puja is the invitation of the divine into the image.[30] The images may be either two-dimensional paintings or three-dimensional sculptures. Some images are made for only a few moments out of clay, while others are enshrined in temples and displayed during festivals. When the divine presence is incarnated into the image, then the adherents make prayers, offer food and gifts, and gather for *darshan* – to gaze into the eyes of the image and to have the image gaze at them in return. Certainly there are spoken words, and songs sung to the divine while it is manifest in the image, but the core of the worship is *darshan* – being seen by God.

The historian of religion Diana Eck observes, "The image is the real embodiment of the deity. It is not just a device for the focusing of human vision, but is charged with the presence of the god. This stance toward images emerged primarily from the devotional *bhakti* movement, which cherished the personal Lord, 'with qualities' and which saw the image as one of the many ways in which the Lord becomes accessible to men and women, evoking their

[29] The others are *jnana* yoga (mystical knowledge) and *karma* yoga (action or good works).
[30] Eck p.47.

affections."[31] Bhakti comes from the Sanskrit verb "to share." The idea being that the relational love is shared between both the God and the adherent.

When God occupies your image, be it a statue or a painting, you offer him or her something to eat or drink! You talk to them and extend hospitality. It is the least one can do for getting a glimpse (*darshan*) of the God or Goddess. Eck notes, "In observing Hindu worship, in the home or in the temple, many Western students are baffled by the sense in which it appears to be an elaborate form of 'playing house' with God. The image is wakened in the morning, honored with incense and song, dressed, and fed. Throughout the day, other such rites appropriate to the time of day are performed, until, finally, the deity is put to bed in the evening."[32]

One cannot help but be reminded of T.M. Luhrmann's study of Evangelical prayer in When God Talks Back. Similar to *bhakti* practices of "playing house with god," evangelical adherents make "dates" with God; invite him to dinner and talk to him as if the Master of Creation were sitting in their dining room over a plate of spaghetti.[33] It appears that a similar kind of playful imagination lies at the heart of the Hindus' *bhakti* devotional practice. The difference of course is in the medium through which one's relationship to God or Goddess is communicated and experienced. For the evangelical Protestant, it is verbal. A conversation occurs either out loud or in one's mind. For the Hindu the relationship is primarily visual – one understands their connection to the divine to be *darshan*; seeing and being seen by God.

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[31] Ibid p.45.
[32] Ibid pp.46-47.
[33] When God Talks Back by T.M. Luhrmann chapter 3.

Gathas

Of the four genres of prayer considered here, *gathas* probably most closely resemble prayers in the Western tradition. Gathas are words spoken at certain occasions in order to remind the practitioner of various teachings and religious ideals. For examples there are *gathas*, words one recites, prior to eating. These function very much like "grace" said before meals. Perhaps the most prolific author of *gathas* in modern times would be Thich Nhat Hanh, who provides the following definition: "Gathas (or mindfulness verses) help us to dwell in the present moment and to be deeply aware of the action we are doing so that we can perform it with understanding and love."[34]

For example, Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing, recites the following *gathas* that are either spoken or silently to oneself prior to meals: "Beings all over the Earth are struggling to live. May we practice so that all may have enough to eat. This plate of food, so fragrant and appetizing, also contains much suffering. This food is the gift of the whole universe—the Earth, the sky, and much hard work. May we eat in mindfulness so as to be worthy to receive it. May we transform our unskillful states of mind and learn to eat with moderation. May we take only foods that nourish and prevent illness. We accept this food to realize the path of understanding and love."[35]

This *gatha* is full of basic Buddhist teachings. The words are intended to remind the practitioner of these teachings at precisely the moment when those teachings are the most relevant. So Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings on the interdependence of everything to all other

[34] Plum Village Chanting and Recitation Book by Thich Nhat Hanh p.23.
[35] Ibid p.21.

things, is emphasized. Prior to taking that bite of rice, Thich Nhat Hanh would urge the practitioner to remember who grew the rice, the sun and rain and toil that went into producing the rice and transporting it to us. Perhaps people worked in unsafe or unjust conditions, for example. The act of eating takes on a dimension of social justice through spiritual reflection on the teachings.

One of the most notable features of *gathas* as a genre of prayer is how they are phrased. Gathas are not directed at anything or anyone other than the practitioner themselves. Most practitioners would probably consider *gathas* a reminder of the practice directed at themselves – to awaken the "Big Mind" that Shunryu Suzuki mentioned.[36] Thus the theological assumption here is that there is a sacred aspect inherent in each person, what Buddhists would call "Buddha-nature" or the potential to become a Buddha, to which one is addressing such a reminder. The hope is that this inherent potential within oneself will be awakened and brought into actuality.

Thich Nhat Hanh is perhaps the most explicit when it comes to a theological reflection on *gathas* as prayer. He writes:

> "You and the Buddha are not two separate realities. You are in the Buddha and Buddha is in you. These seeds of understanding may also be in the Catholic tradition and in all other religions, but Buddhism expresses this in a very clear, uncomplicated way. The one who bows and the one who receives the bow, both are empty. Neither of us has a separate self. So…when we pray in Buddhism, we are praying both to ourselves and to what is outside of ourselves; there is no distinction.
>
> If, in truth, we are practicing, then we can see that we also have the same substance of love, mindfulness, and understanding as all the great beings. God

[36] Suzuki p.33.

> and we are of the same substance. Between God and us there is no discrimination, no separation."[37]

I will leave aside Thich Nhat Hanh's suggestion that Catholicism and other traditions teach the same principle he is discussing here. Nevertheless, the point he is trying to make is that when the practitioner prays to God, they are also praying to some aspect of themselves. When one sits in meditation then they are the Buddha. Hence *gathas* need not be directed to a being other than one's self since such a distinction would be contrary to their theological assumption. Gathas as a genre of prayer are meant to awaken that part of us that is God/Buddha. By emphasizing our interdependence to others in the world, we move beyond our small egos and are invited to respond with compassion in the world.

Conclusion

The theologian David Tracy noted that there is an inherent difficulty in comparing two different cultures or religious traditions.[38] It may be tempting to proclaim that "Love as *Agape*" as it is described by Jesus in the New Testament is the same as "*Karuna* as Compassion" as described by the Buddha. But are they truly identical, he asks? They arise out of radically different contexts, and carry their own unique set of connotations to their respective audiences. The best we can do, says Tracy, is to draw analogies between these two ideas that arise out of different traditions. Buddhist "compassion" is similar-and-yet-different than Christian "love."

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[37] The Energy of Prayer by Thich Nhat Hanh p.31.
[38] The Analogical Imagination by David Tracy pp.405-445.

In exploring these four genres of prayer in Buddhism and Hinduism, my hope is that we can appreciate the diversity of prayer practice that exists. However this appreciation is not a mere sense of diversity for diversity's sake. By studying these genres of prayer we can see something of ourselves in practices that may originate in far off lands. As David Tracy would urge us, we can draw analogies between what "they" call prayer and what "we" call prayer. While there may be things that are similar, analogies also make room for differences. Even if our reaction to one of these forms of prayer is repulsion or rejection, a comparative study such as this one can still teaches us something of our own orientation to prayer.

On the title page of this paper, Tz'u-min recounts a version of what it must have been like to hear Dharmakara make his vow to save all beings once he became the Buddha Amida. If I can employ one final analogy, this would be like a Christian trying to imagine what Jesus might have said to the crowd gathered around the foot of the cross. At that pivotal moment in Pure Land Buddhism, in many ways the *axis mundi* for the whole religion, the Buddha makes a comment about the power of prayer. In prayer we set aside our personal egos for a moment and are receptive to something bigger than ourselves. The theological language one employs in those moments of prayer may be secondary to the very act of doing it at all; we speak to and about our larger Self. Rather than bits of rubble, we make room in our hearts to be transformed into nuggets of gold.[39]

[39] My thanks to my friend Rev. Martin Woulfe for his helpful editorial suggestions.

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Appendix – The Great Compassion Dharani in Korean

shin-myo jang-gu dae-da-ra-ni na-mo-ra da-na da-ra ya-ya na-mak ar-ya ba-ro-gi-je sae-ba-ra-ya mo-ji sa-da-ba-ya ma-ha sa-da-ba-ya ma-ha ga-ro-ni-ga-ya

om sal-ba-ba-ye su da-ra-na ga-ra-ya da-sa-myong na-mak-ka-ri-da-ba i-mam ar-ya ba-ro-gi-je sae-ba-ra da-ba i-ra gan-ta na-mak ha-ri-na-ya ma-bal-ta i-sa-mi sal-bal-ta sa-da-nam su-ban a-ye-yom sal-ba bo-da-nam ba-ba-mar-a mi- su-da-gam da-nya-ta

om a-ro-gye a-ro-ga ma-ji-ro-ga ji-ga-ran-je hye-hye-ha-rye ma-ha mo-ji sa-da-ba sa-ma-ra sa-ma-ra ha-ri-na-ya gu-ro-gu-ro gal-ma sa-da-ya sa-da-ya

do-ro-do-ro mi-yon-je ma-ha mi-yon-je da-ra da-ra da-rin na-rye sae-ba-ra ja-ra-ja-ra ma-ra-mi-ma-ra a-ma-ra mol-che-ye hye-hye ro-gye sae-ba-ra ra-a mi-sa-mi na-sa-ya na-bye sa-mi sa-mi na-sa-ya

mo-ha ja-ra mi-sa-mi na-sa-ya ho-ro-ho-ro ma-ra-ho-ro ha-rye ba na-ma-na-ba sa-ra sa-ra shi-ri shi-ri so-ro so-ro mot-cha mot-cha mo-da-ya mo-da-ya mae-da-ri-ya ni-ra-gan-ta ga-ma-sa nal-sa-nam ba-ra-ha-ra-na-ya

ma-nak-sa-ba-ha shit-ta-ya sa-ba-ha ma-ha-shit-ta-ya sa-ba-ha shit-ta-yu-ye sae-ba-ra-ya sa-ba-ha ni-ra-gan-ta-ya sa-ba-ha ba-ra-ha mok-ka shing-ha mok-ka-ya sa-ba-ha

ba-na-ma ha-ta-ya sa-ba-ha ja-ga-ra yok-ta-ya sa-ba-ha sang-ka som-na-nye mo-da-na-ya sa-ba-ha ma-ha-ra gu-ta da-ra-ya sa-ba-ha ba-ma-sa gan-ta i-sa-shi che da ga-rin-na i-na-ya sa-ba-ha

mya-ga-ra jal-ma ni-ba sa-na-ya sa-ba-ha na-mo-ra da-na-da-ra ya-ya na-mak ar-ya ba-ro gi-je sae-ba-ra-ya sa-ba-ha