# Identification of the Transition States in the Inversion of 1,4-Benzodiazepines with the ab Initio Replica Path Method 

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#### Abstract

The inversion of four 1,4-benzodiazepines was investigated with the ab initio "replica path method" with density functional theory at the B3LYP/6-31G* level. The reaction path constructed with this method for the inversion provides an approximate transition state (TS) geometry, which, upon further TS optimization, leads to the TS geometry characterized by a single vibrational frequency. 1,4-Benzodiazepines lacking a 5 -phenyl ring have a single reaction path for the inversion with $C_{s}$ symmetry at the TS. In contrast, the inversion of benzodiazepines with a 5 -phenyl ring, such as the peripheral benzodiazepine receptor ligand $4^{\prime}$-chlorodiazepam (Ro5-4864) and its $N^{1}$-desmethyl analog (Ro5-2752), can proceed through multiple reaction paths having a TS with or without $C_{s}$ symmetry. Notably, the replica path method found a path connecting two asymmetric TSs of 4'-chlorodiazepam via a symmetrical TS, suggesting that these inversion paths can be readily crossed from one to another. The stabilization energies gained by $4^{\prime}$-chlorodiazepam and its $N^{1}$-desmethyl analog from the breaking of $C_{s}$ symmetry at the TS were calculated to be 0.10 and $0.07 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$, respectively. The origin of the broken symmetry of $C_{s}$ was traced to the coupling of the puckering of the diazepine ring with the rotation of the chlorophenyl ring. These results show the advantages of the replica path method for locating the TSs as well as for constructing the reaction paths for the inversion of 1,4-benzodiazepines.


## 1. Introduction

Analysis of structural modifications occurring upon binding of a ligand to a biomolecule and of any ensuing chemistry may require the transition state (TS) structure along reaction coordinates to be known. In drug development, knowledge of the TS geometry of a substrate for an enzyme is helpful when designing TS analogues that are known to bind generally more tightly than substrates to enzyme active sites. ${ }^{1}$ Theoretical calculation may be the only viable method for obtaining the potential energy surface (PES) relevant to binding and ultimate chemistry.

A PES for a chemical process is typically constructed by carrying out geometry optimization coupled with a scan of a reaction coordinate. This coordinate can be defined, for example, as the distance between the two atoms undergoing bond breaking/forming or as the dihedral angle of the bond within a molecule that is primarily involved with a conformational change or isomerization of interest. From a PES, one could locate a TS, typically the highest-energy point on a reaction path. Once the TS is verified by a single imaginary vibrational frequency, the "intrinsic reaction coordinate" (IRC) method ${ }^{2}$ can then be utilized to find the steepest-descent paths from the TS to both the initial and final geometries to construct the minimum

[^0]energy path. With increases in computer speed and advances in TS search algorithms, ${ }^{3,4}$ the geometry and energetics of the TS of small molecules undergoing reaction with a well-defined reaction coordinate can now be obtained at the ab initio level. Nonetheless, as the complexity of a molecule grows (e.g., the number of rotatable bonds), it becomes increasingly difficult to locate the TS(s) by utilizing either a conventional scan method or one of the more sophisticated reaction path methods, because they often require prior knowledge of the TS geometry.

In this regard, a recently developed "replica path" (RPATH) method for elucidating the reaction mechanisms of enzymes has found its utility in locating a TS of interest, as exemplified in a recent study of the mechanism of chorismate mutase. ${ }^{5}$ The RPATH calculation allows an approximate TS geometry to be found for a particular reaction or conformation through geometrical optimization at the ab initio level on intermediate structures lying between reactant and product in root-meansquare (rms) space. This RPATH method is currently implemented in CHARMM ${ }^{6}$ interfaced with GAMESS, ${ }^{7}$ Q-Chem, ${ }^{8}$ and GAMESS-UK ${ }^{9} a b$ initio programs for $\mathrm{QM} / \mathrm{MM}^{2}$ calculations.

The RPATH method belongs to a class of string methods to determine the pathway on the PES between two or more different points. ${ }^{10}$ Usually these points represent minima on the PES, which are relatively easy to obtain by standard methods, and are fixed during the pathway optimization. The pathway in the RPATH method is constructed by replicating a set of structures spanning, for example, reactant and product. The coordinates for each of these replicas, which are used to construct the initial pathway, can be obtained in different ways.

## SCHEME 1: Structures of Benzodiazepines 1-4, Showing Dihedral Angles and Nomenclature



1


3


2


4

Here, we chose linear interpolation between two minima. The RPATH method adds a harmonic penalty function to the standard force field. This penalty function is proportional to the difference in the root-mean-square distance (rmsd) between the two neighboring structures. In this way, the individual structures on the pathway are kept equidistant in the rms space from their nearest neighbors. This also allows the total length of the path to vary during the simulation, either energy minimization or molecular dynamics.

To assess the applicability of the RPATH method in locating the TS of small yet complex molecules undergoing isomerization without bond breaking, we investigated the inversion of the seven-membered diazepine ring in 1,4-benzodiazepines (BZs) that has been studied both experimentally ${ }^{1-14}$ and theoretically. ${ }^{15-19}$ A BZ ring appears in several types of bioactive compound and drug and is therefore considered to be a "privileged scaffold" in drug design. ${ }^{20,21}$ Best known of these ligands are the BZs acting on central $\mathrm{GABA}_{\mathrm{A}}$ receptors (central benzodiazepine receptors; CBR ) as anxiolytic and sedative drugs (e.g., diazepam; Valium). ${ }^{22}$ Certain derivatives of diazepam, such as the $4^{\prime}$-chloro derivative preferentially bind with high affinity ${ }^{23}$ not to CBR but to another distinctly different binding site, the peripheral benzodiazepine receptor (PBR), ${ }^{24}$ recently named the translocator 18 kDa protein. ${ }^{25}$ PBR has become a promising drug $\operatorname{target}^{26}$ and also a subject for molecular imaging in vivo, ${ }^{27}$ primarily of inflammation because of PBR overexpression in activated microglia under several inflammatory conditions. ${ }^{28}$ Experimental and computational studies of the conformational dynamics in BZs may have intrinsic value for understanding their important bioactivities. For example, BZs are known to exert their agonist effects at CBR by inducing a conformational change in the receptor. ${ }^{29}$ As previously pointed out, ${ }^{16}$ the possibility that ring inversion in these drugs plays some role in inducing receptor conformational changes provides impetus for acquiring a deeper and more accurate understanding of these inversion processes.

## SCHEME 2: Structures of $M$ and $P$ Conformers of Benzodiazepines Where $\mathbf{R}^{\mathbf{1}}$ Is $\mathbf{H}$ or $\mathbf{C H}_{3}$, and $\mathbf{R}^{\mathbf{2}}$ Is $\mathbf{H}$ or $p-\mathrm{Cl}-\mathrm{C}_{6} \mathrm{H}_{4}$



The BZs ( $\mathbf{1} \mathbf{- 4}$ of Scheme 1) studied herein do not have a formal chiral center. Nevertheless, the inversion of the C3 methylene group of the B ring gives rise to two boat conformers that are enantiomers (Scheme 2); by convention, the isoenergetic minimum conformers with a negative and positive value of the dihedral angle C2-C3-N4-C5 ( $\phi_{1}$, see Scheme 1) are designated as conformers M and P , respectively. ${ }^{15} \mathrm{CBR}$ recognize a single enantiomer (designated R or P ). ${ }^{30,31}$ Previous theoretical work on the inversion of diazepam was performed at the level of "density functional theory" (DFT) only. ${ }^{15,16}$

In the present work, both RPATH and scan methods were used to construct the PES for the inversion of BZs $\mathbf{1 - 4}$. Two model compounds $\mathbf{1}$ and $\mathbf{2}$ and two more elaborate compounds, namely the PBR ligand Ro5-4864 (3) and its $N^{1}$-desmethyl analog, Ro5-2752 (4) were studied to reveal the effects of $N^{1}$ methyl and 5-(4'-chlorophenyl) groups on the inversion energy barrier and the landscape of the reaction path. Comparing the PES of the inversions of $\mathbf{1 - 4}$ revealed the advantages of the RPATH method as well as the pitfalls of the scan calculation in locating the TS of BZs, and they are here discussed. The reaction path of $\mathbf{3}$ from the RPATH calculation was also compared with that from the IRC calculation.

## 2. Methods

2.1. $\boldsymbol{A} \boldsymbol{b}$ Initio RPATH Calculations. Initially, 15 replicas were constructed by a linear interpolation between the two energy-minimized enantiomeric conformers, M and P , of compounds $\mathbf{1 - 4}$. The RPATH method then added a harmonic penalty function to the standard energy to restrain distances between adjacent replicas along the reaction pathway, in the form

$$
\begin{equation*}
E_{\mathrm{rms}}=\frac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^{N-1} K_{\mathrm{rms}}\left(R_{i, i+1}-\langle R\rangle\right)^{2} \tag{1}
\end{equation*}
$$

where $N$ is the number of replicas i along the pathway, $K_{\mathrm{rms}}$ is the force constant (set here to $10^{3}(\mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}) / \AA^{2}$ ), and $R_{i, i+1}$ and $\langle R\rangle$ are rmsd deviations given by

$$
\begin{gathered}
R_{i, i+1}^{2} \sum_{j=1}^{n} w_{j}=\sum_{j=1}^{n} w_{j}\left[\left(x_{j}^{(i)}-x_{j}^{(i+1)}\right)^{2}+\left(y_{j}^{(i)}-y_{j}^{(i+1)}\right)^{2}+\left(z_{j}^{(i)}-\right.\right. \\
\left.\left.z_{j}^{(i+1)}\right)^{2}\right] \\
\langle R\rangle=N^{-1} \sum_{i=1}^{N-1} R_{i, i+1}
\end{gathered}
$$

where $n$ is the total number of replicated atoms $j$ with coordinates $\left(x_{j}^{(k)}, y_{j}^{(k)}, z_{j}^{(k)}\right)$ in replica $k$, and $w_{j}$ is a suitable input-defined parameter. Thus, the penalty function ${ }^{5}$ is proportional to the difference in the rmsd between the two neighboring structures. In other words, the individual structures on the pathway are kept equidistant in the rms space from their neighbors. In addition, an angle energy term (eq 2) as previously


Figure 1. PES for the inversion of benzodiazepine 1 obtained from the RPATH calculation with 15 replicas. During geometry optimization, each replica or frame on the reaction path is kept equidistant in the rms space from their nearest neighbors with a harmonic penalty function. Values in parentheses indicate the dihedral angles $\mathrm{C} 2-\mathrm{C} 3-$ $\mathrm{N} 4-\mathrm{C} 5\left(\phi_{1}\right)$ and $\mathrm{CH}_{3}-\mathrm{N} 1-\mathrm{C} 10-\mathrm{C} 9\left(\phi_{2}\right)$; see Scheme 1 for numbering. Inset: PES constructed from both forward and reverse scanning of the $\phi_{1}$ of 1 with an increment of $5^{\circ}$.


Figure 2. PES for the inversion of compound 3 obtained from the RPATH calculation with 15 replicas. Values in parentheses represent the dihedral angles $\phi_{1}, \phi_{2}$, and $\mathrm{C}^{\prime}-\mathrm{C}^{\prime}-\mathrm{C} 5-\mathrm{N} 4\left(\phi_{3}\right)$; see Scheme 1 for numbering. Inset: PES constructed from both forward and reverse scanning of the $\phi_{1}$ of $\mathbf{3}$.
defined, ${ }^{5}$ was included to prevent merging between the adjacent points (force constants $K_{\text {angle }}=100$ and $\cos \max =0.95$ ).

$$
\begin{align*}
E_{\text {angle }}=\frac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^{N-1} K_{\text {angle }}\left(\left(R_{i, i+2}^{2}-\right.\right. & \left.R_{i, i+1}^{2}-R_{i+1, i+2}^{2}\right) / \\
& \left.\left(2 R_{i, i+1} R_{i+1, i+2}\right)-\cos \max \right)^{2} \tag{2}
\end{align*}
$$

The average restraint energy shown in eq 1 was less than 0.1 $\mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol} /$ replica after 100 steps of energy minimization. After an approximate TS was located, the calculations were further expanded to 61 replicas for compounds 3 and 4: 30 replicas connecting the stable conformer M to the TS and another 30 replicas linking the TS to P . The $a b$ initio program GAMESS was used for all RPATH calculations at the B3LYP/6-31G*


Figure 3. Two perspective views of the superposed energy minimized ground states (M, yellow; P, green) and TSs ( $\mathrm{M}^{*}$, white; $\mathrm{P}^{*}$, blue) of 3. The one on the right-hand side was obtained by rotating the ring $A$ into the plane so that it coincides with the mirror plane indicated by the dotted lines.

TABLE 1: Inversion Energy Barrier of BZs Calculated at the B3LYP/6-31G* Level

|  | $E_{\mathrm{a}}(\mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol})$ |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: |
| compound | RPATH $^{a}$ | experiment $^{b}$ |
| $\mathbf{1}$ | 8.6 |  |
| $\mathbf{2}$ | 3.5 | $17.6 \pm 0.2$ |
| $\mathbf{3}$ | 17.3 | $12.3 \pm 0.3$ |

${ }^{a}$ Values represent the energy difference between the ground state and the fully optimized TS at 0 K without zero point vibration. ${ }^{b}$ Determined on compounds without a $4^{\prime}$-chloro substituent. ${ }^{13}$
level. Further refinement of the TS was carried out with the TS search algorithm using the keywords, opt=(ts, calcfc, noeigentest), as implemented in Gaussian 03 software. ${ }^{32}$
2.2. Ab Initio Calculations. The geometries of the BZ conformers M and P were fully optimized with DFT at the B3LYP/6-31G* level in the gaseous phase. The PES for the inversion process was also calculated by conventional scanning of the dihedral angle $\phi_{1}$ in increments of $5^{\circ}$ while optimizing all other geometrical variables. The nature of each TS for compounds 1-4 were confirmed by the existence of a single imaginary frequency. In these calculations, thermal and solvent effects were not taken into account in estimating the inversion barriers. The IRC calculations for the inversion of compound 3 were done utilizing 35 steps descending from $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ or $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ to each of the conformers M and P without mass weighting.

## 3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Inversions of $\mathbf{1}$ and 2. The PES of the inversion of the model N -methylbenzodiazepine 1 obtained from the RPATH method utilizing 15 replicas is shown in Figure 1. In the conversion of M to P , both the C 3 methylene and the $N^{1}$-methyl group undergo respective downward and upward inversion with respect to the A ring (Scheme 2), and these two opposite motions are concerted as indicated by the smooth change in both energy and the dihedral angles of $\phi_{1}$ and $\mathrm{CH}_{3}-\mathrm{N} 1-\mathrm{C} 10-\mathrm{C} 9\left(\phi_{2}\right)$ given in parentheses in Figure 1. At the highest points of the PES, frame 8 , the B ring $\left(\phi_{1}=3.7^{\circ}, \phi_{2}=1.4^{\circ}\right)$ is only slightly distorted from planarity indicating the TS to be symmetrical. The inset of Figure 1 is the PES obtained by the conventional scan calculation by varying the dihedral angle $\phi_{1}$ from $-75^{\circ}$ to $+75^{\circ}$ and then by reversing the scan direction from $+75^{\circ}$ to $-75^{\circ}$ in increments of $5^{\circ}$ while relaxing the rest of the structure. The forward scan has its highest energy at $\phi_{1}=5^{\circ}$ and $\phi_{2}=$

TABLE 2: Dihedral Angles of Compounds 3 and 4 in Both Ground and TSs from RPATH

|  | M |  |  | M* |  |  | P* |  |  | P |  |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  | $\phi_{1}$ | $\phi_{2}$ | $\phi_{3}$ | $\phi_{1}$ | $\phi_{2}$ | $\phi_{3}$ | $\phi_{1}$ | $\phi_{2}$ | $\phi_{3}$ | $\phi_{1}$ | $\phi_{2}$ | $\phi_{3}$ |
| 3 | $-72.5$ | -35.5 | 24.3 | -5.6 | $-7.0$ | 111.2 | 5.6 | 7.0 | 63.1 | 72.7 | 33.6 | 153.0 |
| $4^{\text {a }}$ | $-72.6$ | - 22.4 | 25.5 | -16.4 | -4.4 | 110.3 | 16.4 | 4.4 | 64.4 | 72.6 | 22.2 | 151.5 |

${ }^{a}$ Dihedral angles from the GAMESS optimized geometries.
$-10.7^{\circ}$. A further increase of $\phi_{1}$ to $10^{\circ}$ is accompanied by a drop of $1.0 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$ and a rather steep increase in $\phi_{2}$ from $-10.7^{\circ}$ to $+18.0^{\circ}$. This hysteresis in both energetics and geometry results from the hindered rotation of the $N^{1}$-methyl group around the $\mathrm{N} 1-\mathrm{C} 10$ bond, which in turn is a consequence of the constraint imposed on the reaction coordinate, $\phi_{1}$. The PES from the RPATH lacks such hysteresis because it minimizes structures at each grid point, thus conveniently diffusing rms restraint forces over all the atoms of the compound during geometry optimization.

Further TS optimization at the highest point on the PES of the two methods with Gaussian 03, resulted in an identical TS geometry where the diazepine ring achieves planarity, conferring a $C_{s}$ symmetry on the TS, which is in good agreement with the previous finding. ${ }^{15,16}$ The RPATH calculation gives the inversion energy barrier as $8.6 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$ for 1 (Table 1).

For the $N^{1}$-desmethylbenzodiazepine 2, both RPATH and scan calculations gave a single reaction path with an inversion barrier of $3.5 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$ without hysteresis. The absence of the rotation of the $N^{1}$-methyl group around the $\mathrm{N} 1-\mathrm{C} 10$ bond lowers the inversion energy barrier of 2 by about $5 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$ compared to that of $\mathbf{1}$. The subsequent TS optimization at the highest point on the PES obtained from both methods also gave the TS with $C_{s}$ symmetry.
3.2. Inversion of the PBR Ligand 3. The inversion process of $\mathbf{3}$ obtained with the RPATH method (Figure 2) is characterized by the rotation of the chlorophenyl group coupled with the movements of the C3 methylene and $N^{1}$-methyl groups of the B ring. The similarity of the overall shape of the PES of 3 to that of $\mathbf{1}$ indicates that the inversion may well occur through a symmetrical TS. Nonetheless, a further TS optimization at the highest PES $\left(\phi_{1}=4.9^{\circ}, \phi_{2}=2.5^{\circ}, \phi_{3}=83.5^{\circ}\right)$ resulted in the asymmetrical TS, $\mathrm{P}^{*}\left(\phi_{1}=5.6^{\circ}, \phi_{2}=7.0^{\circ}, \phi_{3}=63.1^{\circ}\right)$, accompanied by an energy gain of $0.3 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$. Regardless of the starting geometry chosen near the highest-energy region, we were only able to obtain $\mathrm{P}^{*}$, even after increasing the number of grid points between frames 7 and 10 of Figure 2. This can be attributed to the preference of the TS optimization process with Gaussian 03 at the DFT level for $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ over $\mathrm{M}^{*}$. Accordingly, the $\mathrm{M}^{*}\left(\phi_{1}=-5.6^{\circ}, \phi_{2}=-7.0^{\circ}, \phi_{3}=111.2^{\circ}\right)$ geometry was obtained by inverting the coordinates of the $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ structure (see Figure 3). Note that $\phi_{3}$ is defined as the dihedral angle $\mathrm{C}^{\prime}-$ $\mathrm{C} 1^{\prime}-\mathrm{C} 5-\mathrm{N} 4$ (e.g., $63.1^{\circ}$ of $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ in Table 2) that is equivalent to the dihedral $\mathrm{C}^{\prime}-\mathrm{C1}^{\prime}-\mathrm{C} 5-\mathrm{N} 4\left(-111.2^{\circ}\right)$.

The inset of Figure 2 is the PES of the inversion of $\mathbf{3}$ constructed with the scan method. Both the forward and reverse scans of the reaction coordinate, $\phi_{1}$, are characterized by a sizable hysteresis in energy as well as in geometry at the highenergy region. Apparently, the presence of a 5-(4'-chlorophenyl) group, makes the effect of the constraint imposed on $\phi_{1}$ more strongly felt in both geometry and energetics than in compound 1. The TS optimization of $\mathbf{3}$ at the two highest-energy points resulted in the enantiomers $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ and $\mathrm{P}^{*}$, as previously pointed out. ${ }^{15,16}$

Utilizing the TS geometry of $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ and $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ (Figure 3), two reaction paths were then constructed by expanding grid points from 15 to 61: one path connecting the M to P via $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ and the
other path connecting M to P via $\mathrm{P}^{*}$. These two paths provide more details on the dynamics of the BZ inversion process than hitherto known. The inversion of M to P involves a concerted rearrangement of nuclei and electron redistribution that is manifested in the paths displayed in Figure 4a in terms of the variation of the three dihedral angles ( $\phi_{1}, \phi_{2}$, and $\phi_{3}$ ); the two asymmetric paths ( $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{M}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$ and $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{P}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$ ) are symmetric by inversion. Figure 4 a shows how the rotation of the chlorophenyl group is synchronized with the inversion of the B ring. When the inversion of $\mathbf{3}$ takes the $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{M}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$ path, a significant change in $\phi_{3}$ is observed between the ground state $\mathrm{M}\left(\phi_{3}=\right.$ $\left.24.3^{\circ}\right)$ and the TS M ${ }^{*}\left(\phi_{3}=111.2^{\circ}\right)$. After the TS is passed, a relatively small change of $\phi_{3}$ is seen until the formation of the enantiomer $\mathrm{P}\left(\phi_{3}=153.0^{\circ}\right)$. This rotation of the chlorophenyl


Figure 4. (a) Conversion of the conformer M into P in terms of three dihedral angles $\left(\phi_{1}, \phi_{2}\right.$, and $\left.\phi_{3}\right)$. Two asymmetric paths, $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{M}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$ and $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{P}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$, are symmetrical by inversion. (b) Energetics of the inversion of $\mathbf{3}$ as a function of $\phi_{1}$ and $\phi_{3}$. Arrows in red and black indicate the frame number on the respective path of $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{P}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$ and $M-M^{*}-P$. Dotted lines in red and black depict the position of $P^{*}$ and $\mathrm{M}^{*}$, respectively, in the space of $\phi_{1}$ and $\phi_{3}$.
group is also closely correlated with the inversion of the B ring characterized by $\phi_{1}$ and $\phi_{2}$; both dihedral angles of the conformer $\mathrm{M}\left(\phi_{1}=-72.5^{\circ}, \phi_{2}=-35.5^{\circ}\right)$ vary with a small rate of increase until reaching $\mathrm{M}^{*}\left(\phi_{1}=-5.6^{\circ}, \phi_{2}=-7.0^{\circ}\right)$, and then with a relatively large increase to $\mathrm{P}\left(\phi_{1}=72.7^{\circ}, \phi_{2}=\right.$ $33.6^{\circ}$ ). When the inversion takes the path of $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{P}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$, the rates of the chlorophenyl group rotation and the B ring inversion are completely reversed. For example, the $\phi_{3}$ of the conformer M increases from $24.3^{\circ}$ to $63.1^{\circ}$ up to the $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ and then to $153.0^{\circ}$ until the inversion is complete. Notably, at the $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ and $\mathrm{P}^{*}$, the values of $\phi_{1}$ and $\phi_{2}$ differ by $11.2^{\circ}$ and $14^{\circ}$, respectively, as compared to $48.1^{\circ}$ for $\phi_{3}$, thus reflecting the larger conformational change of the chlorophenyl group to accommodate the more conformationally restricted seven-membered ring.

Figure 4 b illustrates the energetics of the inversion of $\mathbf{3}$ as a function of $\phi_{1}$ and $\phi_{3}$ showing the two reaction paths going through the $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ and $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ with an equal energy barrier of 17.3 $\mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$. The dashed line shown between the two paths is the one taken from the 15 replicas in Figure 2. Because the geometry optimization at each grid point was carried out on the interpolated geometry of M and P with the rms constraint, each point on this dashed path represents the average geometry of particular intermediates of M and P . This quasi-symmetrical path was broken into the two asymmetrical ones when $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ and $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ were utilized in mapping the inversion, mainly due to the energy difference arising from the rotation of the chlorophenyl ring. For example, frame 11 of the $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{P}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$ path ( $\phi_{1}=-64.9^{\circ}, \phi_{3}$ $=37.2^{\circ}$ ) is $0.46 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$ more stable than that of the $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{M}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$ path $\left(\phi_{1}=-64.5^{\circ}, \phi_{3}=49.9^{\circ}\right)$, and the energy difference becomes smaller at frame $22(0.23 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol})$ and then zero at the TS (frame 31).
3.3. Symmetrical TS. The quasi-symmetrical path shown in Figure 4b together with a small structural difference between the $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ and $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ suggests that the inversion of $\mathbf{3}$ can also proceed via a symmetrical TS. A subsequent geometry optimization with $C_{s}$ symmetry by both Gaussian 03 and GAMESS located the symmetrical TS, which had not been reported before. This newly found TS with $C_{s}$ symmetry is $0.10 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$ less stable than the asymmetrical $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ or $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ and has two negative imaginary frequencies; one is related mainly to the B ring puckering ( -68.6 $\mathrm{cm}^{-1}$, Figure 5 a ), and the other to the internal rotation of the chlorophenyl group ( $-11.9 \mathrm{~cm}^{-1}$, Figure 5 b). These two imaginary frequencies further suggest that the inversion of $\mathbf{3}$ involves multiple TSs that are related by symmetry as in the case of the dissociation of formaldehyde $\left(\mathrm{H}_{2} \mathrm{CO}\right)$ into $\mathrm{H}_{2}$ and CO where two nonplanar TSs can be merged into one planar TS. ${ }^{33}$ In other words, a path connecting the symmetrical TS to the asymmetrical $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ and $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ states would enable the inversion via a crossed path such as $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{P}^{*}$-symmetrical TS -P or $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{P}^{*}$ symmetrical $\mathrm{TS}-\mathrm{M}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$, the latter encompassing the microscopic inversion of the asymmetrical TSs. The RPATH calculation, utilizing 43 replicas between $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ and $\mathrm{P}^{*}$, did indeed find such a path with a symmetrical TS, thus demonstrating that the inversion paths of $\mathbf{3}$ can readily cross from one to the other. The symmetrical TS obtained from the RPATH calculation is essentially identical to that obtained from Gaussian 03 or GAMESS, as shown in Table 3; the energy difference between the RPATH and GAMESS results is $0.0027 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$. It is noteworthy that the TS with $C_{s}$ symmetry cannot be obtained with standard TS optimizers in Gaussian 03 or GAMESS without imposing a symmetry constraint whereas the RPATH naturally yields such TS via focusing.

The TS with or without $C_{s}$ symmetry has intriguing structural features that warrant further examination. To make a meaningful


Figure 5. (a) Imaginary vibrational motion of the diazepine ring associated with the $N^{1}$-methyl and C3 methylene of the symmetrical TS of 3. (b) Imaginary torsional vibrational motion of the 5-(4'chlorophenyl) group of the symmetrical TS of 3 .
structural comparison, it is necessary to focus on the bond distances and angles in Table 3 calculated with the same software (Gaussian 03). First, the C ring of the conformer P , the asymmetrical $\mathrm{P}^{*}$, and the symmetrical TS all deviate from planarity with respect to the plane containing the $\mathrm{C} 1^{\prime}-\mathrm{C} 5$ bond, as indicated by their respective dihedral angles $\left(177.3^{\circ}, 174.4^{\circ}\right.$, $175.9^{\circ}$ ) of $\mathrm{C}^{\prime}-\mathrm{C}^{\prime}-\mathrm{C} 1^{\prime}-\mathrm{C} 5$. This distortion is likely to be a consequence of the steric repulsion between the rings of A and C and is the reason that the dihedral angle $\mathrm{C}^{\prime}-\mathrm{C1}^{\prime}-\mathrm{C} 5-\mathrm{N} 4$ of the symmetrical TS is $87.9^{\circ}$ rather than $90^{\circ}$. Of the two TSs, the symmetrical TS has a smaller distortion because the near orthogonality of the C ring to the B ring attenuates the steric repulsion. Second, the intra-ring bond distances of the B ring of both TSs, such as those of N1-C2, C2-C3, C3-N4, and $\mathrm{C} 10-\mathrm{N} 1$, are quite comparable or slightly different $(\leq 0.0006$ A). Though still small, the difference in the bond distances N4C 5 and $\mathrm{C} 5-\mathrm{C}^{\prime}$ between the two TSs is noteworthy. As compared to the case for asymmetrical $\mathrm{P}^{*}$, the $\mathrm{N} 4-\mathrm{C} 5$ distance of the symmetrical TS is shorter by $0.0014 \AA$, an indication of a little better overlap of $\pi$-electrons over the N 4 and C 5 atoms due to the flat B ring. On the contrary, the inter-ring bond distance, $\mathrm{C} 5-\mathrm{Cl}^{\prime}$, of the symmetrical TS is longer by 0.0018 and $0.0238 \AA$ than that of the respective $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ and the conformer P : a consequence of unfavorable overlap of $\pi$-electron clouds over the C 5 and $\mathrm{C1}^{\prime}$ atoms because the C ring of the symmetrical TS is almost perpendicular to the B ring, as shown by the

TABLE 3: Calculated Distances ( $\AA$ ) and Angles (deg) of the Ground State and TS of 3

| parameter | $\begin{gathered} \mathrm{P} \\ \text { RPATH } \end{gathered}$ | $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ <br> Gaussian 03 | symmetrical TS |  |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  |  |  | Gaussian 03 | GAMESS | $\mathrm{RPATH}^{\text {a }}$ |
| N1-C2 | 1.3951 | 1.3946 | 1.3952 | 1.3950 | 1.3941 |
| C2-C3 | 1.5282 | 1.5275 | 1.5280 | 1.5289 | 1.5286 |
| C3-N4 | 1.4544 | 1.4252 | 1.4253 | 1.4249 | 1.4248 |
| N4-C5 | 1.2862 | 1.2739 | 1.2725 | 1.2725 | 1.2728 |
| C10-N1 | 1.4154 | 1.4218 | 1.4224 | 1.4225 | 1.4228 |
| C10-C11 | 1.4167 | 1.4327 | 1.4327 | 1.4339 | 1.4345 |
| C11-C5 | 1.4921 | 1.4981 | 1.4976 | 1.4979 | 1.4982 |
| C5-C1 ${ }^{\prime}$ | 1.4933 | 1.5153 | 1.5171 | 1.5166 | 1.5172 |
| C5-N4-C3-C2 | 72.7 | 5.6 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| $\mathrm{C} 6^{\prime}-\mathrm{C} 1^{\prime}-\mathrm{C} 5-\mathrm{N} 4$ | 153.0 | 63.1 | 87.9 | 87.6 | 87.4 |
| $C 2^{\prime}-\mathrm{C}^{\prime}-\mathrm{C1}^{\prime}-\mathrm{C} 5$ | 177.3 | 174.4 | 175.9 | 175.4 | 174.9 |

${ }^{a}$ Obtained from frame 21 having the highest energy among 43 replicas between $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ and $\mathrm{P}^{*}$.

TABLE 4: Low Vibrational Frequencies of 3

| transition state | frequency <br> $\left(\mathrm{cm}^{-1}\right)$ | mode ${ }^{a}$ |
| :--- | :---: | :--- |
| asymmetrical $\left(\mathrm{P}^{*}\right)$ | 16.4 | $\mathrm{C}=\mathrm{O}$ out of plane |
|  | 28.3 | C ring twisting |
|  | 40.1 | C ring wagging |
|  | 83.6 | symmetrical $\mathrm{N}-\mathrm{CH}_{3}$ and $\mathrm{CH}_{2}$ |
| symmetrical | 19.4 | $\mathrm{C}=\mathrm{O}$ out of plane plane, $\mathrm{A}^{\prime \prime}$ |
|  | 36.8 | A ring deformation, $\mathrm{A}^{\prime \prime}$ |
|  | 37.3 | C ring wagging, $\mathrm{A}^{\prime}$ |
|  | 84.2 | symmetrical $\mathrm{N}-\mathrm{CH}_{3}$ and $\mathrm{CH}_{2}$ |
|  |  | out of plane, $\mathrm{A}^{\prime \prime}$ |

${ }^{a} \mathrm{~A}^{\prime}$ and $\mathrm{A}^{\prime \prime}$ represent respectively the symmetric and antisymmetric vibration with respect to the $\sigma_{\mathrm{h}}$ plane.
dihedral angle $\mathrm{C}^{\prime}-\mathrm{C}^{\prime}-\mathrm{C} 5-\mathrm{N} 4\left(87.9^{\circ}\right.$ vs $63.1^{\circ}$ of $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ and $153.0^{\circ}$ of P ). This structural comparison suggests that the geometry relaxation from the symmetrical TS to the asymmetrical TS is subtly manifested by the difference in both the C ring distortion and the bond distances $\mathrm{N} 4-\mathrm{C} 5$ and $\mathrm{C} 5-\mathrm{Cl}^{\prime}$.

In the phenomenon known as Peierls distortion, ${ }^{34}$ a vibronic coupling is responsible for the symmetry breaking of the ground state as observed in polyacetylene ${ }^{35,36}$ and cyclobutadiene ${ }^{37}$ whose bond-length alternating structures are more stable than their respective equal bond-length structures. By analogy, the $C_{s}$ symmetry of the benzodiazepine TS can be broken into the more stable enantiomeric $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ and $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ by a coupled motion of the puckering of the diazepine ring (Figure 5a) to the torsional vibration of the chlorophenyl group (Figure 5b). This notion is strengthened by the existence of a number of low-energy vibrational modes ranging from 20 to $100 \mathrm{~cm}^{-1}$ associated with both TSs, as listed in Table 4. Similarly, a coupling between the vibrational mode of $\mathrm{NO}_{2}$ and the internal rotation of $\mathrm{CF}_{3}$ leading to geometry relaxation (i.e., a dihedral angle of $1.4^{\circ}$ between the plane of $\mathrm{NO}_{2}$ and that containing the $\mathrm{C}-\mathrm{N}$ bond) was reported for a small molecule, $\mathrm{CF}_{3} \mathrm{NO}_{2} \cdot{ }^{38,39}$ In that study, the calculated energy difference between the eclipsed and the staggered $\mathrm{CF}_{3} \mathrm{NO}_{2}$ at the MP2/6-311G* level was about $0.1 \mathrm{kcal} /$ mol or $40 \mathrm{~cm}^{-1}$ and is quite comparable to the energy difference between the TSs of $\mathbf{3}$. Our vibrational frequency calculation at the B3LYP/6-31G* level further identified that the staggered $\mathrm{CF}_{3} \mathrm{NO}_{2}$ has the TS geometry, suggesting that a vibrationalrotatonal coupling resulting in the rearrangement of nuclei and electron distribution can occur at the TS of both small and complex molecules.
3.4. RPATH vs IRC. Figure 6 illustrates the inversion of $\mathbf{3}$ obtained from the IRC calculation in terms of $\phi_{1}$ and $\phi_{3}$. Both $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{P}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$ and $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{M}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$ have a rather straight path connecting the conformer M to P . Besides, the $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{M}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$ path is not


Figure 6. Inversion of $\mathbf{3}$ in terms of $\phi_{1}$ and $\phi_{3}$ constructed from the IRC calculation.

## SCHEME 3: Structure of trans-Geldanamycin ${ }^{a}$


${ }^{a}$ The arrow indicates the amide bond that undergoes trans-cis isomerization.
symmetrical with the $\mathrm{M}-\mathrm{P}^{*}-\mathrm{P}$ path by inversion as in the case of the RPATH calculations. This is likely to arise from the harmonic character of the normal mode constraint utilized in the IRC method. The RPATH method is not limited by such harmonic approximation and thus better approximates the PES of the inversion of BZs
3.5. Inversion of the $N$-Desmethyl Compound 4. A very similar PES as shown in Figure 4b, with an energy barrier of $10.7 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$, was obtained for the $N$-desmethyl ligand 4 with the RPATH calculation. The absence of the $N^{1}$-methyl group lowers the energy barrier by about $7 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$ with respect to that of $\mathbf{3}$, and the asymmetrical $\mathrm{M}^{*}$ and $\mathrm{P}^{*}$ are $0.07 \mathrm{kcal} / \mathrm{mol}$ more stable than the TS with the $C_{s}$ symmetry. The symmetrical

TS of 4 has one imaginary vibrational frequency $\left(-56 \mathrm{~cm}^{-1}\right)$ mainly associated with ring puckering as shown in Figure 5a.

## 4. Conclusions

The binding of bioactive ligands to receptors can be accompanied by conformational alterations in both ligand and receptor. A general practical method for exploring conformational pathways including transition points in complex molecules is needed. Embedding the RPATH method in CHARMM with internal access to the major ab initio quantum chemical codes provides such a method. RPATH had been tested for mapping a reaction path at an enzyme site, and it is now being tested for the behavior of the TS in bioactive ligands. The importance of the diazepine ring was outlined in the introduction. The present results show that accurate TS behavior for complicated ligands is readily obtained with the RPATH method. The TS of BZs 1-4 were successfully located, and the calculated energy barriers for the PBR ligand $\mathbf{3}$ and its $N$-desmethyl analog $\mathbf{4}$ were comparable to those experimentally determined for CBR ligands without a $4^{\prime}$-chloro substituent. By further analyzing the conversion of the enantiomeric conformer M into P in both 3 and $\mathbf{4}$ in torsional space, we discovered that (i) the difference in the rate of the inversion of the diazepine ring and the rotation of the 5-(4'-chlorophenyl) group gives rise to two unsymmetrical paths, (ii) a path connects two asymmetrical TSs of $\mathbf{3}$ via a symmetrical TS, resulting in multiple inversion paths, (iii) the coupling of the vibrational motion of the diazepine ring and the torsional vibration of the 5-(4'-chlorophenyl) group at the TS stabilizes the asymmetrical TS of $\mathbf{3}$ and $\mathbf{4}$ over the TS with $C_{s}$ symmetry, and (iv) the geometry relaxation of the symmetrical TS of $\mathbf{3}$ to the asymmetrical TS is manifested by the subtle difference in the C -ring distortion and the bond distances N4-C5 and C5-C1.

Unlike the traditional scan calculation, which imposes a severe constraint on the reaction coordinate, the RPATH method allows the concerted movement of all atoms, thus avoiding hysteresis in energy and geometry during the inversion of the molecules. In addition, the RPATH does not require a priori knowledge of the geometry of the TS of interest, and this provides an advantage for locating the TS of molecules containing many degrees of freedom. For example, the active form of geldanamycin (Scheme 3), an anticancer compound that is recognized by heat shock protein 90 , exists in the compact cis form whereas the more stable form in solution is in the extended trans form. ${ }^{40}$ Because geldanamycin has a 16membered ring with a number of rotatable bonds, other TS searching algorithms may not be practical to approximate the TS of the trans-cis isomerization of geldanamycin. However, the RPATH method does locate the TSs in the isomerization of geldanamycin (to be published), and thus, it can find a wider application in the study of even complex reaction mechanisms of chemical and biological interest.

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