

Dasabhumī and Tre Vie:
An Idea on Reinterpretation of the Christian
Three Ways through the Buddhist teaching
of the Ten Stages of Bodhisattva

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Abstract

Christians have *Tre Vie* or the Three Ways as a conceptual map for their spiritual development. According to the map, a Christian steps up through three stages of purification-illumination-union. However, there are some problems in the way that the teaching is usually accepted. There is widespread misperception that the highest level of development, i.e. the stage of union and contemplative prayer, is accessible to only a few spiritual elites. Another problem is the Protestant resistance to asceticism. Asceticism as human effort is regarded as conflicting with the Protestant theological principle of sola gratia, grace

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alone. This article is to reinterpret *Tre Vie* in the light of *Dasabhumī*, the Ten Stages of Bodhisattva. Remarkable similarities are found when the two teachings are compared and contrasted. Daniel Brown, a psychologist, says that there is a universal path in the development of meditation. His discoveries are a good tool to support the connection and similarities between *Tre Vie* and *Dasabhumī*. As a result, it will be revealed that contemplative dimension is already involved in the earlier stages. If contemplation appears even in the beginner's stage, a sort of elitism that only a chosen few have an access to contemplative prayer is unnecessary. By definition, contemplation is not human effort but the grace of the Holy Spirit. If contemplative dimension is present from the beginning of Christian spiritual development, this means that grace works throughout the entire process. This will eliminate Protestants' misunderstanding and suspicion against asceticism. The development through purification-illumination-union is not a straight line. Rather, it is more like a spiral movement. Even in the lower stage, the entire cycle of all the three elements is made. And it repeats the cycle in a growing scale.

- **Keywords**

the Three Ways, the Ten Stages of Bodhisattva, purification-illumination-union, asceticism, The Universal Stages of Meditation

1. Introduction

This article is no more than a treatise discussion on reinterpreting *Tre Vie*, the Christian Three Ways through *Dasabhumī*, the Buddhist Ten Stages of Bodhisattva. Thus, it does not go beyond suggesting an idea of possibility of reinterpretation. Further and deeper research will be passed on to the future. Analysis of the two basic texts from the two traditions will be omitted. This will only focus on the similarity and the possibility of connection between the two.

Modern times are called the age of spirituality. But Christians seem to have no map for their journey in such an era. They are told to pray a lot, but they know very little about how. Besides, they don't know how their spiritual life as a whole develops. Things are rather worse for Protestant Christians. While the teachings of traditional Spiritual Theology are available to Roman Catholics, Spiritual Theology or any type of ascetical theology have been poorly developed within Protestantism.¹ This has to do with the origin of Protestantism. They were born by resisting the Roman Catholic church of the Middle Ages. As a result, they tend to be very suspicious of any form of asceticism, even today. In their eyes, asceticism places much emphasis on human efforts, and it is considered a direct violation to the Protestant principle of *Sola Gratia*.

Meanwhile, Roman Catholicism offers Spiritual Theology to its members as a map of their spiritual life. In this age of spirituality, the gap between Protestantism and Catholicism tends to narrow gradually. Because they are now encountering their common competitors,

1 Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 19.

other religions in this pluralistic world, what tends to happen is that both churches are placing more emphasis on their common Christian heritage. Now a growing number of Protestant Christians refer to Roman Catholic Spiritual Theology in their spiritual journey with little resistance.

But there is another problem. Those concepts and categories in Roman Catholic Spiritual Theology are rather foreign to most Protestants. Roman Catholic official theology is Thomism, based on the teachings of Thomas Aquinas. And Thomas' Scholasticism is based on Aristotle's philosophy. Although Aristotle's influence lasted until the 17th century in the western civilization, it's become a stranger's language to modern people. Therefore, the borrowed map for spiritual life from Roman Catholicism allows a very limited access, only to those who are able to understand its contents.

Not only that sort of language barrier, but also the content itself of Spiritual Theology tends to bring about a kind of elitism. The stage of purification is considered as a path for beginners, and that of illumination is for the intermediates, while the stage of union is exclusively for the advanced. For the beginners, what is called discursive prayer is prescribed. Affective prayer is considered proper for the intermediates. It goes on, and contemplative prayer is allocated for the most advanced.

Prescribing different approaches according to the developmental stage of each individual is wise and still valid even today. A negative aspect of some popular spiritual programs is that such wisdom is ignored. So called contemplative prayer movements tend to impose a form of contemplation uniformly to everybody without taking each individual's developmental stage into consideration.

However, it also tends to create a problem of elitism that contemplative prayer is only for the advanced. Most Christians regard contemplation as a prayer that only a few elites can do, which they are not allowed to approach. Contrary to this popular belief, this article is to argue that the contemplative dimension is already involved, even in the beginner's stage. Contemplative experiences are much more common than we believe. Even beginners and intermediates are also experiencing them unknowingly. Protestant Christians assert that it is grace alone that leads us through justification, sanctification, and glorification. Likewise, contemplative dimension is always involved from the beginning to the end of a Christian's spiritual development.

Tre Vie is not meant to create such an impression that the developmental process of Christian spirituality follows a straight line. In reality, the features of purification-illumination-union stage appear in rather more mixed manners. If you look at a river from a distant place, it would look like a straight line. But if you get closer, the river reveals much more complex and complicated movements, like fast or slow flow, swirls and delays, even backward flow. Unlike the popular understanding, all the three stages are involved to various degrees in a single act of prayer.

Tre Vie is still a valid conceptual map for identifying which stage of spiritual development an individual is located. However, it can also be used as concepts to interpret everyday experiences no matter what stage each Christian is in. That's the purpose of this article, to argue that the Christian Three Ways can be both a big picture and a small one. By doing so, unhelpful elitism and public misunderstanding can be eliminated.

For this purpose, I would like to refer to *Dasabhumī*, the Bod-

hisattva's ten stages to interpret the Christian *Tre Vie*. The Buddhist teaching indicates that *samadhi* and *prajna* are involved even in the early stages of Bodhisattva's development. And it also reminds us Christians that the contemplative dimension contains both *samadhi* and *prajna*, though contemplation tends to be interpreted almost identically to *samadhi* alone in the current Christian contemplative prayer movements.

The significance of this comparison and contrast between the Christian *Tre Vie* and the Buddhist *Dasabhumī* is that it is a reinterpretation of Christian understanding of spiritual life in the context of the Tao-culture in East Asia. This helps Korean Christians to live a Christian spiritual life in a Korean way. As Aristotle and his Greek philosophy offered the useful concepts and categories for traditional Catholic Spiritual Theology, Buddhist teachings that have been a crucial part of the East Asian Tao-culture can be a source of transforming Christianity into a rather more Asian one.

Trans-personal Psychology can be used as a hermeneutic key in relating the two. This article adopts a study by Daniel P. Brown, a trans-personal psychologist when it analyzes the correlation of *Tre Vie* and *Dasabhumī*.

II. A reinterpretation of *Tre Vie* through *Dasabhumī*

Tre Vie, or the Three Ways, tells us that Christian spiritual life evolves through three major stages, namely purification-illumination-union. These three stages form a hierarchical system that needs to be climbed up one by one. This means that the next step cannot appear until the

first step is made. It is the commonly accepted understanding, and still valid, when one wants to identify where he or she is located in the journey of Christian spiritual life. In terms of frequency of occurrence, those who are inclined to contemplative manner of prayer tend to have less discursive or affective prayers. On the other hand, beginners in prayer usually have difficulty in understanding what contemplative prayer is.

Contrary to the popular belief, however, even in the prayer life of beginners contemplative aspects are involved. It is also true that the advanced sometimes need to rely on discursive or affective manners of prayer. Therefore, the concepts of *Tre Vie* should be applied much more flexibly to both a big picture and a small one.

The stage of purification is, as its name implies, a period of emphasis on purification. The objects of purification are the world, the body, and the devil. We must purify the influence of the world, the impulses of the body, and the temptation of the devil that drives us to live a selfish and sensual life. Evagrius Ponticus introduces eight evil thoughts to fight against during this period. They are gluttony, lust, greed, sadness, acedia (or despondency), anger, vainglory, and pride. Evagrius' eight evil thoughts (*logismoi*) went through a slight modification and settled as seven deadly sins within Catholic Church. They are pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth.²

No matter whether the main targets of struggle during this period are eight or seven, the question is what is the driving force to start and continue this process? *Tre Vie* answers that it is repentance.³ The basic

2 Evagrius. *Praktikos*, trans. into Korean by Sungsuk Huh (Waegwan: Bundo Publishing, 2011), 65-71.

3 Adolphe Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, trans.

meaning of repentance is the change of direction, turnabout. Eight evil thoughts or seven deadly sins are not easy for human nature to resist. They arrive in a human heart quite naturally. To continue the purification process against them, the first step is important, but it also requires constant motivation and power. Therefore, the stage of purification can be said as a process of continuous repentance.

Traditional spiritual theology defines faith as the force of the purification stage struggle. Faith here is identical to holy fear of God, and from it comes out the power to restrain.⁴ How can we produce such living faith? By observing the moral precepts. In the Buddhist teaching, it is said that *dhyana* or contemplation, and *prajna* or wisdom come out with *sila* or precepts as the root. *Dhyana*, *prajna*, and *sila* are called the Three Vehicles of learning in Buddhism. All great religions emphasize the importance of keeping the rules in life. By following the rules regularly, new habits are formed. And those new habits will eventually transform the person.

This also goes with the insight of modern psychology. Habits change people. During the purification period, it is necessary to form new habits like praying and reading the Bible regularly at certain times, and also belonging to a faith community. You will be transformed along with the tradition of your faith community. Within the community, you are constantly encouraged to commit to your spiritual training and discipline.

One of the points that this article is to make is, contemplation is involved to various degrees even in the early stage purification period.

into Korean by Daesik Chung (Seoul: Catholic Christian, 1999), 3 and 103.

4 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” Hebrews 11:6(NIV).

People tend to believe that contemplation is available only in the stage of union. However, faith grows when there is at least a little taste of contemplation. As mentioned above, Protestant churches have difficulty in developing ascetic theology because they believe that asceticism is against *Sola Gratia*. However, contemplation is a prayer of grace alone. All the power of the human active mind goes into a state of rest. If the contemplative dimension is at work even in the period of purification, it can be said that grace leads the whole process of our transformation.

Let's take a look at the teachings of *Dasabhumī* or the Bodhisattva's Ten Stages. *Dasabhumī* is a part of *Avatamsaka Sutra* (華嚴經), Mahayana Buddhism's best known scripture. The first stage of *Dasabhumī* is called the stage of rapture or ecstasy. After one has a religious experience of rapture or ecstasy, the person begins the whole process of spiritual growth. This is significant because it helps us Christians to see the importance of contemplative dimension in the earlier stage of purification.

Bodhisattva refers to a person who has made a vow to save people. *Dasabhumī* is the process of gaining power for the practice. For the first degree of Bodhisattva, doctrinal understanding is more important than anything else.⁵ Based on that understanding, he or she can continue to live a life of *dāna*, a charitable act. However, this doctrinal understanding is not abstract. It is rather empirical learning, learning the teachings of doctrines by putting them into practice.⁶

What then would happen to the first degree Bodhisattva? While the teaching of *Dasabhumī* tells us the stages of becoming a Bodhisattva, the teaching of Six *Paramitas* (六波羅密) tells us how. The six are charity,

5 *Avatasamka Sutra*, trans. into Korean by Ho Choi (Seoul: Hongshin Culture Co., 1990), 31.

6 *Ibid.*, 34.

precepts, forbearance, samadhi, and wisdom. The first degree Bodhisattva is said to be good particularly at charity.⁷ People tend to understand this as simply following the moral imperative. However, the first degree Bodhisattva begins his journey after experiencing a transcendental rapture or ecstasy. In that experience, the person realizes that he and others are no different. Now the first degree Bodhisattva's act of charity is to be understood as putting that realization into practice. This way, a contemplative dimension is involved even in the beginner's stage although it is not like the point where everything happens by itself. By practicing charity acts, the first degree Bodhisattva deepens his understanding of doctrine. His wisdom grows profoundly.

Therefore, the first degree Bodhisattva does acts of charity not simply because it is a moral imperative, but because he is motivated to do so based on the realization from his own transcendental experience. Let's bring this lesson back to our Christian understanding of the Three Ways. It is said that the beginner has to fight against all the evil tendencies with repentance and faith. From the perspective of the Buddhist teaching, it can be interpreted as this: Because the beginner has a transcendental, a sort of contemplative experience, he or she is able to take the first step. Because the beginner from time to time tastes a contemplation at least slightly, he or she is able to continue the commitment, to maintain the motivated state.

The second degree Bodhisattva is said to be good at observing precepts.⁸ By doing so, he is able to habituate the six *paramitas* in his spir-

7 Hongsik Yoon, *Hwaecomgyung: Open the Path toward Bodhisattva* (Seoul: Bonghwangdonglae, 2018), 33.

8 Ibid.

itual journey. This teaching is in line with Christian teaching that one needs to habituate the rules of life in the stage of purification. Faith as deep understanding of doctrine is nurtured within the fence of rules. Once again, it needs to be emphasized that it is not a dry observation of rules but rather living interaction between all the three ways.

Now the third degree Bodhisattva is good at forbearance. Forbearance or patience is antidote to arrogance and vanity. Jealousy and anger come out of the two as their root. In psychology, narcissistic personality disorder refers to a personality characterized by arrogance and vanity. And the Buddhist teaching fits well to the Christian teaching of purification period that fighting against those evil tendencies is its main feature.

How is the purification period completed? During the stage of purification, a soul is not only fighting against those evil tendencies but also becoming more and more favored in spiritual matters. *Tre Vie* explains in such a way that the beginner's soul eventually reaches *apatheia*,⁹ the state of no thoughts, no feelings. There are some signs for the soul to recognize whether he reaches *apatheia*: Distraction of mind is significantly reduced; awareness of one's unconscious level is sharpened; introspection ability grows. And also the soul becomes more accustomed to what is called the complete solitude of desert. *Apatheia* is considered to be the end of the purification stage.

Apatheia is usually understood to be the state of no thoughts or feelings that is pure consciousness. Another way to understand *apatheia* is that it is a state of indifference where thoughts and emotions appear

9 *Apatheia*, a Greek word, literally means the absence of passions. As a concept in Stoic philosophy, it is commonly translated as dispassion; Joshua L. Hickok, "apatheia," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed., Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 270.

but are not affected by it.¹⁰ The former understanding of *apatheia* is simply silence of the mind and heart. It is a pure consciousness with no contents. The later way of understanding *apatheia* is identical to mindfulness. Mindfulness is simply being aware of everything but without identifying self with anything. If the period of purification is defined as a process of getting used to *apatheia* as a contemplative state, it is not right to say that contemplation doesn't appear until the stage of union. Thomas Merton says that silence is no different than contemplation,¹¹ therefore silence is not simply the preliminary step for contemplation. Silence of mind and heart is contemplation itself.

That the end of the purification period is *apatheia* is comparable to the stage of the fourth degree Bodhisattva. In the fourth stage, Bodhisattva reaches the state of no doubt. His doctrinal understanding reaches the completion stage. The fourth degree Bodhisattva has no doubt about the doctrines because he has learned them by experience. *Dasabhumī* considers those stages from the first to the fourth as the preliminary part.¹² It is like a basic physical fitness training for an athlete. So the fourth degree Bodhisattva is said to be good particularly at exertion, rigorous self-discipline.¹³ If he learned the doctrines only intellectually, he would not have such strong exertion power. He has tasted *samādhi* and wisdom enough to firmly maintain his rigorous self-discipline. In that sense, the power of *apatheia* is penetrating the whole stage of purification to various degrees. This needs to be emphasized as mentioned above. It is not just a sense of duty to sustain

10 Evagrius, *Praktikos*, 54.

11 "In Silence God ceases to be an object and becomes an experience," accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1213881>.

12 *Avatamsaka Sutra*, 37.

13 Hongsik Yoon, *Hwaemgyung*, 35. .

the process.

Now the stage of illumination, or the path of light, is described as the stage in which the purified soul enters. To say that purification is over means that we are no longer governed by the outside world and senses. It doesn't matter whether it's external stimuli or inner imagination and memory stimuli. Why this stage is called the stage of illumination or a path of light is because the love of God illumines through the cleaned window of consciousness. In fact, purification and illumination are simultaneous. As all the dark and negative thoughts and feelings get removed, the degree of illumination, awakening into God's love and presence increase.

The fifth degree Bodhisattva is called the stage of knowing the calling of heaven.¹⁴ Likewise, a Christian recognizes the will of God in this stage of illumination. The pure consciousness with little hindrance from contaminated thoughts and feelings accepts the illumination of God or the calling of heaven or the command of conscience. That is why the fifth degree Bodhisattva is the stage of knowing, the calling of heaven while he is good at *dhyana* and *samadhi*. *Dhyana* means to be free from attachment to all outer objects. The Christian *apatheia* attained after the period of purification is *dhyana*. *Apatheia* as the silence of mind has another aspect: inner peace. And *samadhi* means to attain inner peace.¹⁵

If the stage of purification focuses on the elimination of vice, the

14 Ibid.

15 Dhyana and samadhi: Literally it means "dwelling in tranquility." Dhyana means to be free from attachment to all outer objects, and samadhi means to attain inner peace. The Practical Dictionary of Korean-English Buddhist Terms, "dhyana and samadhi," accessed December 15, 2020, http://dic.tvbuddha.org/s1/view.htm?vtype=search&search_key=%EC%84%A0%EC%A0%95&page=1&num=2382.

stage of illumination focuses on the enhancement of virtue. The center of gravity is placed on positive rather than negative. Now the sixth degree Bodhisattva is said to reach the point of knowing truth in all he hears.¹⁶ So the sixth is more advanced than the fifth. The Ten Stages explains the difference this way. The fifth degree Bodhisattva jumps into a life for others as he knows the calling of heaven. However, the level of knowing is rather abstract and theoretical in the fifth stage. Now the sixth degree Bodhisattva has more profound knowing because he has gone through putting the will of heaven into practice.¹⁷

The seventh degree Bodhisattva is described as having gained full freedom in knowing the calling of heaven and putting them into practice. If illumination is considered to be identical to knowing and practicing heaven's will, up to the seventh stage of Bodhisattva may be included in the stage of illumination. In the Christian teaching of *Tre Vie*, the stage of illumination is for the intermediate. Therefore, if up to the seventh degree Bodhisattva is corresponding to the intermediate level, it would be seen as a severe degradation of Bodhisattva. But the purpose of this paper is right there. Whether it's Christian Three Ways or Buddhist Ten Stages, I am trying to present them as a framework of concepts that can have meaning to a wider range of people. I think both have become too mystified and too high for most people to reach. Compared to earlier stages, the seventh degree Bodhisattva is much more free, and everything is done by itself without effort.

But the seventh degree Bodhisattva still needs to make minor efforts. Using the Christian language, there remains a bit of human effort, namely ascetic dimension. Even the seventh stage has not yet been

16 *Avatamsaka Sutra*, 38.

17 *Ibid.*

completely passed on to mystery. It's only at the eighth stage that everything is done by itself without human effort. Mystery is self-fulfilling by the power of grace without having to work with our own strength. If we follow the classification of mystery as the stage of union, we can say that from the eighth stage of Bodhisattva belongs to mystery.¹⁸ This is because the six *paramitas* are made by themselves without effort at the Bodhisattva's eighth stage.

Now the stage of union is considered to be the highest peak of spirituality that a Christian can reach on earth. From this stage, it is no longer that humans strive for, but a mysterious stage in which the Holy Spirit works. This corresponds to the eighth to tenth degree of Bodhisattva. *Dasabhumī* explains that everything is done by the inner Buddha-nature from the eighth degree of Bodhisattva. It is consistent with the state of consciousness giving the initiative to the inner Holy Spirit and saying, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2:20)¹⁹ In fact, the difference between the eighth and the ninth of Bodhisattva is that the level of freedom becomes even more deepened. The ninth stage is more sophisticated than the eighth in its use of upaya, skillful means.²⁰

The tenth stage of Bodhisattva is the ultimate level that humans could reach. It is the same as Christianity identifying the stage of union as the peak that humans could reach on earth. Now, the tenth degree Bodhisattva is said to be the Buddha-nature in human form. It sounds pretty similar to the Christian doctrine of holy incarnation that God

18 Dalsoo Jeon, "Spiritual Theology from the Catholic perspective," *Theological Thought* 99 (Winter 1997), 204.

19 Bokin Kim, "Christ as the Truth, the Light, the Life, but a Way?," *Buddhists Talk about Jesus Christians Talk about the Buddha*, eds., Rita M. Gross & Terry C. Muck (New York/London: Continuum, 1999), 56.

20 *Avatamsaka Sutra*, 40.

has become a human. Of course, the Christian doctrine says that the pre-existing Christ became Jesus of Nazareth. On the contrary, the Buddhist teaching says that a human being goes up all the way through the ten levels and reaches the point of becoming the tenth degree of Bodhisattva. The former is top-down while the latter is bottom-up.

However, Buddhism also says that the original face of the people is the Buddha-nature. It resembles the way Christianity says that we are all children of God. In terms of biblical language, saying that we are children of God is like saying that our nature, our original face in the Buddhist term, is divine. Focusing on humans, it can be said that humans have gradually become Buddhas. Focusing on the Buddha-nature, on the other hand, it can be said that the Buddha-nature has been incarnated into a human. Christianity follows the language of the latter and Buddhism follows that of the former. Once these two teachings are combined, a significant correction regarding the Christian teaching can be made. Christians believe that it is impossible for them to be like Jesus because he is the only incarnation of the divinity. Adopting the Buddhist teaching, we all can be incarnated ones, the divine in the human form. Jesus told his disciples that they would do even greater things than he did (John 14:12).

Imitatio Christi (the imitation of Christ) is often suggested as the goal of Christian spiritual life, and it has a double meaning. On one hand, it means that we can resemble Christ. On the other hand, however, we cannot ontologically be the same as Christ. Once emphasis is placed on the latter, Christians tend to ignore the importance of cultivation, spiritual practice to be like him. What if we adopt the Buddhist teaching here? We human beings have a great possibility of becoming like Christ, the divine in the human form. Both the Christian *Tre Vie* and

the Buddhist *Dasabhumī* say the same thing. As Bodhisattva remains a human even after the ultimate realization, the difference between a human and the Buddha-nature itself is still there. Likewise, a Christian remains a human even after reaching the highest peak of spiritual development. We are like God, but we are not God. The Buddhist understanding of Bodhisattva expands the meaning of *imitatio Christi* without hurting Christian doctrinal position.

Today Christianity is reduced to a religion with poor spiritual cultivation. The Protestant side, in particular, reveals such a tendency. If the Buddhist teaching of Bodhisattva is accepted, so that if Jesus of Nazareth is viewed as a Bodhisattva,²¹ it will be helpful for Protestant Christianity to recover asceticism while retaining its doctrinal position. Of course, in this case, there will be quite a different emphasis than usual. Like Jesus of Nazareth, the divine in a human form, we all are called to be like him. Jesus Christ is rather the archetype for us all. Becoming an incarnated divine is not something to stop at Jesus of Nazareth. It is a universal path for all mankind to walk on.²² Therefore the holy incarnation is not a one-time event, but a universal prototype like a Bodhisattva.

III. Daniel P. Brown's universal stages of meditation

Daniel Brown and Jack Engler present evidence in chapter 6 and 7

21 Hee Sung Kil, *Bodhisattva Jesus* (Seoul: Hyeonamsa, 2004), 193.

22 Even the Theravada tradition says that the goal of perfection is accessible to all, for all share a common humanity with the arahant. Richard Kieckhefer & George D. Bond, eds., *Sainthood* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 144.

of their book *Transformations of Consciousness* that the universal stages of meditation actually exist.²³ Despite language and cultural differences, there are universal stages of development in meditation. It is true even between theistic religions such as Christianity and non-theistic religion such as Buddhism.²⁴ Therefore, the comparison and contrast between the Christian *Tre Vie* and the Buddhist *Dasabhumī*, as attempted above, is not an unreasonable connection. The universal stages of meditation can be applied as a hermeneutic key to mix and mingle the theistic religion's teaching and the non-theistic religion's teaching. Here, I will rely on Daniel Brown's analysis.

After studying the three traditions of meditation, *Visuddhimagga* (the Path of Purification), *Yoga Sutra*, and *Mahamudra*, Brown says that there are three major stages in meditation. They are the stages of preliminary practice, concentration meditation, and insight meditation. These three major stages are in turn divided into six smaller stages, two each. The preliminary phase is divided into ethical and mind-body training. Attitude change, going inside, and behavioral change are included in the ethical training. In the mind and body training are included body awareness, calming breathing and thinking, etc. Concentration meditation stage is also divided into two parts: concentration with support and concentration without support. In Christianity, these two parts are distinguished from each other as meditation and

23 Daniel P. Brown, "The Stages of Meditation in Cross-cultural Perspective," *Transformations of Consciousness*, Ken Wilber-Jack Engler-Daniel P. Brown (Boston/London: Shambhala, 1986), 219.

24 Japanese theologian Seiichi Yagi says, "When we compare Christianity with Buddhism, we find remarkable similarities"; Seiichi Yagi, "Paul and Shinran; Jesus and Zen: What Lies at the Ground of Human Existence?," *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, eds., Paul O. Ingram & Frederick J. Streng (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 197.

contemplation. Insight meditation is divided into general and extraordinary insight.²⁵

The first part of Brown's preliminary stage is an ethical stage. This corresponds to the stage of purification in the Christian three ways. Just as the stage of purification begins with repentance, the preliminary stage of meditation begins with attitude change. Here, Brown says something like the concept of self-efficacy of activism psychology. Because most beginners doubt their own ability to reach enlightenment, it is necessary to begin with an exercise to awaken faith.²⁶ One of the three essentials to begin Zen meditation is great faith. Likewise, Christians need to begin their spiritual journey with faith. The beginner's virtues in the stage of purification is repentance as attitude change and faith. Brown's preliminary requirements are the same as those in both Buddhist and Christian teachings.

However, repentance or attitude change is not one-time event. Brown points out that one purpose of this preliminary stage is to produce a hyper-motivated state. Having cultivated such state, the beginner is able renounce everyday affairs.²⁷ This sounds similar to the Christian teaching of renouncing the world. Remaining motivated state can be called a life of repentance and faith in Christian terms. In order to do so, habits need to be formed, and, after all, humans are changed by habits in the long run. Brown describes this process with reactance, a social psychological concept. Reactance refers to individuals resisting social pressure for their own freedom. Similarly, the stage of purification in Christian *Tre Vie* consists of resisting and refusing

25 Brown, "The Stages of Meditation in Cross-cultural Perspective," 223-224.

26 Ibid., 226.

27 Ibid., 227.

the pressure of the world.

Brown's "going inside" as a part of preliminary training is also found in the preliminaries of Christian three ways. "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen" (Matt 6:6). Going inside is also a meaning of repentance because metanoia means turnabout.²⁸ Here, Brown mentions the formal study of philosophical foundations. "Social psychologists have shown that alterations in one's outcome expectations and belief system have a significant impact on all types of behavioral change."²⁹ In other words, spiritual cultivation must be supported by doctrinal study. Both Mahayana Buddhism and Christianity again say the same thing in this respect.

Above all, Brown's preliminaries aim at confronting the negative emotions that can be hindrances to development.³⁰ We must find and eliminate painful thoughts, imaginations, and memories. Only then can we move forward without doubt or obstacles. This is in line with Christian teaching of the purification period that struggling with eight or seven negative emotional states is a key task. To fight against the negative thoughts and feelings, you must be sensitive to them. Christian practices such as confession of sin and examen all contribute to this task.

Brown's preliminary stage can be summed up in these three: intellectual understanding of doctrines, elimination of negative emotions, and habituation of new behavioral and attitude changes. It is in line with the Christian purification stage to have faith, fight against eight

28 The only real solution is "inner alchemy," which means discovering the kingdom within; Kenneth S. Leong, *The Zen Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 17.

29 Brown, "The Stages of Meditation in Cross-cultural Perspective," 227.

30 Ibid., 228.

or seven sins, and habituate a life of regular spiritual practice. If my suggestion of considering them from the first to fourth degree of Bodhisattva as something identical to the Christian stage of purification, similar elements are found: the first's act of charity as an antidote to negative emotions, the second's rules of life to a deeper doctrinal understanding, the third's forbearance based on the deepened doctrinal understanding, and the fourth's exertion as hyper-motivated state to bring about the completion of the preliminary stage.

Now the second stage in Brown's analysis is concentration meditation. The first of them is concentration with support.³¹ There is something that holds one's attention, and there are various objects depending on the individual's temperament. It can be a visual object or an auditory object, such as a mantra. As time goes on, the focus gradually changes from the outside to the inner. When concentration deepens, negative thoughts that caused pain fade away. Concentration tends to reduce the contents of consciousness and to produce inner peace.³² Jesus Prayer has a support for concentration, that is the verse, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me." Centering Prayer usually have a shorter support that consists of one or two words like "Abba" or "peace."

Concentration with support gradually gives way to concentration without support. Meanwhile, the practitioner experiences increasingly tranquility or inner peace. Depending on its depth, concentration

31 Ibid., 234.

32 "Meditation, for me as a Christian, sometimes feels like sinking into a deep place of peace where all suffering is wordlessly and compassionately soothed"; Frances S. Adeney, "How I, a Christian, Have Learned from Buddhist Practice," *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer*, eds., Rita M. Gross & Terry C. Muck (New York/London: Continuum, 2003), 19.

without support can be identified either with *apatheia* at the end of purification period or with contemplation during the union period. Here is a difference between the Christian teaching and Brown's explanation. While the purification stage and the union stage are related to each other hierarchically, Brown's concentration and insight meditation both have a movement from lower to upper level within each category. It seems because Brown wants to differentiate the two different kinds of meditation: concentration and insight.

Let's move on to Brown's third category, insight meditation. Insight means gaining a different perspective regarding the world and oneself. According to Brown, insight meditation technically is a high-speed analysis of the stream which unfolds over time as a "succession" of discontinuous or continuous movements.³³ That explanation applies to mindfulness meditation. Therefore, Brown's insight meditation is identical to mindfulness meditation. Concentration and mindfulness are usually regarded as two equal but different types. Once again, the relation between Brown's two meditations seems rather more horizontal than hierarchical. No matter what, however, all the fundamental truths like impermanence, suffering, no-self come out of insight meditation. Yoga Sutra, on the other hand, says in a different way to speak that the universe changes endlessly, but there is ground of all that does not change.

Brown insists that although the stages of development are universal, the result experience of each tradition are different. *Visuddhimagga*, the Theravada tradition, is nihilistic in that successive events and moments of awareness disappear. *Yoga Sutra*, the Hindu tradition, is eternalist because the experienced interconnectedness is of some

33 Brown, "The Stages of Meditation in Cross-cultural Perspective," 246.

underlying substratum to the universe and its reflecting awareness is unchanging. The Mahamudra experience is the middle path because the interconnected events and their awareness change.³⁴ To sum up, Brown says that the paths are universal, but the destinations are different.³⁵

Exploring Brown's "same path, different destinations" is beyond this article's concern. To see how his analysis on the universal stages of meditation fits both Christian *Tre Vie* and Buddhist *Dasabhumī* is the purpose of this article. Though there are not without some differences like Brown's horizontal arrangement of stages and the rather hierarchical arrangement of *Tre Vie* and *Dasabhumī*, his explanation largely fits the two traditions. Even the difference has an implication for the Christian teaching. The three paths can be used as concepts to capture the meaning of short-term events and experiences rather than to read the big picture of one's whole spiritual journey.

IV. Conclusion

The usual understanding of *Tre Vie*, or the three ways needs to be corrected as follows. First of all, the Christian spiritual development in the three ways is not a straight line. It is rather spiral repeating similar cycles again and again. For instance, *apatheia* which is considered the end of purification period is contemplation itself. Just looking at the stage of purification, there appear the elements of all the three ways to various degrees. Therefore, it is right to say that the cycle of

34 Ibid., 256.

35 Ibid., 220.

purification, illumination, and union is once and already completed within the stage of purification. As the cycle repeats itself, the strength, intensity and depth of it grows.

What we have learned from the Buddhist teaching of Bodhisattva development is that contemplative dimension is already involved from the first stage. If there is a universal path for all different spiritual traditions, we have no reasons to refuse that learning. It helps us to see that grace is already at work even in the very first stage of the Christian spiritual journey. This explanation will be helpful to eliminate the misunderstanding of Protestant Christians against asceticism as a fully human effort.

Secondly, contemplation is not just about *dhyana*, dwelling in tranquility. Christians tend to emphasize contemplation as the nature of concentration without support in Brown's explanation. Insight or wisdom also needs to be emphasized so that both *dhyana* and *prajna* of contemplation are paid equal attention. Insight or new perspectives is allocated somewhat exclusively to the stage of illumination, and such biased understanding seems due to that. When Evagrius named the stage of union as the stage of theology, it seems he wanted to not lose the aspect of insight.³⁶

This reinterpretation of *Tre Vie* will correct the popular belief that contemplation is available only to the chosen few. There may be differences in depth and frequency, but even beginners and intermediates often experience contemplation. But people often pass by without knowing it. If their spiritual directors or leaders help them to be aware of it, their spiritual development will accelerate.

This way of reinterpretation has much to suggest to Protestant

36 To Evagrius, theology is contemplation; Evagrius, *Praktikos*, 106.

churches, where misunderstandings and antipathy toward contemplative prayer are still prevalent. They tend to consider affective prayer as the goal of prayer life. However, it will be a different story if they have already experienced contemplative dimension more often than they expected. If that is the case, it is no longer necessary for them to believe that contemplative prayer is for Catholics only, or that it is suspicious thing belonging to heretics or new age groups.

This interpretation is the same as sudden enlightenment and gradual cultivation. The popular belief about purification-illumination-union is like gradual cultivation and sudden enlightenment. It sounds like it is human efforts to achieve the goal. If contemplative dimension is already involved in the earlier stage, we can say that it is God's grace that leads the whole process of spiritual development.

As mentioned in the beginning, this article is rather a treat attempt to suggest a possibility of understanding *Tre Vie*, the Christian spiritual teaching, differently through *Dasabhumī*, the Buddhist teaching. As suggesting that possibility based on some similarities between the two basic texts is the primary goal of this article, all the rest will be passed on to future research.

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