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WAY OF ENLIGHTENMENT, WAY OF SALVATION

The Pilgrimages of Sudhana and Ramon Llull

The story of Sudhana's pilgrimage to the truth, although one of the most important in all the Buddhist canon, is a difficult one to assimilate spiritually outside the precincts of Buddhist belief. Unlike the story of Prince Siddhartha's journey to awakening, which has proved inspiring to people of all faiths, Sudhana's journey to the truth does not seem to be structured by the sorts of mythical pattern that allow it entrance into spiritualities other than the explicitly Buddhist. Despite the literary devices needed to advance the story of a voyage of faith to supreme wisdom, there is far more to learn from the account about the otherness of Buddhism than about sentiments and aspirations common to all religious pilgrims. It appears to be crafted so deliberately as a didactic text for believers that the uncertain wanderings of the mind and heart that belong to the human pursuit of truth is all but edged out of the picture by the certitudes of faith. Indeed, at first glance it does not even seem to be a document of *fidens quaerens intellectum*, but only of scholastic instruction to one whose faith never wavers in the least.

The temple of Borobudur in Central Java, reputed to be the largest Buddhist monument in the world, tells the story of Sudhana's pilgrimage in stone engravings dating back to the ninth or tenth century. Walking through the five kilometers of images depicting the ascent through ever higher stages of enlightenment seems to put one in touch with something timeless in the soul—in a way that the text of the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra*, which it purports to illustrate, cannot.¹ Like much great religious art, the carvings have a way of leaping over doctrinal particularity and in this sense speaking directly to those of all faiths. But it does so at the cost of minimizing the complex doctrinal content of the written scripture.

There is nothing particularly alarming about this. No religion is without its exclusivity, particularly when it comes to doctrinal theory. There is no reason

¹ For details of the history and textual foundations of the temple, see N. J. Krom, *Barabudur: Archaeological Description* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1927), 2 volumes. The direct relation to the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra* is spelled out in vol. 2, pp. 1–115.

why all sacred texts should be transparent or even immediately accessible to all persons, however sincere their intentions. Nor is it to be wondered at that a potentially universal archetype like that of the pilgrimage to truth is particularized for pedagogical purposes to such an extent that the questions of the seeker are fashioned to fit predetermined answers. It would be presumptuous to fault the story of Sudhana's pilgrimage for failing to be guided by the motif of the detached, disinterested seeker of truth that we find for example, in legends of the Buddha like Aśvagoṣa's *Buddhacarita*. They are simply different genres.

I am not suggesting that there is nothing for Christian spirituality to learn from the story of Sudhana or the symbols that mark the stages of his pilgrimage. I mean only that the ordinary tools of doctrinal comparison are of little use. A different approach is needed, something like an experiment in religious imagination. Rather than simply follow in the footsteps of Sudhana as a co-pilgrim, waiting for some sign of contact with the Christian path, I have tried to look beneath the surface of the story for the basic motif that inspires it. Seeing through the flesh and blood of the text that place the story squarely in the realm of specifically Buddhist practice, I believe it is possible to x-ray the model of the *homo religiosus* that lies within it. Then, in a kind of anatomical exchange, I will attempt to wrap that skeleton in the flesh and blood of an exemplary pilgrim from the history of Christian spirituality: the thirteenth-century mystical theologian, Ramon Llull.

The Structure of the Sudhana Story

Trimming away the specifically Buddhist doctrine that is being taught in the story of Sudhana in order to get at the underlying structure is a task whose proper execution lies well beyond my means. Not only the complicated history of the composition of the text, but also its archaic prose woven thick with Buddhist terms makes for such slow reading that it is difficult for the non-specialist to detect the motifs that dominate the whole loom, let alone to tell when the basic structure has been set aside for a detour into some secondary question. Still, I believe it is possible, even on a reading as crude as my own, to single out the key elements.

THE STARTING POINT

I begin with the simple question that sets Sudhana off on his pilgrimage: namely how to practice the teachings of the Buddha. After listening to Mañjuśrī, the embodiment of the perfection of the Buddha's wisdom, Sudhana tells the bodhisattva that he has set his heart on a clear *bodhi* mind in order to benefit all living things. Praising the virtues of Mañjuśrī, he asks to be shown the way (1:41–46):

O sublime one crowned with wisdom, you have already ascended to the throne of the Dharma by your wisdom-eye. You who have bound your forehead with the silk turban of the kind of knowledge, show me that royal city of the Dharma.

Mañjuśrī looks at him “like an elephant” and recognizes that he has indeed set his heart on supreme awakening:

As one who seeks the perfection of the bodhisattva path, I think that you have to inquire well into bodhisattva practice. This is the starting point for everything, Sudhana.... You must therefore never grow lax in serving faithfully the knowledge of the good. (1:46, 1178)²

Sudhana asks for more detailed instructions and is told by Mañjuśrī:

Throughout the ten corners of the world you will see face to face the infinite buddhas of no circumference and no center.... You must practice the bodhisattva path and fulfill the vows. And behold, legions of living beings will listen to your vows and be filled with joy. (1:46–47, 1179)

He then instructs Sudhana to visit a monk named Meghaśrī who lives in a mountain in Rāmavaranta, and to ask him how a bodhisattva should practice. With tears of gratitude in his eyes Sudhana departs on his journey.

The aim of Sudhana’s quest is clearly not theory but *practice*. It is not a practice that ignores doctrine, but a practice grounded in deep *insight* into the teachings. His quest is for what the Huayan scholar Kawata Kumatarō calls a “metaethics”:

It is not a metaphysics or a metalogic or a theology. The Europeans do not have this expression of a metaethics. This is because they do not have, or at least do not sufficiently have, what is meant by the term.³

We need not be detained by the misjudgment of European philosophy, where the metaethical tradition is in fact well established, to agree with the point that we are stepping into the borderlands between doctrine and virtue, where theory and

² All translations were made in consultation with the English version of Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), which differs considerably from the more reliable two-volume Japanese translation supervised by 梶山雄一『さとりの遍歴』上下 (中央公論社, 1994). The Japanese version is based on the original Sanskrit edition edited by P. K. Vaidya, *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, No. 5 (Darbhanga, 1960), and is fitted out with proper apparatus. But inasmuch as the Cleary translation is the only existing English version, I am including a second page reference to this work.

³ 川田熊太郎, 「佛陀華嚴・華嚴經の考察」, 川田熊太郎・中村元編『華嚴思想』, 法蔵館 1960, pp. 72–73.

practice shade indistinguishably into each other. Sudhana is not concerned with the idea of enlightenment but only with what its consequences might be.⁴ It is in this light, as Kawata shows, that the “catechesis” of the text needs to be read.

In a similar vein D. T. Suzuki suggests that the whole of the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra* may be read as the story of the seeker’s unfolding and expanding consciousness. It is not aimed at wisdom (the pursuit of the śrāvaka) but at the practice of wisdom for the benefit of others (the pursuit of the bodhisattva).⁵

THE ENDING POINT

The story of Sudhana’s pilgrimage ends, as he had hoped, in the Vairocana Tower, the abode of the Buddha Maitreya who waits in Tuṣita heaven for a future rebirth to lead all beings to enlightenment. He asks Maitreya to show him the Tower, and at a snap of the fingers it opens as wide as the sky itself to reveal thousands of towers, all interconnected. One of the towers rises majestically above the rest. There Sudhana meets the bodhisattva Samantabhadra out of whose enlightened practice the entire cosmos is born, and recognizes his identity with Samantabhadra, the embodiment of giving oneself for the salvation of others.

The text’s description of the Tower is based on everything Sudhana had learned during his pilgrimage. It is a place of no-place, a place where all places coexist in an Eternal Now. It is not another world, but this world as it appears to one who has seen through everything that differentiates and separates things and times from one another. It is the retreat to which all of us have access if we would but see “with an insight free of obstruction” (2:328, 1457).

The reason Sudhana is allowed to see this, the sutra tells us, is that his all-inclusive “power of observation does not permit a single thing to slip by unattended” (2:400, 1496). Sudhana hears another snap of the fingers and emerges from the trance to find himself alone again before Maitreya. He begins to question:

Sudhana: “Where has all that magnificence gone?”

Maitreya: “Where it came from.”

⁴ “So once Sudhana had awakened the thought of enlightenment... he asked no more about the thought of enlightenment.” Li Tongxuan, *Entry into the Realm of Reality: The Guide*, trans. by Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala, 1989), p. 22. This translation is included in Cleary’s full version of *The Flower Ornament Scripture* as an appendix.

⁵ *Essays in Zen Buddhism: Third Series* (London: Rider and Company, 1973), pp. 83, 94. I have made liberal use of this long essay as a guide to reading the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra*.

Sudhana: “And where did it come from?”

Maitreya: “It comes from the appearance of the exalted power of the bodhisattva. There it rests, going nowhere, coming nowhere, without accumulation, not beyond change yet neither in any fixed state or place or locality.” (2:404, 1498–9)

In a word, the Tower is the cosmos, the world of the Dharma (*dharmadhātu*) where all things coexist without obstructing each other. It is a world of absolute emptiness. Knowledge of that world arises from *jñāna*, discriminating consciousness, but full insight into it takes place in emptiness where even the discrimination between attaining enlightenment and not attaining it is erased. In this sense, the end is the same as the beginning, since it was the renunciation of the desire to be enlightened that set Sudhana off on his journey in the first place. It appears and disappears at a snap of the fingers—in an emptiness richer than the fullness of knowledge, but only to those who have the eyes to see.

THE WAY

On the way to his final destination Sudhana meets 52 teachers (for a total of 54 if we count Maitreya and Samantabhadra⁶). The teachers include bodhisattvas, lay persons (men and women), and goddesses.

It is worth noting that the inclusion of women among Sudhana’s teachers is not the magnanimous reaction against the ever-increasing androcentrism of Buddhist doctrine that it might at first seem. The text makes it clear that the women have transcended their sex, something it does not claim for any of the men that appear. For example, the ravishing beauty and renowned harlot Vasumitra, the twenty-fifth figure whom Sudhana encounters, tells him that she has achieved the bodhisattva liberation of final dispassionateness, so that those who gaze at her, step onto her couch, hold her hand, and even kiss her, come to recognize in her form the compassion of the universe (1:336–7, 1272). Or again, in his earlier meeting with Achala, whose beauty was said to be unequalled in the whole world, no one could look on her with lust (1:288, 1252).⁷

Be that as it may, the persons Sudhana meets on his journey seem to be grouped didactically. The first ten teach Sudhana that the entry into the ordinary world does not impede awakening but is its fulfillment, that compassion is the comple-

⁶ The text actually contains 53 encounters, reckoning that near the end of his journey Sudhana meets two persons in a single encounter, namely the boy Shrisambhava and the girl Sumanāmukha.

⁷ See Li Tongxuan, *The Guide*, pp. 55–56, 48.

tion of insight. The second ten encounters focus on perfecting the art of self-help and helping others. The third ten stress the need for discipline in order to act naturally and in accord with one's true nature, neither sinking into the mire of the ever-changing world nor leaving it behind for a higher realm. The fourth ten encounters, all with "night goddesses," introduce the cosmic side of compassion. Several of these goddesses speak of their former lives on earth, but it is in the figure of Sarvajagadrakshapranidhanaviryaprabha that the veil of impermanence is lifted from natural world to disclose a mirror-image of true reality:

Her body was covered with a net of jewels reflecting the truth of the cosmos. Her body showed reflections of the sun and moon and other heavenly bodies and constellations.... Her body appeared to be present everywhere to bring all living beings to completion. (2:122, 1365)

The fifth group of 10 persons Sudhana meets teach him to decipher the truth in the actual world. It includes the mystical reading of written letters as well as the conventional and mystical arts and sciences. His final three encounters are with the future Buddha Maitreya, Mañjuśrī, and last of all, Samantabhadra.

The pattern that emerges here is preordained and periodically forecast along the way. The characters Sudhana meets are not ordinary beings but archetypes of unchanging principles. Even the direction of the pilgrimage, southwards, is not determined by any place to which the pilgrim must go but is symbolic of the pursuit of clarity of thought.⁸ There is no going to and coming home in any ordinary sense of the terms. Progress has nothing to do with the spiritual advance of the pilgrim Sudhana or with any questions he asks. Indeed he is made to appear as passive throughout, which heightens the sense of his acceptance of things as they are—arriving at the "nowhere" that is hidden in every place and every moment of time. When one has achieved the insight of the "threefold eye,"⁹ the clouds are dispersed and there is no longer any need to look at them or through them. One sees and acts naturally under the clear void of the sky. Everything is just as it is.

The middle point of the journey is the twenty-seventh encounter with Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of mercy (often, though not here, depicted in a female

⁸ Li Tongxuan, *The Guide*, pp. 23.

⁹ The idea of the three eyes that yield knowledge of objective principles, knowledge of how we know, and knowledge of the difference between right and wrong, gives the name to the locus of Sudhana's eleventh encounter: Trinayāna. See Li Tongxuan, *The Guide*, p. 38.

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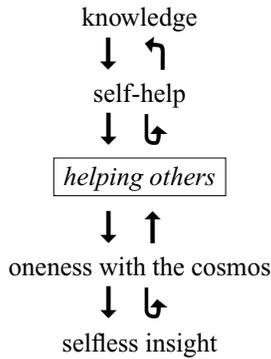


Figure 1. The structure of Sudhana's pilgrimage

form). There is nothing in the text to draw attention to the fact, but the placement is hardly accidental. Since the purpose of the pilgrimage is moral praxis, it is fitting that compassionate action for others should hold the central place. It also helps to see the sense in which the spiritual progress rotates endlessly about that single center (see Figure 1). Each stage embraces the one before it so that, for instance, in helping others one is helping oneself and acting out of knowledge. It is also reversible: just as knowledge leads to compassion for others, so does compassion return to generate new knowledge. Although there is some sense of progress in the pilgrimage, such that the early bodhisattvas are seen to represent a more imperfect state than the later, nothing is lost along the way. It is an advance that embraces what went before it and at the same time flows naturally from it. Even the final awakening to selflessness is not an end but propels one back to a heightened awareness of reality and compassion for others.

As noted at the outset, the pattern itself is static and predetermined in the sense that it cannot be altered by the pilgrim who experiences it. At the same time, it is dynamic in that its repetition impels the pilgrim to practice what he has been preached.

VISION OF THE COSMOS

The intricate vision of the cosmos that culminates in the arrival at the Vairocana Tower led the Huayan school to a certain excessively speculative analysis of the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra* that D. T. Suzuki criticizes for “pushing its spiritual value behind the screen of intelligibility.”¹⁰ I leave it to others more conversant in the

¹⁰ *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, p. 150. My comments here are a synopsis of Suzuki's resume of the interpretation of Fazsang (642–712).

varieties of Huayan philosophy to sort out what is excessive from what is not, in order to single out the distinctive view of the cosmos (*dharmadhātu*) that Sudhana is shown at the end of his pilgrimage.

In a word, the cosmos is seen as a One in which each of the many items that make it up are identifiable with every other item. Each individual has its identity as an individual through the interaction of every other. Its identity is not due to any intrinsic nature of its own but as a unique, once-and-for-all constellation of the many in one particular form. Conversely, since that item is also part of the constellation of every other item, its identity includes collaboration in the identity of every other thing. In this sense the One is composed of an interplay of the many that is both dynamic and static—dynamic, in that each individual cooperates in the coming to be and passing away of every other; static, in that the many are permanently locked into the totality of the One.

At the same time, the identity of the individual entails an identity with the One. As a point of intersection of the whole of the cosmos, the individual is both sustained in existence by the rest of the cosmos and reflects that greater totality. Suzuki uses the familiar Huayan image of the mirror to describe it:

When an image is reflected in the mirror, there is a state of identity between mirror and image, for outside the mirror there will be no reflection and without the reflection the mirror is non-existent. A mirror is distinguishable only when there are some images to bring forth its existence, and the same can be affirmed of the images that come to reflect themselves on the mirror.¹¹

The idea itself is familiar to the Western philosophical tradition, beginning with Pythagoras' mathematical theory of monads in the sixth century BCE. Perhaps the clearest approximation comes with Leibniz in the early eighteenth century:

Now this interconnection, relationship, or this adaptation of all things to each particular one, and of each one to all the rest, brings it about that every simple substance has relations which express all the others and that it is consequently a perpetual living mirror of the universe.¹²

As simple as this view of the cosmos is, it brings inestimable complication to any attempt to locate the “essence” or “reality” of individual things in the world. This is exactly what is conveyed to the reader in the description of the Tower with its rich and overwrought metaphors. As Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty has

¹¹ *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, p. 153.

¹² *Monadology* (1716), 53.

shown, in the Indian imagination metaphor and philosophy are bound to one another not as convenient images to illustrate deeper truths, but as mutually dependent ingredients in a single insight.¹³ Without that insight, we end up skimming through the nearly insufferable accumulation of images in search of the “kernel” of truth. The Sudhana story forces us to recover this unity of vision and intellection in moral praxis, not in the precise elaboration of rational principles. The only justification of the convoluted cosmic vision the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra* allows for is as an impetus to let go of private identity in the service of others who are, in the greater scheme of things, identical with who I really am.

The Story of Ramon Llull

Unlike the story of Sudhana, the story of Ramon Llull (1232-1316) and his search for enlightened action is based on a dictated autobiography, *Contemporary Life*,¹⁴ whose historical details are largely acknowledged as accurate. As perhaps the first in European history to have composed philosophical novels, one might have expected metaphor and literary motifs to have been dominant in his autobiography, but this is in fact not the case. Others of Llull’s works of poetry and novelettes are rich in such devices, but he sets this genre aside in his autobiography in favor of straightforward reminiscence. While there is an archetypal quality to the story that lifts it out of the annals of history and speaks directly to the seeker of religious truth, it is a quality that in no sense is artificially imposed on the text. Rather it points in each instance to the myth of his own life, a fresh look at which is presented by Amador Vega in his *Ramon Llull and the Secret of Life*.¹⁵ The “secret of life,” as Vega carefully unravels it, is not unlike a working out of the moral consequences of an enlightenment experience, and thus bears comparison with the mythical pilgrimage of Sudhana.

Instead of a direct comparison of the two stories, however, I propose to use the key elements singled out above from the Sudhana story as a lens through which

¹³ *Dreams, Illusions, and Other Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 128.

¹⁴ The standard English translation can be found in Anthony Bonner, *Doctor Illuminatus: A Ramon Llull Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 11–40, and is reproduced, minus the critical annotations, in Amador Vega, *Ramon Llull and the Secret of Life* (see note 15), pp. 236–58.

¹⁵ Amador Vega, *Ramon Llull and the Secret of Life*, trans. by J. W. Heisig (New York: Herder, 2003). First published in Spanish in 2002 by Siruela of Madrid. Here I am reconfirming Vega’s reading of Llull’s life, though by a different route.

to take a second look at Llull's account of his own life story. This is not to assume that Buddhist enlightenment and Christian mystical experience are in any sense fundamentally identical. That may be, but it is not something we may assume carelessly or even deduce as probable from a single comparison.¹⁶ My aim is more modest. It simply pursues the question: *If the central motif of Sudhana's pilgrimage are applied to the story of Llull's spiritual pilgrimage, is anything important drawn out of the shadows and into the light?*

I begin with a brief sketch of Llull's spiritual pilgrimage as he himself records it. At age thirty-one, the young troubadour Ramon is composing a love song to one of the many women he had courted in his native Majorca, when suddenly he sees a vision of Christ crucified suspended in the air before him. Four more times he tries to complete the song, and each time the same vision is repeated. Reflecting on their meaning, he decides to set aside his libertine ways and devote his life to the conversion of the Saracens, Muslims scattered around the fringes of the Roman Empire in the thirteenth century and in whose midst he had been raised. Familiar with the ways of court life as a court poet, Llull was well aware of the efforts of the Christian Crusaders to reclaim the Holy Land and of the Saracen resistance. He also knew how seriously the Church took the Muslim threat to the conversion of the world to Christ: not only did they vastly outnumber the Christians, they were growing and threatening to convert the entire Mongol empire. It is no surprise, therefore, that his first thoughts upon being visited by spiritual visions were to give up his life for the preaching of Christianity. To this end he proposed to devote his literary skills to writing "the best book in the world" in order to convince the Saracens of the superiority of Christian doctrine, and then to preach it—even to the point of dying a martyr's death if need be.

Llull undertakes a life of poverty, abandoning not only his possessions but his wife and children, and sets out on pilgrimages to holy places in Spain and France. Aware of his lack of preparation for the task that lay ahead, he submits himself to nine years of formation. This included achieving fluency in Arabic, the language of the Muslim world. In fact his first work, *The Book of Contemplation on God* was composed in Arabic. On completing it—the text runs to over one million words, or about 2,500 book pages by today's count—at age forty-two, he is visited by another mystical experience, this time on a mountain in his native Majorca.

¹⁶ The only sustained argument against the identification of the two I have read is James Arraj, *Christianity in the Crucible of East-West Dialogue: A Critical Look at Catholic Participation* (Chiloquin, OR: Inner Growth Books and Videos, 2001).

There the content of his “greatest book” —the “Art,” as he would call it—came to him in a flash. It is not his goal of converting Jews and Muslims to Christianity (hardly unusual at the time) for which history remembers Lull most, but his Art. Some see it as little more than a play with Neo-Platonist categories, but most scholars recognize the Art as a strikingly original contribution to medieval thought and acknowledge his “combinatory logic” as a forerunner to contemporary computer languages. A synopsis of the Art was written shortly after his second mystical experience and was followed by numerous others, each aimed at clarifying its content and making it accessible to a wider readership. When he died, he left behind more than one hundred and twenty books.

After founding a school for the study of Arabic and lecturing on his theories in Paris, at age sixty he set out to “complete” the process that began with enlightenment and led to his theory: he made a missionary voyage to Tunis, resolved to convert the Muslims or die a martyr in trying. At every step of the way Lull’s attempt to use his Art met with frustration. Expelled more than once from Muslim lands, ignored again and again by the papal court and the academics of Paris, he continued to write, though often at the brink of despair. He is forthright about these matters in many of his writings, but the final chapter of his autobiographical recount the many obstacles he encountered with an equanimity and a conviction that his pilgrimage has embodied the words of the scriptures, “For it is not you who speak, but the spirit of your Father which speaketh in you” (Matt. 10:20).

LLULL THROUGH SUDHANA’S LENS

Although the complexity of Lull’s Art and his prolific output may have obscured the fact for intellectual historians interested only in the content of his works, the center of his life, as his memoirs make clear, was always preaching, leading others to the faith through rational argument. His writings were never more than a means to that end. This suggests that the formalized pattern of Sudhana’s pilgrimage may help to uncover a similar motif at work in Lull’s own *Vita*. At the same time, the difference in genre between the two texts prohibits direct comparison. On the one hand, we have Sudhana, an ahistorical archetype; on the other, the historical figure of Ramon Lull. What is more, whereas the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra* does not argue the doctrine it presents but declares it on its own authority, Lull’s writings appeal again and again to reasonableness—so much so that not even his own mystical visions are called forth in evidence of what he has to say.

Nevertheless, it seems possible to reread Lull’s story in the light of Sudhana’s and to seek spiritual affinities between their widely divergent literary forms. I

would go further: unless the Sudhana story is used as a lens to view the lives of historical figures like Lull, whether Buddhist or Christian, the sutra remains incomplete. Scripture that is not applied to history is no longer sacred. It may be aesthetically pleasing in itself, but it needs to enlighten our lives and the lives of exemplary figures from our tradition in order to be sacred.

The Sudhana story of itself does not tell us not how any one, including ourselves, should seek truth, or even how we can best overcome pitfalls along the way. What it does tell us is how we can order that search in hindsight so that it opens up beyond the confines of our personal story, or even of the whole of our particular religious tradition, and speak to others with different personal stories and from different doctrinal traditions. Like any abstraction from concrete history, the Sudhana story has no other means of survival than connectedness to the concrete world. Lull's rationalizations, far from signaling a disjunction from the concrete, are the opposite of abstraction. They represent insight at work, and insofar as this work is done for the conversion of others, it is compassionate. This is the point at which the two texts converge.

To repeat: I have no intention of trying to collapse Christian doctrine into Buddhist doctrine or vice versa. In fact, I am not interested in the details of the doctrine at all. There are far ways to pursue this course than comparing the opus of Lull with the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra*.¹⁷ I am only interested in using the Sudhana story to uncover a structure in Lull's spiritual pilgrimage that goes beyond its Christian expression. There are four elements that emerge in the uncovering:

1. Lull's writings need to be read as a metaethics.
2. Lull's writings form a unity with his mystical visions that transcends the doctrinal content.
3. The orthodoxy of Lull's cosmic vision is confirmed by right praxis.
4. Lull's struggles with failure and despair are incorporated into his pilgrimage.

Like the story of Sudhana, Lull's story can be read as a single motif working itself out in different aspects of his life and work. Accordingly, these four elements are not to be understood as stages along the way, such that the pilgrim

¹⁷ In particular I would note the attention that Luce Lopez-Baralt's has drawn to the architecture of Teresa of Avila's inner castle and the structure of the seventeenth-century Islamic mystical text known as the *Nawadir*, a compilation of stories and religious thoughts attributed to Ahmad al-Qalyubi. See her *Maqamal alqulub o Moradas de los corazones* (Madrid: Trotta, 1999).

advances from one stage to the next, but as the progressive realization of an original and fundamental myth of life.

THE ORIENTATION TO MORAL PRAXIS

From the start, we recall, Sudhana's pilgrimage is oriented to moral practice, not to understanding doctrine or deepening enlightenment. This may seem far removed from the orientation of Llull's search for religious truth, which is typically seen as focused on "writing the best book in the world" in order to convert Islam to Christ. But the *Contemporary Life* makes it clear that his aim was not to become a mystical theologian or to find a way to prolong or repeat his ecstatic visions, but "to give his life and his soul" for the sake of those who do not know Christ. Only after realizing that he first needed to secure the linguistic and philosophical tools to do this did it occur to him to write his book. His writings were never armchair theory meant for others to put into practice. As soon as he started writing Llull realized that he would have to argue its truth to the leading Christian intellectuals of the day in Europe and eventually travel abroad to persuade Islamic intellectuals.

If Sudhana's pilgrimage is an abstract model aimed at showing how Buddhist teachings oblige one to compassion for others, Llull's is a concrete account of one man's life experience, showing how religious experience brings clarity of insight into doctrine and propels that insight into a mission to share that doctrine with others. Obviously the doctrinal framework of the two stories is distinct. At the same time, the often heard claim that Buddhist is a religion of enlightenment and Christianity a religion of salvation can only be sustained—if indeed it can be sustained at all—on the level of doctrinal content. Llull's life shows at every turn that awakened insight is more basic than any rational formulation of doctrine, just as the new understanding of doctrinal tradition that it gives rise to is finally justified not by the transcendent truth of the doctrine but by the practice it inspires. There is no salvation without enlightenment, and no enlightenment without salvation. On this point the Buddhist and the Christian are in fundamental agreement.

Reading Llull's life as a commitment to practice for the salvation of others, as the Sudhana story suggests we might, casts his writings in a different light. Amador Vega has noted that writing books had a different meaning in thirteenth-century Spain than it has today.¹⁸ For one thing, the book was almost archetypal

¹⁸ *Ramon Llull and the Secret of Life*, p. 13.

among religious communities at the time. For another, Islam understood itself as the “community of the Book.” Writing was a form of incarnation as important as the incarnation of Christ is to the Christian, and for this reason was critical to one who would lead them to salvation. What is more, the voluminous nature of Llull’s writings and rewritings is due in large part to his awareness of what we might call the Christian equivalent of *upāya* or “skillful means”—namely, the need to make oneself intelligible to people in different strata of society. In short, writing the book was a praxis of compassion, not an attempt to carry on the same career by making a simple transition from love poet to theologian and mystical author. To ignore this aspect in order to focus on the “philosophical” ideas of his works would be equivalent to displacing the commitment to help others from the center of Sudhana’s encounters and replacing it with a body of truth-claims as the core of the Buddhist way. In this sense, the structure of the Sudhana story helps us to see the important sense in which Llull’s corpus needs to be read as a metaethics, not as a simple apologetics aimed at converting unbelievers to the truth of Christianity.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE VISIONS

Llull’s spiritual awakening, initially in a series of visions of Christ crucified and then in the content of his Art on Mt. Randa, is the starting point of his spiritual pilgrimage. In the model we extracted from the Sudhana story, the awakening and its vision come at the end of the pilgrimage. In both cases the awakening is not complete until it takes concrete form in enlightened action. Even so, there is something unsettling about Llull’s spiritual visions that needs to be faced squarely.

Llull’s mystical experiences, no less than Sudhana’s encounters, are a mixture of the culturally specific and the cross-culturally universal. When a Christian reads of Sudhana’s meetings with former buddhas with the aim of learning something from them, the focus immediately, and naturally, shifts to the rational *content* of the vision, since it is obvious such encounters are closed to the Christian. And vice-versa for the Buddhist, there is no hope, or even wish, to be visited with the kinds of visions Llull had, but this does not in principle preclude interest in the intellectual content of his writings. In each case the safest strategy is to withdraw from the particularity into a more accessible universality where translation across religious traditions can more easily be made. Or so it would seem. In fact, what is going on is more like a displacement of one particularity with another: the concreteness that cannot be achieved experientially is recovered at the level of ideas by elevating an alien doctrine to an acceptable level of abstraction and then paraphrasing those abstractions as doctrines familiar to the modes of thought of one’s own faith.

I am not suggesting that nothing is gained in such translation, but only that something important is lost. In distilling the content from their respective visions, the aboriginal unity of the two slips out of focus and eventually disappears from view. Remove the religious experiences that set Lull off on his pilgrimage from discussion, discount the encounters with former buddhas that structure the story of Sudhana, and the task we are left with is no more than an exercise in textual criticism.

At the same time, to claim that the Lull's visions are indispensable for understanding his writings, and vice-versa, is not to say that all *judgments about* the visions are thereby confirmed. If the Christian would argue that it is one thing to say "I had a vision of Mañjuśri" and another to say, "It was Mañjuśri who appeared to me," then the Buddhist posture that Lull's account of having seen the crucified Christ does not require the conclusion that Christ continues to exist somewhere and is capable of assuming the physical shape he had twenty centuries ago, cannot be dismissed out of hand. Still, it seems possible, perhaps even preferable, to seek a standpoint from which such judgments less essential to appropriating the truth of doctrinally alien religious expressions than is an insight into the unity of vision and expression. For the Christian the fantastical flights of imagination in the Sudhana story can only yield religious insight if one is prepared to recognize the sense in which Lull's visions of the crucified pose no less a challenge to the Buddhist, and from there seek a deeper point of contact than that of doctrinal content.

In a word, the simple reduction of religious expression to abstract forms of thought purified of the concreteness of beliefs eclipses the more serious challenge that the overlay of the Sudhana story on the pilgrimage of Ramon Lull presents to both the Buddhist and the Christian: to encounter the other at a place where one remains *of* one's own tradition without standing *in* it. It is into this no man's land that one must step if there is to be any hope of one particular spirituality appropriating the truth of another.

THE COSMIC VISION

Throughout Sudhana's encounters stress is put on a compassion that uses all means possible to spread the truth or Dharma that has been glimpsed in personal experience. This not a mere search for missionary technique, but for a confirmation of the Dharma in all things great and small. The final vision in which each thing in the world is seen to reflect and depend on every other thing is not a mere philosophical assumption. It is a reason for taking responsibility towards others as a critical principle for judging the truth of ideas. Thus, although the doctrine is presented without any attempt to argue its orthodoxy, what saves it from

becoming dogmatic is the stress on orthopraxis. Not only do right teachings lead to right practice, it is right practice that finally makes the teachings right.

This draws our attention to something similar going on in Llull's writing. *The Book of Contemplation on God* poses the question, "How do I seek what I have already found?" The question is not how to *communicate* what he has seen in mystical experience, but how to *look for* it. In other words, if his experience was to be more than a private grace, he had to see it confirmed everywhere, and this confirmation in turn would provide firm ground from which to persuade others of the universality of what had touched him in a particular way. The bond between God and the self that he had discovered in his vision could only be justified if it could be rediscovered in all of creation, and the truth of that cosmic vision could only be justified by others' recognition of it. In this sense, the final authority of rational argumentation did not rest in the application of objective method, but in the actual conversion of others. For Llull right doctrine was not secured by the correct application of logic and fidelity to tradition; it entailed right seeking, and the only assurance that it was right was if he could present it as a method that others could follow and find what he had found. The aim of his writing was to present an Art that used logic and doctrine, but that ended in insight for those who followed it. Here, too, only right practice makes the teachings right.

What is surprising here is that Llull sees this practice as entailing dialogue with those whom one would convert, and this requires an act of faith, prior to reason, in a truth held in common with those who follow other religious ways. In *The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*, he places a gentile, a man with no religion, in the midst of a Jew, a Muslim, and a Christian to guide the three to a common theory of truth where on whose basis they can argue the merits of their respective positions. It is no accident that he has the man leave the picture without deciding for one faith over the others. Vega's comment here is crucial:

The religious philosophy of Ramon Llull dislocates faith to a place outside of reason. The foundation for dialogue must be shared, but it is right intention, guided by a longing for truth, that finally leads to understanding and the discovery of rationality in the other. Dialogue is the result of a desire to know and faith rests on the possibility that the truth lies outside of oneself.¹⁹

There is another sense in which the Sudhana story illumines the writings of Llull. Reading through the various teachers Sudhana encounters on his way, one is struck by the high degree of repetition. The same ideas are presented again

¹⁹ Vega, *Ramon Llull and the Secret of Life*, p. 79.

and again; only the metaphors seem to change. The cumulative effect is not to convince the reader of the complexity of understanding the Dharma but of its utter simplicity: it can be found everywhere if one only knows how to look for it. The difference between great and small, central and peripheral in the doctrine collapses into insignificance when what one is seeking is not a logical exposition of the highest truth but a fundamental unity present all around.

Something similar is going on in Llull's writings. Indeed unless we recognize that similarity, much of his writing is bound to sound as quaint and alien to the modern Christian reader as the cosmic imagery of the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra*. Though many of his writings make ample use of fables, parables, and metaphors to illustrate a point, there is a great deal of verbosity and circularity in his more rational arguments. These latter, while only rarely comparable to the creative and rich torrent of images in the Sudhana story, do serve the same purpose as his more colorful prose of making his arguments easy to understand and laying bare the simple patterns at work there. For example, in the *Ars brevis* Llull presents an alphabet of the attributes—goodness, greatness, eternity, power, wisdom, etc.—and from them generates propositions by using them alternatively as subjects and predicates for each other (“Goodness is great,” “Greatness is Good”...). He then takes these propositions and applies them as principles to particular individuals, e.g. “Peter’s greatness is good.” This is followed by the relations of difference, concordance, and contrariety, and by generation of definitions based on them. Through a series of geometric figures he creates algorithms to combine these attributes into a series of relationships that increase proportionately with the introduction of each new term. In the fuller accounts of the Art he goes to enormous lengths to spell this out.

Llull's aim, as ever, is not only to provide a common ground for discussion among the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) that share belief in a common creator God, but to “answer all questions, assuming that one can identify them by name.”²⁰ Without ever abandoning his conviction of the superiority of belief in Christ, he does not appeal to sources whose authority requires belief in Christianity but only to a rational way of approaching the natural world and, through it, the One in whose image it was made. In addition to geometric figures, he uses trees and ladders (common to the other religions) to communicate respectively the generative dynamism that his logic shares with the natural world and the way of spiritual ascent to truth and descent to the serv-

²⁰ Cited from a short selection from the work in Vega, *Ramon Llull and the Secret of Life*, p. 239.

ice of others. This is his grammar for the dialogue through which he hopes to persuade others to faith in Christ.

In many of the dialogues he uses to show the Art at work in the concrete world—of which *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved* is a splendid example—the skeleton of the combinatory logic disappears behind the flesh and blood of texts that are at once easy to understand and yet richly suggestive of something profound at work in the background. In *The Tree of Knowledge*, a sustained attempt to show how the clear-thinking mind generates ideas in accord with same natural principles by which trees sink roots and produce fruit, he introduces a genre that bears comparison to the Zen dialogues that were being composed at roughly the same time in medieval Japan. The difference is that enigmatic answers are frequently followed by instructions to jump to another portion of the book to refine one's questioning.

The immediate effect is dizzying, but the lasting impression is not unlike that left after reading through the concluding sections of the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra*: there is really no way to understand how all things are sustained in existence by reflecting and sustaining all other things except by piling up examples of that interrelationship. Consider the following passages, selected at random:

135. Question: How is an evil temptation recognized?
Answer: The delight that lies beneath a wicked habit is where the vices find repose.
See also the roots of the wicked Tree.
138. Question: It is asked if the goodness of a prince is greater than the goodness of the people.
Answer: Many knights buy a horse.
162. Question: It is asked why the sun is brighter at midday than in the morning.
Answer: More smoke rises out of green wood than out of dry.
169. Question: It is asked if angels are corruptible.
Answer: No simple circle, or so we say, is divisible.
172. Question: It is asked if angels are audible.
Answer: The idea can be considered between God and creatures.
179. Question: If the devil has sinned in time, why is his punishment eternal?
Answer: See the roots of the everlasting Tree.
203. Question: It is asked whether Jesus Christ could have sinned while in this world.
Answer: It is impossible for the body to be a corpse while the soul is in the body.
See also the roots of the Christian Tree.²¹

²¹ Cited from Vega, *Ramon Llull and the Secret of Life*, pp. 204–206.

The location of the questions and answer in the trees makes a clear link between insight and cosmos, while the strategy of his “migrating dialogues” both signifies and actualizes the fact that insight needs to be sought. Only then can it be said to be true.

THE END OF THE JOURNEY

Because Llull’s *Life* is one of historical particularity, it cannot end where Sudhana’s story does. But it can, and I believe does, end in the same place *theoretically*. The “end” here is not an existential point in time but an ideal. I understand “theory” here not in the perennial philosophical sense of speculative thought detached from praxis but as something like Gregory of Nyssa’s sense of a pursuit of a contemplative vision that elevates the mind above the everyday and restores it to its original nature, where praxis is the process of purification of mind whereby one is led to a clarity of thought.²² On this point the two stories converge.

At the same time, insofar as Llull’s thought is bound to a concrete life’s journey, it cannot *achieve* an end consistent with a previously established doctrine; it can only *approach* it. What is more, that approach is not an unimpeded, straight progression like the advance of Sudhana from one teacher to the next. Everywhere it is blocked by misunderstanding, persecution, and personal despair. In part, it was the boldness of the Art itself that set it up for failure. Those who could not agree with Llull’s view that his Art was divinely inspired, and hence were not prepared to apply it universally, would never be able to see what he had seen. It was not enough for Llull to believe in the truth of his Art. If the academics in Paris and the Muslims in northern Africa declined to practice it, there was no way its purpose could be fulfilled.

Llull does not hide his frustrations, but transforms them into poetry and thus appropriates them into his life story. *The Tree of Knowledge*, begun in 1295 when he was sixty-seven years of age, opens with these words:

Disconsolate and weeping, Ramon sat beneath a beautiful tree and sang of his grief to relieve some of the pain he felt at having failed to complete the holy business of Jesus Christ in the court of Rome and the service it would have done to all of Christendom.²³

²² John Keenan uses this approach of Gregory of Nyssa as an important reference point for his attempt to rethink Christology in Buddhist terms. See his *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahāyāna Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989).

²³ Cited from Vega, *Ramon Llull and the Secret of Life*, p. 195.

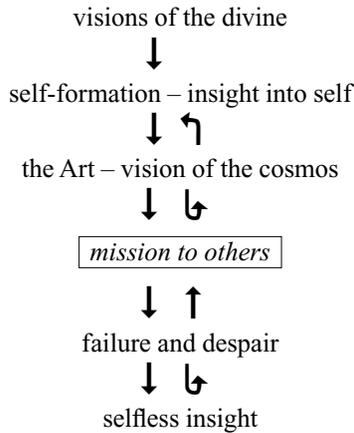


Figure 2. The structure of Ramon Llull's pilgrimage

In the space of two pages a wandering monk convinces him to try again, and Ramon, inspired by a nearby lemon tree, begins to write again. His *Disconsolation*, composed around the same time, treats the despair at greater length. Once again, it is a wandering monk who tries to convince him that the only way to be delivered of his sadness is to trim back his ambitions. Ramon disputes with him at length until at last he convinces the monk to join him in his cause.

These are only two examples of how important Llull's struggles with failure were to the pilgrimage of his life. This is not to say that he did not pass through failure to selfless insight, but that the passage was not a single, irreversible event. It was something he had to go through time and again, and each time the rebound led him back to the central motif of his life's journey: the mission to convert others. Putting this schematically, both to summarize and to sharpen the overlay of the Sudhana story, we can read the story of Llull's pilgrimage in a somewhat different light from the way he is typically perceived by intellectual historians (see Figure 2).

More attention to the texts of Llull's Art would show how it was not simply a vision of the cosmos but a collaboration with the confusing, unpredictable, and uncontrollable historical world. They would show how the sufferings he endured as each of his successive attempts to convert Islamic lands had to pass through self-centered despair before leading to selfless insight and a return to the mission in a new form, and how each return brought with it a deepening of the Art.

What is perhaps most surprising—at least more so to students of the Christian mystics than to students of Buddhist enlightenment stories—is that despite the

radical impact of his initial visions and the singlemindedness with which he pursued their consequences throughout life, he does not seem to have been led to further mystical experiences in later years. His deepest experiences swung like a pendulum between insight into himself and his own life and insight into a selflessness beyond the reaches of his own life, but never again did they rise up to the heights from which his pilgrimage began. In a sense, his pilgrimage was not an ascent but a continuous descent; it did not return to its starting point but ended in exile far removed from it. Not that the interior life was unimportant to him: on the contrary, the Art is an attempt to fuse contemplation and universal knowledge so completely into one another that in practice the very distinction between faith and reason becomes a mere abstraction.²⁴ In the Buddhist tradition, this position is well established and most certainly assumed in the *Gaṇḍavyūha sūtra*.

On first reading, the language of Llull's writings may seem excessively obscure and out of reach of the Buddhist believer, just as the symbolism of the Sudhana story will no doubt strike Christian readers as foreign to their usual way of thinking about religious faith. The stumbling block this presents is often removed by appealing to a common substratum of religious experience, expressed differently in each of the traditions but grounded in the same reality. Although this approach is common among Christian scholars seeking rapprochement with Buddhism, and to some extent among Buddhists in dialogue with Christianity, in recent years the underlying idea that experience can be distinguished from its modes of expression has stepped out of the shadows of tacit assumption and come up for serious question. Indeed there are good grounds for arguing that in the concrete it simply does not hold.

Might it not be that the preoccupation with reconciling differences of doctrine, where the distinction between experience and expression arises in the first place,

²⁴ "For if the Catholic faith is unprovable by intellect, then it is impossible for it to be true." Vega, *Ramon Llull and the Secret of Life*, p. 256. Vega seems to take Llull's fusing of faith and reason almost for granted in his interpretation, although it is crucial to his reading of Llull (see p. 29). A recent book on Llull has fallen into my hands, where I see that not only is this not assumed, but "contemplation" is seen as referring to Llull's mystical experiences and detachment from his former life and "universal knowledge" to his rational Art. While this interpretation has support of the classical medieval distinctions between faith and reason, contemplation and action, it seems to me to miss the distinct quality of Llull's life that Vega catches and that our overlay of the Sudhana myth brings into interreligious relief. See Jordi Gayà Estelrich, *Raimondo Lullo: Una teologia per la missione* (Milano: Jaca Books, 1999), p. 23.

is less important to the mutual appropriation of one another's truth than we have assumed, even secondary? Might it not be that the harmony between experience-expression and the selfless activity for others that we honor in the lives of our saints is a more promising point of contact for Buddhists and Christians and a better ground for doctrinal discussions? I have tried to argue there that the Sudhana story suggests that this is the case *in principle*, and the Llull story read through the lens of that principle illustrates it *in practice*.