

ARTICLE

Two Spiritual Masters: St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo

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Abstract

The Second Vatican Council's declaration *Nostra Aetate* spoke of the Catholic Church's "high regard" for other religions and sought to promote dialogue among them. The following article seeks to further this goal by reflecting on the work of two highly regarded spiritual masters within two of these religions. Within the Christian tradition was St. John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Carmelite who is widely recognized as a preeminent Christian spiritual master, while a counterpart from the Buddhist tradition was Nyoshul Khenpo, a twentieth-century exponent of Dzogchen, which he considered the heart of his own lineage within Tibetan Buddhism. The article begins with a brief account of the life of each man, followed by what they taught about the ultimate goal within their respective traditions, as well as the practices or virtues needed to attain that goal.

Keywords

John of the Cross, Nyoshul Khenpo, detachment, meditation, solitude, humility, love

Introductory Remarks

On October 28, 1965, the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church approved *Nostra Aetate* ["In Our Time"], a declaration on the relation of the

Church to non-Christian religions. This was the shortest of the council's sixteen documents but also one of its most influential. With a large majority of about 87 percent of its voting members voting for approval, the council changed a centuries-old attitude toward other religions that had been marked by negative attitudes toward them and no real need for dialogue. The French journalist Henri Fesquet, who covered the entire council, later wrote about the significance of *Nostra Aetate* in the following words: "Whether we recognize it or not, this sudden extension of Rome's religious horizon marks a rupture with a certain tradition [in the Church's past]. It would not have been possible without the combined efforts of Pope John XXIII and Cardinal [Augustine] Bea, as well as the sustained collaboration of Vatican II."¹ The second section of *Nostra Aetate* says that "Throughout history even to the present day, there is found among different peoples a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life. At times there is present even a recognition of a supreme being, or still more of a Father," leading to "a way of life that is imbued with a deep religious sense." The declaration goes on to name some religions that have developed "well-defined concepts and exact language" to answer basic questions of who we are and how we ought to live. Of Buddhism in particular, the declaration says that this religion "in its various forms testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world. It proposes a way of life by which men can, with confidence and trust, attain a state of perfect liberation and reach supreme illumination, either through their own efforts or by the aid of divine help." That second section of the declaration concludes with these words: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions...The Church therefore urges her sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture."²

That declaration, only five sections long, has had major influence in the more than sixty years since its promulgation. The Vatican now has a Dicastery (i.e., a permanent council) for Interreligious Dialogue whose staff organizes interreligious dialogues in various parts of the world and publishes the journal *Pro Dialogo*, while other groups promote the same ideals in their

1 Henri Fesquet, *The Drama of Vatican II*, trans. Bernard Murchland (Random House, 1967), 746.

2 *Nostra Aetate*, sec. 2, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, new rev. ed., ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Liturgical Press, 2014), 739.

own countries or regions, all with the goal of abandoning the negative attitudes of the past and instead promoting mutual understanding.

There have also been individual pioneers who have been leaders in the same endeavor, such as the monk Bede Griffiths, born in England in 1906 but having spent the final decades of his long life in India until his peaceful death in 1993. He showed his own attitude toward religious diversity in the Introduction to his work *Universal Wisdom: A Journey through the Sacred Wisdom of the World*, where he expressed the hope “that the texts which have been gathered together in this volume...may provide a source book for a new vision of reality, which the world is seeking today.”³ Reflecting on such texts, we come to “see our own religion in a new light and we begin to discern how humanity today could grow in mutual understanding, toward that unity which is our common goal.”⁴

Such an approach is at the background of this article, which seeks to foster the kind of mutual understanding that pioneers like Griffiths desired. While interreligious dialogue may occur when two individuals or groups from different traditions meet face-to-face, it can surely take place also in the *intra*religious dialogue that comes about when a person confronts texts by authors from two different traditions and is open to the expanded horizon that can result from reflecting on their works. To that end, I have chosen two authors, one from my own Catholic tradition and the other from Tibetan Buddhism. Many other pairs might have been chosen, but John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo seemed appropriate because they have been widely recognized as spiritual masters within their own traditions. John of the Cross (1542–1591) is one of only thirty-eight persons who have been designated “Doctor of the Church” because of their sound teaching, leading our contemporary scholar Bernard McGinn to claim that John of the Cross “blazes like a star of the first magnitude.”⁵ For those of us living in the West, Nyoshul Khenpo (1932–1999) is less well-known, but within his own Tibetan Buddhist tradition he was so highly regarded as to be called “the most outstanding and knowledgeable exponent of Dzogchen, the summit and heart of the teaching of the ancient Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.”⁶ During the final decades of his life, Nyoshul taught some of the

3 Bede Griffiths, *Universal Wisdom* (Fount, 1994), 10.

4 Griffiths, *Universal Wisdom*, 10.

5 Bernard McGinn, *Mysticism in the Golden Age of Spain (1500–1650): Volume 6, Part 2, The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (Crossroad Publishing, 2017) 230.

6 Sogyal Rinpoché, introduction to Nyoshul Khenpo’s *A Marvelous Garland of Rare Gems: Biographies of Masters of Awareness in the Dzogchen Lineage*, trans. Richard Barron (Padma, 2005), xv.

most important Nyingma lamas, such as Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Dzigar Kongtrul, and Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. Much of what Nyoshul wrote has now been translated from Tibetan to English in the books that will be referred to in this article.

When I began my research I did not know what correspondences I might find, but during my reading and reflection I came to conclude that these two men were in important respects kindred spirits. Even though on a discursive level they certainly differed in matters of doctrine, there did seem to be on the non-discursive level of spiritual practice what Griffiths considered a common wisdom which we all share, one that “converges on the center” from which “everything springs” and toward which “everything is converging.”⁷

In structuring this article, I will use the following major divisions: (1) a brief account of the life of St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo; (2) what St. John and Nyoshul said about the ultimate goal within their respective traditions; (3) what each author taught about the path to the goal, specifically with respect to the need for detachment, the kind of meditation each recommended, and the attitudes or virtues needed to reach the goal, specifically the practice of solitude, humility, and love.

A Brief Account of the Lives of St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo

The Life of St. John of the Cross

John was born in 1542 at Fontiveros, Spain, a town about twenty-five miles northwest of Avila. After receiving a basic education in nearby Medino del Campo, he entered a Carmelite friary in 1563 and after professing vows was sent to that order’s college in Salamanca, where he could also take some courses at its famous university. Ordained to the priesthood in 1567, he was in his hometown to sing his first Mass when he met Madre Teresa de Jesús, better known in English as St. Teresa of Ávila. She persuaded him to join her in her plan of providing a stricter, reformed rule for the Carmelite friars as she had already begun to do for Carmelite nuns. Not surprisingly, their plans for reform brought about much opposition, so much so that in early December 1577 a group of Carmelites who followed the mitigated rule had John seized and imprisoned in a cell at their monastery in Toledo. This cell was tiny, originally intended as a closet, with very poor lighting, and John

7 *A Human Search: The Life of Father Bede Griffiths*, directed by John Swindells (More Than Illusion Films, 1993), DVD.

was taken from it three times each week for scourging as he knelt in the middle of the refectory. After a daring escape in the middle of the night in August 1578, John journeyed to El Calvario in the southern part of the country, where he was safer. In the ensuing years Fray John assumed various duties in the reformed order: prior of the monastery at El Calvario, confessor and spiritual director of the nuns at nearby Beas, rector of the Carmelite college in Baeza, vicar provincial of Andalusia, and major definitor at the 1588 chapter of Madrid. It was during these years that he did much of his writing (poems, commentaries on his poems, and spiritual maxims) along with practicing the work at which he felt especially suited: serving as spiritual director for the friars, nuns, and laypersons.

The calm did not last, however, this time because of clashes within the reform itself. The vicar general, Nicolás Doria, proposed changes that Fray John and others opposed. At the chapter held in 1591, John was not elected to any office. Instead of being despondent, he wrote to Madre Ana de Jesús at Beas: “If things did not turn out as you desired, you ought rather to be consoled and thank God profusely. Since His Majesty has so arranged matters, it is what most suits everyone...It is in my favor since, being freed and relieved of the care of souls, I can, if I want and with God’s help, enjoy peace, solitude, and the delightful fruit of the forgetfulness of self and of all things.”⁸ Fray John was then sent to the solitude of La Peñuela, only to suffer a month later from an inflammation of the leg that quickly worsened. To receive medical attention, he was sent to the town of Ubeda in September 1591, where the sickness grew still worse and led to his death shortly after midnight on December 14. He was canonized by Pope Benedict XIII in 1726 and declared a Doctor of the Church by Pius XI in 1926.

The Life of Nyoshul Khenpo

Nyoshul was born in 1932 in Kham, the eastern region of Tibet, and was at that time given the name Jamyang Dorje. His devout grandmother urged him to find a teacher who could train him on the path to enlightenment. Following her advice, the boy began a lifelong search for learning, although always accompanying that search with spiritual practice. A twelve-year period of training led him to be recognized as a *khenpo*, that is, someone recognized as being a professor or abbot. After receiving the “pith instructions” that distill the essence of Buddhist philosophy into clear, experiential guidance, he received a new name, Nyoshul, taken from the name of the monastery at which he was then living as well as the name of

8 Quoted by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., “General Introduction,” in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (ICS Publications, 1979), 25.

the teacher who had introduced him to the nature of the mind. His extensive study of works by the prominent fourteenth-century master Longchen and by later teachers, along with oral instructions that were the heart of the Dzogchen tradition and that were only given to him and other disciples one at a time and never to a whole group, determined Nyoshul Khenpo's special lineage. Sometimes Nyoshul would meditate alone in a cave or on mountaintops, but at other times would visit monasteries in Tibet to receive further teachings from all the different Buddhist traditions and lineages, for by this time he knew what he was seeking and where to find it. He also composed extemporaneous songs, known as *vajra* songs, penning them spontaneously on whatever paper happened to be at hand. Sung spontaneously for various individuals, they were later repeated at his students' request and then recorded, transcribed, and translated into English or French. These songs, along with Nyoshul's own commentaries on them and on earlier songs by other Tibetans, form the core of his published works.

His life, and that of his fellow Tibetans, changed drastically with the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950. He joined a group that set out from the eastern region of Kham in order to escape, but most of his companions died or were killed on the way, so Nyoshul was among the relatively few who arrived safely in Nepal. He said that this experience made a lasting impression on him, showing the impermanence that surrounds our lives. From Nepal he went to the Himalayan region of West Bengal and lived in great simplicity in India for the next twenty-five years. He was now able to give teachings to others, doing so in a very kind and loving way and making use of teachings from various schools of Buddhism besides his own, for he was a follower of the non-sectarian Rimé movement within Tibetan Buddhism. In his words, "We should have an open, spacious attitude and be open to all forms of the truth, all the different paths that can bring beings to the ultimate understanding."⁹

On the background of his extensive training and study, Nyoshul became determined to write a history of the Dzogchen lineage, a project on which he was at work when in the mid-1970s he suffered a stroke and seemed to be at the point of death for several years. A guru in Bhutan urged him to marry as a way to help restore his health, so he left the monastic state and married a woman named Damchö Zangmo, the daughter of a Bhutanese yogi who gave him the kind of care that seems to have prolonged his life. Bhutanese friends helped him raise enough money to fly to Switzerland for medical treatment, and from there he accepted an invitation to reside in the

9 Nyoshul Khenpo and Lama Surya Das, *Natural Great Perfection: Dzogchen Teachings and Vajra Songs* (Snow Lion, [1995] 2008), 35.

Dordogne area of southwestern France, where he helped build a retreat center at which he later taught for four years. With somewhat improved health, he began traveling to various countries to teach, but he took up permanent residence in Bhutan so as to be near sites sacred to Longchen, who had founded a monastery in that country in the fourteenth century. Falling seriously ill in 1999, Nyoshul was flown back to France for medical care and died there in late August of that year.

The Ultimate Goal of Our Life according to these Two Teachers

Having heard something of the lives of these two spiritual masters, let us see what they taught about the ultimate goal of our life. For John of the Cross, the major source of all his teaching was certainly the Bible, where that ultimate goal is often called “eternal life.” For example, in Jesus’s high-priestly prayer in the seventeenth chapter of the Fourth Gospel, he asks the Father to glorify him, the Son, “so that he might give eternal life to all you gave him. Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ” (John 17:2–3). In the Second Letter to Timothy, the goal is expressed in somewhat different language, for after saying that he has competed well, finished the race, and kept the faith, the Apostle continues: “From now on, the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will reward to me on that day, and not only to me but to all who have longed for his appearance” (2 Tim. 4:7–8). One of the most influential of early Christian authors, John Cassian (c.360–c.435), wrote that our ultimate goal is “the kingdom of God,” which can be reached only if our lives are marked by “purity of heart.”

St. John of the Cross would surely have agreed with any of these, but the terms he regularly used are “union with God” or “uniting one’s will with God’s.” One of many passages in which he expresses this goal is the following from the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*: “Our intention in this work is to guide the soul through spiritual goods to the divine union with God.”¹⁰ Or similarly, from the second book of the same treatise: “A man makes room for God by wiping away all the smudges and smears of creatures, by uniting his will perfectly to God’s...When this is done, the soul will be illumed by and

10 St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 3.33.1. These numbers refer to Book 3, Chapter 33, Section 1 of the work. All subsequent quotations from the treatises of John of the Cross will follow this format. I use the translation by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., eds., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, but this numbering system will be useful to readers using any other editions or translations.

transformed in God. And God will so communicate His supernatural being to it that it will appear to be God Himself and will possess all that God Himself has.”¹¹ To help explain this, in the *Spiritual Canticle* John uses the image of a window through which the light of the sun is shining. If there are no smudges on the window, then there seems to be no distinction between the window and the light shining through it. He writes: “In this transformation the two [i.e., God and the soul] become one, as we would say of the window united with the ray of sunlight.”¹² Such language has at times made spiritual writers seem suspect to authorities anxious to preserve orthodox teaching, but John is clear that the identity was of “appearance” and not of substance.

At first sight, Nyoshul’s teaching about our ultimate goal may seem so different from the teaching of St. John as to make us doubt that at the deepest level there is a “common wisdom” that allows us to see how different traditions actually converge. Practically all Christians would find themselves in agreement about their ultimate goal being union with God, eternal life, or other synonymous terms, but no Buddhist would use such terminology. Even though Nyoshul was a self-proclaimed “non-sectarian” and therefore very open to teachings from the various Buddhist schools, he always held that Dzogchen is the quintessential practice. He writes of Dzogchen’s goal as one’s coming to realize or truly experience that “this innate Great Perfection [the literal meaning of Dzogchen], this basic goodness called Buddha-nature, Buddha-mind, or *rigpa*, is our own nature...our very own being....It is what we are.”¹³ Or again: “[O]ne’s own nature is the infinite great expanse.”¹⁴

Now if St. John of the Cross teaches that the ultimate goal of our life is to attain union with God, whereas Nyoshul holds that our ultimate goal is to realize that our innate basic goodness, our Buddha-nature or Buddha-mind, is our very own being, or that our own nature is “the infinite great expanse,” then this might indeed make us suspect the claim of Griffiths that at the deepest level religions share a common wisdom. That suspicion becomes questionable, however, when we examine more closely the way in which each of these masters talks about this ultimate goal. According to John, even though we may know many truths about the divine reality (such as creation, the Trinity, and the Incarnation, all of which are summarized by St. John of the Cross in his nine *Romances* based on the opening verses of the Fourth

11 St. John, *Ascent*, 2.5.7.

12 St. John, *Spiritual Canticle* (second redaction), 26.3.

13 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 108.

14 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 114.

Gospel), such knowledge is not the same as full comprehension. John's years of study at Salamanca, where the work of St. Thomas Aquinas was central to the teaching of theology, surely made the Carmelite familiar with that passage in the *Summa Theologiae* where St. Thomas writes: "No created mind can attain the perfect sort of understanding that is intrinsically possible of God's essence. God, whose actual being is infinite, as noted above [in Ia 7,1], can be infinitely understood. The created mind, however, understands God more or less perfectly according to the degree of the light of glory that floods it. Since...the created light of glory cannot be infinite, it is impossible for any created mind to understand God infinitely; impossible, therefore, to comprehend him."¹⁵

It is for this reason that St. John frequently writes that we must advance to union with God's wisdom "by unknowing rather than by knowing," for "all of the world's wisdom...contrasted with the infinite wisdom of God is pure and utter ignorance."¹⁶ This being so, the saint sometimes uses the phrase "I don't know what" (*un no sé qué*) to describe the unfathomable gap between our knowledge and God's reality. The phrase appears, for example, in each of nine stanzas of a *Glosa á lo Divino* that is among his minor works. Its final stanza reads as follows:

I will never lose myself
 For that which the senses
 Can take in here,
 Nor for all the mind can hold,
 No matter how lofty,
 Nor for grace or beauty,
 But only for I-don't-know-what
 Which is so gladly found.¹⁷

For his part, Nyoshul used very similar language about the goal of Dzogchen practice, as when he wrote that that "the natural Great Perfection...is inconceivable and cannot be described. The absolute truth is not something that can be apprehended by the mind of ordinary beings. In order to indicate this to beings, in a relative way, the Buddhas have said that the void nature is like the sky, while its luminous expression is like the sun."¹⁸ In one of his *vjara* songs, Nyoshul refers to the "unfabricated, intrinsic nature of

15 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia. 12, 7, in *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 3, trans. Herbert McCabe, O.P. (Blackfriars, 1964), 25.

16 St. John, *Ascent*, 1.4.5.

17 St. John, "Commentary Applied to Spiritual Things," in *The Collected Works*, 737.

18 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 74.

mind” that is “free of all limitations.” This calls to mind the frequent reference in Dzogchen writings to “the sky-like nature of our mind. Utterly open, free, and limitless, it is fundamentally so simple and so natural that it can never be complicated, corrupted, or stained, so pure that it is beyond even the concept of purity and impurity.”¹⁹ Dzogchen masters realize, of course, that to talk of the nature of mind as “sky-like” is only a metaphor, but the term does help us to begin to imagine the ineffable, all-embracing boundlessness of the mind, far beyond the power of human words to describe just what it is.

This means that both men were writing within what is sometimes called “the apophatic way,” a term that comes from the Greek verb *apophánai*, meaning “to say no; to deny.” What both St. John and Nyoshul are denying is that our finite mind is able to grasp fully, to “comprehend,” the ultimate reality to which we are called. This teaching has been propounded by some of the most important thinkers in both the Christian and Buddhist traditions, and both St. John and Nyoshul are in full agreement with this traditional teaching about the inability of the human mind to comprehend or fathom the ultimate reality, whether that be called God or the Buddha-mind. Such emphasis does not deny that many persons will feel more called to follow a “cataphatic” path, finding genuine spiritual nourishment in religious objects like statues and paintings, mantras and mandalas, as well as in practices intended to lead to the actual visualization of a deity or sacred person or object. But it is surely one of the lasting values of the more austere approach of St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo that they keep us always mindful that the ultimate reality to which we aspire is truly transcendent or, as taught in still another religious tradition, Hinduism, is *neti neti*, “not this, not that.” From this perspective, we can very well conclude that such spiritual masters do share “a common wisdom,” even though basic agreement at this level does not mean that they are merely “saying the same thing.” But if the ultimate goal is strictly ineffable, both St. John and Nyoshul held that it can nevertheless be experienced or in some respects “seen.” Let us therefore consider how these two spiritual masters describe the path to the goal of which each speaks.

19 Sogyal Rinpoché, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (Harper, 1992), 49.

Teachings about the Path to the Goal

St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo on Detachment

Both in his minor works, such as his *Precautions* and his *Maxims and Counsels*, as well as in the major treatises—the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the *Dark Night*, the *Spiritual Canticle*, and the *Living Flame of Love*—John made use of what he had learned of Aristotelian philosophy at Salamanca. Since, “as we learn in philosophy,” it is impossible for two contraries to coexist in the same subject, then because “darkness, an attachment to creatures, and light, which is God, are contraries...the light of divine union cannot be established in the soul until these affections are eradicated.”²⁰ In one of the minor works, St. John gives examples of the kinds of objects to which one may become attached and so be hindered in attaining union with God: “the habit of much talking; some small unconquered attachment, such as to a person, an article of clothing, a cell, a book, or some kind of food, or other conversations and little satisfactions in tasting things, and knowing and hearing, and the like.”²¹ But it is not only attachment to particular objects, such as a book or a kind of food, that will stand in the way of union with God, for attachment to spiritual feelings is just as much a hindrance, as so clearly expressed in one of St. John’s *Sayings of Light and Love* in the minor works. Here, in a way reminiscent of the kind of image used so effectively by St. Francis de Sales in the following generation, St. John uses the example of an insect to emphasize the way this kind of attachment can deprive one of the freedom necessary to ascend to divine union: “The fly that clings to honey hinders its flight, and the soul that allows itself attachment to spiritual sweetness hinders its own liberty and contemplation.”²² Even if persons are not fully aware of it, such appetites do actually torment them, as illustrated by eight scriptural passages either quoted or referred to in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 1.7. It is not that the things themselves are what keeps one from union with God, but rather the craving or appetite for them, a distinction clearly made by the saint when he wrote: “We are dealing with the denudation of the soul’s appetites and gratifications; this is what leaves it free and empty of all things, even though it possesses them. Since the things of the world cannot enter the soul, they are not in themselves an encumbrance or harm to it; rather, it is the will and appetite dwelling within it that causes the damage.”²³

20 St. John, *Ascent*, 1.4.2.

21 St. John, *Maxims on Love*, no. 43, in *The Collected Works*, 677. See also *The Precautions*, no. 7, page 657 in the same volume.

22 St. John, *Sayings of Light and Love*, no. 24, in *The Collected Works*, 668.

23 St. John, *Ascent*, 1.3.4.

Such appetites concern not only impersonal objects, such as a particular “article of clothing, a cell, a book,” as mentioned above, but also one’s fellow human beings. Here the danger is particularly acute when it concerns one’s immediate family or close relatives. In his words, “you should have an equal love for and an equal forgetfulness of all persons, whether relatives or not, and withdraw your heart from relatives as much as from others, and in some ways even more for fear that flesh and blood might be quickened by natural love, which is ever alive among kin and which must always be mortified for the sake of spiritual perfection.”²⁴ One perceptive student of St. John who understood the saint’s teaching in this regard was the prominent French philosopher of the twentieth century, Jacques Maritain. Writing in particular with respect to love of one’s relatives, but in a way that would apply to any object of one’s love and desire, Maritain wrote that the soul is bound not to destroy its legitimate love for relatives but rather “to subordinate it completely to charity and, as far as may be necessary, to tear out its own sense of proprietorship. Only then will it arrive at a perfect love of its own, in and for God, loving them [i.e., one’s relatives] indeed as its own, but according to God in a supernatural and incomparably deeper way.”²⁵

St. John’s advice on how to overcome our natural appetite toward all created things is summarized in some of the best-known passages from his works, the two lists given near the end of the first book of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. The first list asks his reader always to be inclined “not to the easiest, but to the most difficult; not to the most delightful, but to the harshest,” and to six other alternatives, all summed up in a desire “to enter for Christ into complete nudity, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world.”²⁶ St. John’s second list is longer but it, too, concerns the way to channel our desires or appetites in a Godward direction. The list begins by assuring us that “to reach satisfaction in all, desire its possession in nothing,” and after listing more than ten other alternatives concludes that “in this nakedness the spirit finds its quietude and rest,” whereas when anything is coveted, in that very desire the spirit is wearied.²⁷

This is the kind of teaching that has led some readers of St. John of the Cross to feel that what he asks is excessively harsh and demanding, but what such readers overlook is the saint’s assurance that living in this way will in fact bring about a sense of freedom and delight far beyond anything that purely natural inclinations could ever provide. As he wrote, “If you sincerely

24 St. John, *The Precautions*, no. 5, in *The Collected Works*, 656.

25 Jacques Maritain, introduction to *St. John of the Cross*, by Fr. Bruno, O.D.C. (Sheed & Ward, 1936), xxi.

26 St. John, *Ascent*, 1.13.6.

27 St. John, *Ascent*, 1.13.11.

put them [i.e., these teachings] into practice with order and discretion, you will discover in them great delight and consolation.”²⁸ Or again, St. John writes that if by mortification a person lives a genuinely spiritual life, “this person, now of pure heart, finds in all things a joyful, pleasant, chaste, pure, spiritual, glad, and loving knowledge of God.”²⁹

This assurance that what one loves will be one’s own in a supernatural way, far more delightful than what might seem to result from a purely human appetite, was perhaps nowhere more beautifully taught by St. John than in a prayer contained among his minor works. Having himself reached a high degree of union with God’s will, he was now able to exclaim in exultant tones: “Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth. Mine are the nations, the just are mine, and mine the sinners. The angels are mine, and the Mother of God, and all things are mine; and God Himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me. What do you ask, then, and seek my soul? Yours is all this, all is for you.”³⁰

Having seen what St. John teaches about the need for detachment from our various appetites, let us now consider what Nyoshul said about the same topic. An appropriate place to start is with the *Bhavacakra* or “Wheel of Life,” which is depicted on the outside wall of almost all Buddhist temples or monasteries in the Indo-Tibetan region, for at its center is a small circle depicting three creatures that symbolize the “three poisons”: attachment or craving (represented by a rooster), aversion or ill-will (a snake), and ignorance or delusion (a pig). To the first of these poisons Nyoshul ascribes special emphasis, writing that “of all the Buddhist teachings, the main thing is the release or loosening of selfishness, of self-grasping, of ego-cherishing, of craving, resistance and attachment.”³¹ Indeed, he ascribes to Buddha Shakyamuni the claim that “the root of all suffering is clinging, attachment. There is no teaching other than this. This is the root of all.”³² Accordingly, detachment is the way to be released from cyclic existence and so “become enlightened like the primordial Buddha.”³³

Living in this way will, of course, include being freed from the other two poisons as well. Instead of the aversion or ill-will represented by the image of the snake in the wheel of life, we give up quarrels and enmities, all strife and hostility, even as we likewise give up the delusion or ignorance symbolized by

28 St. John, *Ascent*, 1.13.7.

29 St. John, *Ascent*, 3.26.6.

30 St. John, “Prayer of a Soul Taken with Love,” in *The Collected Works*, 669.

31 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 94.

32 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 119.

33 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 76.

the pig, no longer being misled by the “magical appearance of all phenomena,”³⁴ because we come to recognize their lack of substantial, independent existence, just as upon awakening from sleep we realize the insubstantiality of our dreams. Using his acquaintance with a well-known parable from the Christian scriptures, Nyoshul writes that the genuine happiness that comes to one by overcoming clinging and attachment is like that of the prodigal son upon being restored to his proper place, for it is “like being reintroduced to ourselves, like the prodigal son being restored to his rightful place as crown prince of his father’s kingdom, beyond the possibility of doubt or disputation.”³⁵

So even though St. John of the Cross would not have accepted the Buddhist notion of there being no substantial self, it would be altogether correct to say that his teaching is intended to draw us away from what many Christian writers call the “false self” of self-centeredness, foreshadowed by what St. Paul had earlier written when he urged his readers to “put away the old self of your former way of life ... and put on the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth” (Eph. 4:22–24). In this respect, both St. John and Nyoshul would be in agreement about the joy or happiness that is the fruit of putting away the clinging, craving, or possessiveness that otherwise keeps us fettered. Even as the two men emphasized the need for detachment from our various cravings, they also wrote much about the need for appropriate ways of meditation, which we will next consider.

St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo on Meditation

St. John is explicit about the fact that his work was intended primarily for nuns and friars of the Primitive Observance of Mount Carmel, whom he considered “proficients,” that is, “already detached to a great extent from the temporal things of this world.”³⁶ He was convinced that many of them were well prepared for a form of prayer that consisted in “a simple, loving knowledge” of God, a “loving awareness” that would be hindered if their spiritual director insisted on their continuing to meditate in a discursive manner as they had done while still in the state of beginners.³⁷ Several times he gives the signs that a person is ready to move on to a higher form of prayer, and he repeatedly warns that “directors should not impose meditation upon persons in this state, nor should they oblige them to make

34 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 51.

35 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 77.

36 St. John, *Ascent*, prologue.

37 St. John, *The Living Flame of Love*, 3.34–35.

acts or strive for satisfaction and fervor. Such activity would place an obstacle in the part of the principal agent Who, as I say, is God.”³⁸

St. John assumes that his readers will readily understand the difference between the kinds of prayer or meditation to which he refers, the earlier form being “to meditate and make acts of discursive reflection with the imagination.”³⁹ When using the word *meditación* all by itself, St. John is usually referring to this kind of meditation, which he sometimes calls “*la obra del discursivo meditar*” or “*la meditación y discurso*.” In such cases, he will sometime contrast this with “contemplation,” which is “*la via del espíritu (que es la contemplativa)*.”⁴⁰ As St. John was writing in the first instance only for his fellow Carmelites of the Primitive Observance and as they would already have experienced discursive meditation during their period of initial formation, he did not need to define more exactly just what he meant by that term. It will be helpful, however, to give a brief description of discursive mediation as taught by another great Spanish saint who lived somewhat earlier in the sixteenth century, St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Of the various writings of this founder of the Society of Jesus, the best known is surely the *Spiritual Exercises*, intended above all to help Christians discern their particular God-given calling. These exercises abound in the kinds of “points” and the uses of the imagination that St. John considered necessary for beginners. One could turn to almost any page of the *Exercises* to see what “discursive meditation” (that is, meditation “step by step”) really means. Consider what St. Ignatius asks of someone meditating on “the standard of Christ,” contrasted with “the standard of Satan.” The preludes to this meditation abound in the use of the imagination, as when one is asked “to imagine a great plain in the region of Jerusalem, where the supreme commander of the good people is Christ our Lord; then another plain in the region of Babylon, where the leader of the enemy is Lucifer.” There follow three points about Satan, including imagining him “seated on a throne of fire and smoke,” summoning “uncountable devils” to all parts of the world, and admonishing them to tempt people to covet riches and honor. In contrast, there follow three points where one gazes in imagination on Christ our Lord, considering how he has taken his place on a beautiful area near Jerusalem and from there sends his followers throughout the world to spread his doctrine and call people to spiritual or actual poverty, to a desire for reproaches and contempt, and to humility, thereby inducing people “to all the other virtues.” This is followed by three colloquies, the first being a

38 St. John, *Living Flame*, 3.33.

39 St. John, *Living Flame*, 3.32.

40 For these terms, see St. John, *Ascent*, 2.13.1; 2.14.2; and 12.14.1.

prayer to Our Lady, the second to her Son, Jesus, and the third to the Father, followed by the Lord's Prayer, plus a note saying that "this exercise will be made at midnight and again after arising," followed by "two repetitions of it, one near the hour of Mass and one near that of Vespers," each of them closing with the three colloquies mentioned above.⁴¹

It is crucial to emphasize that St. John of the Cross fully recognized the value of such meditations for those who are still in the beginning stages of the spiritual life, but he was very concerned that inexperienced directors would keep insisting on such meditations for persons who needed another kind of prayer. In the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, he twice writes of signs that a person is ready to move on beyond discursive meditation, namely that the person no longer receives satisfaction from its practice, can no longer fix the imagination or sense faculties on particular objects, and is drawn instead to "remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without the acts and exercises ... of the intellect, memory, and will."⁴² It is altogether understandable that St. John would express his concerns about unwise directors in a treatise like the *Ascent*, which is largely devoted to the active nights of the senses and spirit. His concern was so great, however, that even in the *Living Flame of Love*, a work that was devoted to the spiritual marriage, the highest stage possible on earth, he also devotes many pages to expressing his dismay over the harm done by unwise insistence that a person should keep trying to practice discursive meditation when he or she is no longer able to do so. In fact, some of his harshest criticisms of poor directors are found in this treatise, as when he writes:

[M]any spiritual directors cause great harm to a number of souls because, in not understanding the ways and properties of the spirit, they ordinarily make them lose the unction of these delicate ointments, with which the Holy Spirit anoints and prepares them for Himself, and they [the directors] instruct them in other baser ways, serviceable only to beginners, which they themselves have used or read of somewhere. Knowing no more than what pertains to beginners—and please God they would even know this much—they do not wish to permit souls to pass beyond these beginnings and these discursive and imaginative ways (even though God may desire to lead them on). Thus they do not let them go beyond their natural

41 Ignatius of Loyola, "*The Spiritual Exercises*" and *Selected Works*, ed. George E. Ganss, S.J. (Paulist, 1991), 154–64 (nos. 136–48).

42 St. John, *Ascent*, 2.13.2–4.

capacity, but through their natural capacity souls cannot make much progress.⁴³

Similarly, he wrote elsewhere: “It is sad to see many disturb their soul when it desires to abide in this calm and repose of interior quietude, where it is filled with the peace and refreshment of God.”⁴⁴

If, however, a wise and experienced director helps a person proceed to that gentle, loving awareness that is brought about by God and leads through what the saint terms “the spiritual espousals” all the way to “the spiritual marriage,” then a soul attains the most sublime state possible in life on earth. It is now God who infuses both knowledge and love, for “in this contemplation we are discussing (by which God infuses Himself into the soul), particular knowledge as well as acts made by the soul are unnecessary, because God in one act is communicating light and love together, which is loving supernatural knowledge.”⁴⁵ The soul here returns to a pristine state in which the soul “resembles Adam in the state of innocence, who did not know evil. For she [the soul] is so innocent that she does not understand evil, nor does she judge anything in a bad light.”⁴⁶ So intimate is this “transforming union” that “the Beloved lives in the lover and the lover in the Beloved. Love produces such likeness in this transformation of lovers that one can say each is the other and both are one,” although St. John rightly emphasizes that this is not to be called a “substantial conversion,” for “the substance of the soul is not the substance of God,” who infinitely transcends the substance of any creature.⁴⁷ The saint adds that any more perfect union could take place only in the next life.

There is no doubt but that St. John expected those of his Carmelite readers who had reached this state of transforming union to lay aside the works and exercises in which they would have been engaged at earlier periods of their life. This is especially clear when he writes that “until the soul reaches this state of union of love, she should practice love in both the active and contemplative life. Yet once she arrives, she should not become involved in other works and exterior exercises that might be of the slightest hindrance to the attentiveness of love toward God, even though the work be of great service to God. For a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church ... than all these other works

43 St. John, *Living Flame*, 3.31.

44 St. John, *Ascent*, 2.12.

45 St. John, *Living Flame*, 3.49.

46 St. John, *Cantic*, 26.14.

47 Quotation one is from St. John, *Cantic*, 12.7; the second quotation is from St. John, *Living Flame*, 2.34.

put together.”⁴⁸ He then alludes to the legend that St. Mary Magdalen, after some time spent preaching to others, went to live in the desert for thirty years in order to surrender herself fully to this love.

St. John was, however, well aware that there are many different callings in the church. He certainly never claimed that God wanted every single Catholic to live as Carmelites as did he and St. Teresa of Avila, but he was convinced that even those whose ministry was of a more active sort would benefit if they avoided too much involvement in their works and devoted more of their time to prayer. In his words, “They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labor, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer, they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm.”⁴⁹ With this summary of what St. John of the Cross taught with regard to meditation, contemplation, and prayer in general, we next ask how this teaching might compare with that of the Tibetan Buddhist master Nyoshul Khenpo.

Within the Buddhist tradition, the term “meditation” is normally not restricted to what St. John usually meant by “discursive meditation.” For Buddhists, the term embraces many different ways of calming the mind and so is described by various terms. In his “Instructions on Mindfulness,” Nyoshul writes that the terms “calm abiding,” “one-pointedness,” and “mastery of the mind” are different ways of speaking of the same aspect of meditation. “These mean that we need to remain focused...Whether it is the recitations of Tara or Avolokiteshvara, or the accumulation of the preliminary practices...such as performing prostrations, single-minded mastery of our mind is what is important. In fact the practice of concentration, of focusing the mind, is not only found in the buddhadharma but is taught in many other traditions as well....[They all] teach stilling the mind and one-pointed concentration.”⁵⁰ Such stilling of the mind should characterize one’s entire day, whether one is walking, sitting, eating, resting, or any other aspect of daily life. But whereas some Buddhist traditions place much emphasis on prostrations, spinning prayer wheels, or using mandalas and mantras, the Dzogchen emphasis is distinct in its strong emphasis on “calm abiding” or “resting in natural great peace.” That latter phrase is in fact the first line of a poem that Nyoshul once wrote, a line that in the

48 St. John, *Canticle*, 29.2.

49 St. John, *Canticle*, 29.3.

50 Nyoshul, *The Fearless Lion’s Roar*, trans. David Christensen (Snow Lion, 2015), 131–32.

opinion of his friend and fellow Tibetan Sogyal Rinpoché sums up all that Nyoshul taught: “Rest in natural great peace.” For at the very end of his introduction to Nyoshul’s *Marvelous Garden of Rare Gems*, his monumental history of the entire Dzogchen tradition, Sogyal wrote that Nyoshul himself was, in every way, “the greatest statement of Dzogchen, in simply how he was and how he incarnated that natural ease of the innermost nature of mind...the ‘natural great peace’ he wrote of so beautifully” in these lines:

Rest in natural great peace.
This exhausted mind,
Beaten helpless by karma and neurotic thoughts
Like the relentless fury of the pounding waves
In the infinite ocean of samsara.
Rest in natural great peace.⁵¹

Not surprisingly, this emphasis on rest corresponds to St. John’s teaching that, as one progresses along the spiritual path, the relative “busyness” of discursive meditation is to be replaced by resting in a gentle, loving awareness of God’s presence. Nyoshul, of course, does not speak of God, but it is significant that he is just as aware as was St. John of the limits of discursive thought. He agreed with one of his predecessors, Patrul Rinpoché, that in most Buddhist schools or “vehicles” there is a chaining of “one thought to another, an endless chain of discursiveness that we get tangled in, due to our own willful efforts. But in the path of Dzogchen, all appearances, all phenomena, spontaneously dissolve in their own natural state, self-appearing, self-releasing, beyond fixation and reference point.”⁵² Similarly, Nyoshul once wrote in a letter to his disciples of “aimless discursive thoughts arising of themselves, and dispersing and vanishing like clouds.”⁵³ Likewise, Sogyal Rinpoché wrote of the simplicity that at times characterized his own way of meditation: “Sometimes when I meditate, I don’t use any particular method. I just allow my mind to rest and find, especially when I am inspired, that I can bring my mind home and relax very quickly. I sit quietly and rest in the nature of mind; I don’t question or doubt whether I am in the ‘correct’ state or not...I simply am. A fundamental trust is present. There is nothing in particular to do.”⁵⁴

51 Nyoshul, in Sogyal Rinpoché’s introduction to Nyoshul’s *A Marvelous Garden of Rare Gems*, xlii.

52 Nyoshul, *Great Perfection*, 109–10.

53 Nyoshul, *Great Perfection*, 131.

54 Sogyal Rinpoché, *Book of Living and Dying*, 63.

Clearly there are definite similarities between what St. John of the Cross meant by “the contemplative way” and the teaching about meditation found in the works of Nyoshul Khenpo, Sogyal Rinpoché, and other Tibetan Buddhist masters in the Dzogchen tradition. This brings us to the next and final topic in this paper, namely the practices needed if one is to attain the ultimate goal: solitude, humility and love.

St. John of the Cross and Nyoshul Khenpo on Solitude, Humility, and Love

As one would expect, there are many requirements if a person is fruitfully to follow the path toward the ultimate goal, but certainly the following three are central: a significant degree of withdrawal or solitude, the practice of humility, and an all-pervasive spirit of love.

Both in his major treatises and his minor works, St. John regularly taught the importance of a degree of withdrawal from worldly activities. In one of his minor sayings, he urges his reader to “withdraw from creatures if you desire to preserve, clear and simple in your soul, the image of God. Empty your spirit and withdraw far from them and you will walk in divine lights, for God is not like creatures.”⁵⁵ When he was prior of the community at Los Mártires he would often take his friars out into the open air along the spurs of the Sierra Nevada. Once there the group would spend some time in conversation, after which he would sometimes say, “Today each one is to go alone through the mountains and spend the day in solitary prayer and in speaking to the Lord from his heart,” while at other times he left them to speak with one another while he went off alone to spend the day in prayerful solitude. If not to the mountains, he might lead the group to a spot along the banks of one or another of the small rivers near the friary, allowing all of them to enjoy the beautiful landscape.⁵⁶ The saint’s love of beautiful scenery is especially evident in his poetry, as in the following two stanzas from the *Spiritual Canticle*:

My Beloved, the mountains,
The solitary, wooded valleys,
The strange islands,
The sonorous rivers,
The whisper of the amorous breezes.

55 St. John, *Sayings*, in *Collected Works*, 668.

56 Crisógono de Jesús, *The Life of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kathleen Pond (Longmans, 1958), 196.

The tranquil night,
 At the time of the rising of the dawn,
 The silent music,
 The sounding solitude,
 The supper that recreates and enkindles love.⁵⁷

If such relishing of created beauty seems contrary to St. John's advice to "withdraw from creatures," it really is not, for he realized that such places could lead one to thoughts of their Creator, just as he knew that those who were already advanced in the spiritual life would easily be able to love friends, relatives, and all creatures in a Godly way, for these goods would turn such persons immediately to God.

With regard to the virtue of humility, it is not at all surprising that St. John should write about it often in his various works. One significant place is in the first book of the *Dark Night*, for after he describes with psychological acumen the various manifestations of pride that afflict some beginners, he turns to those who are truly humble, who are far from desiring to be anyone's teacher or favorite but are instead "ready to take a road different from the one they are following, if told to do so.... They rejoice when others receive praise, and their only sorrow is that they do not serve God as these others do. Because they consider their deeds insignificant, they do not want to make them known. They are even ashamed to speak of them to their spiritual directors because they think these deeds are not worth mentioning."⁵⁸ One might think, of course, that St. John had risen to such a height that he had no need to acknowledge any weaknesses or failings on his own part, and if we had only his various treatises available to us that would be a conclusion easy to make. We do, however, also have a number of his letters, and it is instructive to read his letter to Doña Juana de Pedraza, written just two years before he died. There he writes: "Let not the soul be attached to anything, for since prayer is not wanting, God will take care of His possessions; they belong to no other owner, nor should they. I see this with myself: the more that things are mine, the more I set my heart and soul and care on them. The loved object becomes one with the lover, and so does God with the one who loves Him. Hence one cannot forget the loved object without forgetting one's own soul; and a person even forgets his own soul for the object loved, because he lives in the thing he loves more than in himself."⁵⁹

57 St. John, *Canticle*, stanzas 14 and 15 of the second redaction.

58 St. John, *Dark Night*, 1.1.7.

59 St. John of the Cross to Doña Juana de Pedroza, Jan. 28, 1589, in *The Collected Works*, 691.

Finally, it may be that St. John is nowhere more eloquent than when he writes about love, which has been seen as the most central Christian virtue ever since the teaching of Jesus and of his apostle St. Paul, who wrote his memorable praise of this virtue in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians. And as Jesus taught with regard to the two great commandments and to how we are to relate to those who dislike or even hate us, so too is St. John insistent that our love is to be extended to everyone. In a letter he wrote to a fellow Carmelite in October or November of 1591, just weeks before he died, St. John said: “Have a great love for those who contradict and fail to love you, for in this way love is begotten in a heart that has no love. God so acts with us, for He loves us that we might love by means of the very love He bears toward us.”⁶⁰ St. John certainly lived these words, for when he was near death at Ubeda and was suffering not only from physical pain but from harsh treatment by Fray Francisco Crisóstomo, the Carmelite superior of that house, he spoke kindly to that friar, urging him not to be distressed that the small community had to endure great poverty. We are told that Fray Francisco Crisóstomo left the dying man’s cell in tears and afterwards became an avid distributor of his relics and an imitator of his virtues. Until his last breath the saint had lived what he had taught, namely that a little of pure love “is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems to be doing nothing, than all the other works put together.”⁶¹ And that at the evening of life, all of us will be examined on our love.⁶² We will next see that similar teachings are to be found in the works of Nyoshul Khenpo.

In the autobiographical account that is the first chapter in Nyoshul’s *Natural Great Perfection* he writes that at various times in his life he lived in strict solitude. For example, while in his early twenties he made a solitary retreat for an entire year while concentrating on instructions he had received from one of his teachers, while other times he “spent meditating alone on windswept mountaintops and in caves consecrated by the lineage masters of old.”⁶³ In an essay on one of the songs of the fourteenth-century Dzogchen master Longchen, Nyoshul first quotes from one of that master’s poems the lines “Emulating the way of the sages / Meditate in solitude and discover peace!” and he then comments in the following words: “Longchenpa counsels us not to stay in towns and cities, because this will cause us to lose our peace of mind. We will be endlessly distracted and will not be able to

60 St. John, to a Carmelite nun in Segovia, Oct.–Nov. 1591, in *The Collected Works*, 706.

61 St. John, *Canticle*, 292.

62 St. John, *Sayings*, no. 57, in *The Collected Works*, 672.

63 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 21.

practice. We should always stay in places of solitude and devote ourselves to dharma practice. Then, at the time of our death, we will have no regrets. The best outcome will be enlightenment in this very lifetime, and if we don't attain that, at least we will have no regrets. So we must be clear about what we are doing!"⁶⁴

Nyoshul himself lived according to that advice. Although he had at times visited large cities in Europe and the United States, the hectic pace of life in such places led him always to prefer living in rural areas, whether in Tibet, India, or France. The kind of advice he gave in his commentary on one of Longchen's poems is also reflected in some of his own *vajra* songs. While giving a retreat at a zendo in the Catskill Mountains of New York state in 1992 he composed a lengthy song that included the following lines, which reveal not only his love of the natural world but also his ability to note the kinds of flora and fauna to be found in such a setting. He gave no commentary on this song, nor was one needed. Especially beautiful are the following lines:

O, my extremely fortunate friends,
 Here in this supreme place of the ultimate, vast sky-like expanse [...]
 Look at this wonderfully pure sight.
 Externally: Unfabricated, this natural forest,
 Adorned with thousands of variegated colors,
 Trees, creepers, leaves, flowers,
 All kinds of birds, deer, skunks, turkeys, and other wild animals
 frolicking,
 While delightfully resounds the melodious humming of all types of
 creatures,
 And a shower of snowflakes wafts down from the sky,
 Shaped like flowers, petals, and divine objects.
 In this place, totally free of the cacophony of meaningless worldly
 babble,
 Which would disturb the practice of meditative serenity,
 Within this naturally tranquil forest
 Is the supreme place for accomplishing wisdom and samadhi.
 Emaho, how wonderful!⁶⁵

As humility is a further quality that Nyoshul considered crucial on the path to the ultimate goal of "natural Great Perfection," one of the clearest ways in which he himself practiced it was his reverence for his various teachers.

64 Nyoshul, *Fearless Lion's Roar*, 41.

65 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 125–26.

He never claimed any personal ability of his own that had not been made possible by those who had taught him during his formative years. It was these teachers “who gave me everything,” so he continued regularly praying to them.⁶⁶ Sogyal Rinpoché once asked Nyoshul how he had become so “realized,” and he replied with his usual humility, “I don’t have any deep understanding. I just prayed to the lama [i.e., one’s teacher],” for he was convinced that “if you possess that heartfelt devotion to your lama and the lineage, then you can and will receive the blessing of Dzogpachenpo.”⁶⁷ Even though he came to be regarded as fully enlightened in Buddhahood, he never accepted that kind of status for himself. Indeed, throughout his writings he regularly refers to himself in very lowly terms, such as “the bucktoothed foolish ox, the fallen monk” or “the Tibetan stray dog.”⁶⁸ This is similar to the way some of the most revered Christian saints would speak of themselves by a term like “miserable sinner,” a designation that can best be understood as reflecting their awareness of the infinite distance between themselves and God, even as Nyoshul considered himself to be only a novice compared to Buddha Shakyamuni or Longchen.

As regards the attribute or virtue of love, what Nyoshul taught is perhaps best found in his discussion of *bodhicitta*. This Buddhist term, which literally means “the mind” [*citta*] aspiring to “awakening” [*bodhi*], was considered by Nyoshul to be “the all-sufficient wish-fulfilling jewel” and thus “the foundation of all the vast and profound teachings.”⁶⁹ It is the practice of unselfish love and compassion and as such is the most profound way to dissolve ego-clinging. The aspect of unself love (or “loving-kindness”) includes the wish that all beings be established at the level of perfect enlightenment and so experience the supreme happiness of that state, while the aspect of compassion consists of wishing that all beings be free from suffering and from the causes and effects of suffering. In its universal scope, *bodhicitta* is “an open, loving heart whose scope instinctively encompasses the infinity of sentient beings,” so effective that we read that constant meditation on *bodhicitta* by an eleventh-century bodhisattva led sheep and wolves to live together in peace in his hermitage.⁷⁰ This virtue can be developed by reading a book like *Entering the Path of Enlightenment* by the eighth-century Indian monk and philosopher Shantideva, and as its practice deepens and expands

66 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 116.

67 Nyoshul, quoted in the Introduction to *A Marvelous Garden*, xxv and xxvi.

68 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 124, and *Fearless Lion’s Roar*, 220.

69 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 140–41.

70 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 43 and 45.

within a person there will arise “incredible spontaneous compassion for all those who don’t realize it” and who are still suffering from delusion.⁷¹

However, it is important to emphasize that Nyoshul not only taught the importance of love but actually lived it. An American Buddhist teacher, Sharon Salzberg, once spoke of his “wide-open consciousness and huge unbounded heart. Being with Khenpo was the closest I’ve come to experiencing transformation through just being in the presence of a realized person.”⁷² Similarly, Sogyal Rinpoché said of him that “he treated everyone with kindness, no matter who they were. He was known for his pure perception, for seeing the good in people, whoever they might be, and for showing love and compassion to absolutely everyone he met.”⁷³ In words that for a Christian would resemble some aspects of the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, Nyoshul wrote that so often “we indulge in unloving or unkind feelings, in likes and dislikes. Yet ... all our preferences are unreliable and cause us to accumulate the karma of meaningless attachment and aversion. We need to give up all strife and hostility and instead without delay subdue our own mind and practice the dharma.”⁷⁴ That he himself tried to live in this way shines through in a *vajra* song he composed for his students while he was living in France. One stanza consisted in these words:

I remain loving and kind to whomever I meet, high or low,
 Man or woman, my parents from long ago.
 I treat them all as close brothers and sisters, with love in my heart.
 For this the stupid and jealous may mock me,
 But they cannot change my naturally kind thoughts.⁷⁵

In this attitude, as in many other ways, Nyoshul Khenpo was a kindred spirit with St. John of the Cross, and it may properly lead us to agree with Bede Griffiths that such spiritual masters did indeed share “a common wisdom” from which everything springs and toward which everything is converging.



71 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 120.

72 Sharon Salzberg, quoted in the Introduction to *A Marvelous Garden*, xxxvi–xxxvii.

73 Sogyal Rinpoché, introduction to Nyoshul’s *A Marvelous Garden of Rare Gems*, xix.

74 Nyoshul, *Fearless Lion’s Roar*, 30.

75 Nyoshul, *Natural Great Perfection*, 130.

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