

**The First World Encounter between  
Discalced Carmelites and Theravāda Buddhists in Ávila:  
A Chronicle and Reflection**

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From July 27<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> 2017, the “First World Encounter on Teresian Mysticism and Interreligious Dialogue: Theravāda Buddhism and Teresian Mysticism—Meditation and Contemplation, Pathways to Peace” was held in the medieval city of Ávila, Spain, organized by the International Centre of Teresian and Sanjuanist Studies (CITeS), with the collaboration of the Centre of Buddhist Studies (CBS) of The University of Hong Kong (HKU).

Invited by the Order of Discalced Carmelites, a delegation of Theravāda Buddhists from Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the United Kingdom and Taiwan travelled to Ávila for an interfaith conference attended by over one hundred people from thirty countries. Among other participants, the conference convened Theravāda and Carmelite monastics and scholars, among whom were some of the most renowned exponents of their respective traditions for four days of dialogue, sharing and academic exchanges.

The Discalced Carmelites primarily envisioned this encounter as the first of a series aimed at putting Carmelite mysticism in dialogue with other religious traditions. The Carmelites’ motivation was to facilitate and promote mutual understanding and foster peace among peoples of diverse cultures, languages and views. In this first forum, the conversational partner was Theravāda Buddhism and the dialogue let participants be enriched spiritually by others and explore similarities and differences between the two traditions in a spirit of togetherness, integrity and mutual respect.

The topic chosen for this conference was “Meditation and Contemplation: Pathways to Peace.” More specifically, the focus was on the *vis-à-vis* study of the paths of Theravāda Buddhist meditation and the Carmelite path of prayer and contemplation, for which Ācariya Buddhaghosa and Saint Teresa of Ávila were the designated spiritual cartographers and primary interlocutors. The conference theme was handled in four sessions with analogous segments in the two traditions’ spiritual paths: (1) morality and virtue, (2) prayer and religiosity, (3) reflective meditation and mindfulness/recollection, and (4) the roles of the *jhānas* and mystical prayer.

As the conference was conceived, there were two presentations for each session, one Carmelite and another Theravāda, presenting analogue subdivisions of spiritual life, followed by a panel discussion led by a moderator knowledgeable in both traditions and the subjects of discussion. The discussions allowed attendees to explore structural and functional parallelisms, as well as phenomenological similarities and differences along the spiritual paths of the two traditions.

**Opening session (Thursday, July 27<sup>th</sup>)**

The official opening of the congress took place on the afternoon of July 27. After warm words of welcome by Fr. Dr. Romulo Cuartas Londoño, deputy director of CITeS, Fr. Dr. Francisco Javier Sancho Fermín, director of CITeS and Ven. Sik Hin Hung, director of the Centre of Buddhist Studies (CBS) at The University of Hong Kong (HKU) spoke on the importance of interreligious dialogue and the goals for the encounter from Carmelite and Buddhist perspectives, respectively.

Both speakers concurred that interreligious dialogue is imperative now, an urgent need, and an ineludible exercise in responsibility for the religious traditions of humanity. Fr. Sancho stressed that, from the Christian viewpoint, interreligious dialogue is no more than “to put into practice

what for Christians is Jesus's main message: loving thy neighbor," a positive appreciation of those who are different than us, in their difference and in fraternity. Ven. Hin Hung emphasized that "truth and goodness are not tradition-specific" and outlined how from a Buddhist perspective, dialogue with other traditions has transformed Buddhism throughout its history (already India and then from to China and Japan), and how necessary it is for mutual learning and life in harmony.

After a break, the partners in dialogue introduced each other. Fr. Agustí Borrell, Definitor of the Discalced Carmelites Order, presented the Carmelite Teresian tradition, explaining Carmelite charisma as a particular way to live the Gospel based on a life of prayer, love of God and service to others. Following, Dr. Asanga Tilakaratne, professor of Pāli and Buddhist Studies at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, presented a paper entitled "Theravāda Buddhism Tradition," offering a masterful overview of the history, doctrines and practices of this tradition.

### **Day two (Friday, July 28<sup>th</sup>)**

Each day of the encounter started with the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. After the Holy Mass, Theravāda monastics conducted a chanting ceremony. Many of the participants and delegates gathered for both ceremonies, creating an atmosphere of harmony and friendship.

The morning session was devoted to discussing the role of virtue in both traditions. The first lecture was given by Dr. Maximiliano Herráiz, a CITEs professor and publisher of the books of Teresa of Ávila, who presented a paper entitled "Virtues-Prayer, Teresa and John of the Cross". Dr. Herráiz highlighted that, for Teresa, growth in virtue is nothing but the deepening of the relationship between the soul and God in prayer.

Next, Ven. Prof. Raluwe Padmasiri, head of the Department of Buddhist Philosophy, Postgraduate Institute of Pāli and Buddhist Studies at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka delivered an expert presentation entitled: "The Role of Virtue (*sīla*) in the Path to Emancipation in Pali Buddhism". Prof. Padmasiri stressed the positive (active) aspect of Buddhist ethics in developing wholesome qualities (virtues)—and not merely in abstaining from unwholesome actions—the multiple connections between morality and virtue (*sīla*) and the *summum bonum* of Buddhism: nirvana.

After the two presentations, a panel discussion unfolded, moderated by Dr. J. Abraham Vélez de Cea, professor in the Religion Department at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, Kentucky. During the lively discussions, topics such as the way to deal with negative emotions, love and compassion, or the nature of the spiritual goal, were touched on, from a comparative perspective.

The afternoon session was devoted to the function of prayer and religiosity in the two traditions. First Sister María José Pérez, Discalced Carmelite Nun from the Puçol Monastery in Valencia presented the paper "Vocal and Mental Prayer: Religiosity in the School of Teresa de Jesús." Sister María José stressed the democratization of mental prayer that Teresian reform entailed, stating that for Teresa the essence of prayer is love and dialogic friendship with God, and the awareness that the prayerful is addressing Him, and not its form, vocal or mental.

Ven. Dr. Khammai Dhammasami, DPhil (Oxford), the Centre for Buddhist Studies at the University of Oxford, read a presentation entitled: "Prayer, Worship and Ritual in the Theravāda Tradition." Faith in Buddhism is the first step to knowledge. It has cognitive and emotional aspects, but is always accompanied by reason. Ritual can exacerbate emotions, and although the Buddha was critical of some rituals, he was not opposed to it per se. The Theravāda tradition embraces ritual.

Dr. Francesc Torradeflot, director of UNESCO Association for Interreligious Dialogue (Unescocat), moderated the panel discussion. The topics included: the essentiality of love in Christian prayer, together with its dialogical character, and the function of *mettā* (loving-kindness) meditation in the Buddhist path of concentration; the important but limited role of language and the value of silence in both traditions; and the similarities and differences between Teresian mental prayer

and the prayer of recollection and the Buddhist mindfulness meditation.

The second day of the encounter concluded with an inspiring guided Buddhist meditation led by Ven. Dr. Dhammadinnā, professor at the Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts, Buddhist Studies Department and director of the Āgama Research Group in Taiwan.

### **Day three (Saturday, July 29<sup>th</sup>)**

After the Holy Eucharist and Buddhist chants, the morning session began for day three, dedicated to discursive meditation and mindfulness/recollection in the two traditions.

Fr. Dr. Rómulo Cuartas, deputy director and Professor of CITEs, in his presentation, "Discursive Meditation and Prayer of Recollection," pointed out that prayer in the Carmelite tradition, in all its stages and forms, is an exercise of a relationship of love or friendship that has the purpose of growth in communion with the divinity. In this dialogue all dimensions of the person are involved.

Dr. G. A. Somaratne, assistant professor, Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong (HKU) introduced the audience to the essential preparations for the practice of meditative absorption (the *jhānas*), with a paper entitled "Preliminaries of Concentration Meditation." Dr. Somaratne highlighted the need to pay attention in meditative training to the unique characteristics and experiences of the meditator versus the abstract map of the *Visuddhimagga*.

Ven. Dr. Dhammadinnā, professor at the Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts (Taiwan), moderated the ensuing panel discussion. Among the themes discussed were the different views on the roles of emotion and affectivity, and the interrelation between spontaneity and structure, applied to Christian prayer and Buddhist meditation.

The afternoon of the third day was dedicated to the Awards Ceremony of the II International Award "Teresa of Jesus and Interreligious Dialogue." This second edition was dedicated to studies in "Buddhism and Mysticism of the Teresian Carmel." The first prize was €6,000, and all four finalists received €1,000 each.

The winner of the first prize was Mr. Igor Giusti, Italian researcher and PhD(c) residing in the United States, for his work entitled *St. Teresa of Ávila and Gotama the Buddha: A Comparison of Mystical Stages and Final Spiritual Attainments in St. Teresa's Path to Union with God and the Buddha's Path to Nibbāna in Theravāda Buddhism*. Giusti compares the experience of mystical marriage as defined by St. Teresa to the experience of nirvana, as well as the stages in the two paths to reach the soul's union with God and attain nirvana. Giusti concluded that although St. Teresa's path is theistic, and the Buddha's is non-theistic, at the experiential level both paths describe several similar mystical experiences and outcomes such as "peace," "self-forgetfulness," "dispassion for suffering," and "detachment."

The four finalists and works were: Cristiana Dobner OCD, *The Diamond Way and the Interior Castle*; Imanol Bageneta Messeguer, *The Interior Kingdom of Souls: Similarities and Differences in Contemplative Spiritualities*; Jesús Collado Gómez, *Teresa of Avila and Siddhartha: the Journey to Nothingness*; and Joy Alumkal Philopose, OCD, *St. Teresa of Avila and Nagarjuna: Two "Gurus" of Transhistorical Relevance with their "Middle Way."* After the ceremony, the four finalists presented their papers.

The third day concluded with a workshop on Christian meditation dedicated to the practice of the prayer of recollection and guided by Fr. Danilo Ayala Changa O.C.D., professor at CITEs.

### **Day four (Sunday, July 30<sup>th</sup>)**

The First World Theravāda-Carmelite Encounter reached its climax on the fourth day of the event,

dedicated to the last theme on the program: the *jhānas* and mystical prayer and its degrees.

After the Buddhist chanting, Dr. Francisco Javier Sancho Fermín, director and professor at CITEs, presented the paper “Mystical Prayer and Its Degrees”. In a masterful lecture, Dr. Sancho explained that the “Teresian degrees of mystical prayer are experiences of union in love between the soul and God. What is vital here are not techniques or methods of prayer but proper disposition of the soul, its growth in love and knowledge, and the gratuity of God.”

Prof. Rupert Gethin presented a paper entitled “The *Jhānas* in the Buddhist Path to Liberation: The Theravāda Perspective.” Dr. Gethin defined the *jhānas* as “four meditation attainments that involve a mental and emotional unification involving the arising of boundless joy and happiness that emerges by withdrawing the mind from the senses” and mental defilements. This great joy is refined in successive *jhānic* attainments towards peaceful equanimity.

After the presentations by Prof. Sancho and Gethin, a panel discussion developed, moderated by Daniel Millet Gil, Ph.D. candidate, the Centre of Buddhist Studies at the University of Hong Kong. Among the topics discussed were the interrelationship between love/compassion and knowledge in both Buddhism and Christianity, the role of the will in the unfolding of the *ghanas* and in the proper disposition of the soul to God in mystic prayer, and the limitations of the neurosciences in explaining *jhānic* and mystical phenomena.

### **Conclusion of the conference**

After scholarly exchanges, the conference ended with closing remarks by Fr. Agustí Borrell and Ven. Hin Hung on the theme “Buddhism and Christianity: Cooperation for Peace.” Ven. Sik Hin Hung said that “religions should be leaders in bringing more understanding, peace and happiness to humanity,” and an interreligious conference such as this special meeting between Buddhists and Carmelites does precisely that. Fr. Agustí Borrell said: “each one of us would like to contribute to world peace; each one of us agrees that true peace begins within oneself; and that peace among the peoples of the world will be made possible by those who have first pacified their hearts.” Both agree that interior life, spirituality, meditation and contemplation are rightful ways to true peace.

### **Significance of the Encounter**

The First World Encounter between Discalced Carmelites and Theravāda Buddhism was a truly exceptional and highly significant event. Its greatest significance is its occurrence. There can be no traditions more different than Theravāda Buddhism and Carmelite mysticism. Both represent extreme opposites in the doctrinal spectrum. Moreover, the Discalced Carmelites Order has traditionally been notoriously conservative, arriving late to the interreligious conversation, compared to other religious orders in the Roman Catholic Church. In this sense, the Discalced Carmelites must be commended for taking the initiative for this unique interfaith engagement.

This Carmelite-Theravāda Encounter has once again demonstrated that, among the various approaches to interfaith dialogue (institutional, doctrinal, aspectual, thematic, national, etc.), the experiential model is the most fertile ground for a truly fruitful interreligious exchange.

Another original improvement is the methodology employed. Particularly, framing the dialogue with analogous segments for the entire pathway of the two spiritual paths, taking authors as representative of their traditions, and Buddhaghosa and Teresa as the ultimate interlocutors, and having highly qualified exponents of each tradition in their respective fields of expertise, has led to perceiving structural parallels, affinities in pattern progressions and phenomenological similarities between the spiritual paths in both traditions, notwithstanding the obvious doctrinal differences between both traditions. During the discussions, other areas of confluence, suggestive homologues and intriguing commonalities began to emerge that require proper examination.

Lastly, the harmony and friendship attained in this encounter was remarkable. Surely, the human quality of all those involved, and the perfect hospitality of the Carmelites made all the difference.

### **Conclusion**

British historian Arnold Toynbee wrote: “a thousand years hence historians will look back at the twentieth century and remember it not for the struggle between liberalism and communism but for the momentous human discovery of the encounter between Christianity and Buddhism.”<sup>1</sup>The modern world is in the midst of a severe spiritual crisis that can no longer be ignored. The very foundations of our civilization are being questioned. The outcome of the interaction between Christianity and Buddhism is still unknown, but there is growing evidence that the answer to today's problems cannot come from modernity itself. The intriguing commonalities in the paths of these two venerable traditions, which ultimately may refer to the nature of the human self, will probably have much to reveal to a world ready to rediscover ancient wisdom.

It is important to keep alive the spirit of openness, integrity, exploration, and true friendship that inspired the First World Encounter between Discalced Carmelites and Theravāda Buddhist, and renew this open forum for future exchanges. This, ultimately, will benefit us all.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Akizuki Ryōmin: “Christian-Buddhist Dialogue,” *Inter-Religion* no. 14 (Fall 1988) p. 39.