

## **From Fullness to Emptiness: Encountering Non-dualism in Jesus the Buddha - Conjectures of a Vipassana Meditator**

“On his way back from the K’un-lun Mountains, the yellow emperor lost the dark pearl of Tao. He sent Knowledge to find it, but Knowledge was unable to understand it. He sent Distant vision, but distant Vision was unable to see it. He sent Eloquence, but Eloquence was unable to describe it. Finally, he sent Empty Mind, and Empty Mind came back with the pearl.”

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“In the middle of Nothing, I join the Source of All Things.”<sup>1</sup>

“St John of the Cross gave three signs for a God-seeking person to move from active meditation to the prayer of loving attention: The first, that ‘when a person reaches such a state, on hearing... anything about such practice (s)he feels bored’; the second, that ‘when listening to or dealing with them (s)he receives no pleasure’. The third, that ‘when (s/he feels growing in himself/herself) the hunger and desire for highest good which (s/)he still cannot reach.’ This makes (him/her) pray: *My Lord God, I cannot proceed further. It is mine to ask, and yours alone to give what I ask.*”<sup>2</sup>

### **The Abstract**

The paper makes a submission from the subjective personal perspective of the author having been introduced to the (Buddhist) Vipassana Meditation practice as to how it helped purify and rethink inherited Christian belief system besides offering leads for integrating the twin systems (traditions). The paper builds on the three fold impact the ten day course had through the silent presence of a teacher, guiding into the rigorous discipline which gave insights into encountering suffering (crucifixion) and the possibility of transcending it. The three parts of the Essay besides offering a critique of the technique makes the submission that meditative processes can modify the mind as to let go of the sense of personal ego and in it lays the non-dual approach to religious experience of the divine. The paper also argues that a fallout of such experience for Christian meditator could be the meeting point or coalescing of Jesus’s path of liberation/salvation with the Buddhist path of enlightenment/nirvana. The philosophical intent of the paper is the submission that the meditative experiencing opens up an epistemological-metaphysical transition from grasping being (fullness) to the realization that there is nothing (emptiness) to be grasped at all. The ambivalence of nothing consists in perfecting the non-dual equanimity in the momentary as cosmotheandric.

### **Becoming a Meditator**

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Hoff, *The Tao of Pooh*, Egmont, 1982, p.144, 149.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Peter Lourdes from Norbert Cummins, *Freedom to Rejoice: Understanding St John of the Cross*, Harper Collins, 1991, p.193 in his talk “Keeping Sane inspite of Psychology” delivered at the valedictory function of the Diploma Programme at Bosco renewal Centre, Bangalore, October 2008

On completing the *vipassana* course, part of the ‘midi sadhana’<sup>3</sup> programme of Sadhana Institute, Lonavla (Pune, India), the assistant teacher<sup>4</sup> of the technique threw a challenge saying that the Catholic Church is yet to come up with studied and deep response to this phenomenon which has been growing in India for the past twenty five years.<sup>5</sup> His words took my thoughts back to 1981, my novitiate year, when, the Master of Novices,<sup>6</sup> initiated us into *vipassana* meditative technique of awareness and equanimity as a project of life. Later in 1985-87, while doing Masters in Philosophy at Pune the book *Art of Living*<sup>7</sup> was gifted by MRA centre (Moral Re-Armament, presently renamed as Initiatives for Change), Panchgani during a visit to its Asian Headquarters. It occasioned the attempt to revive the meditative technique during a retreat basing on the above book for 6 days at Don Bosco, Lonavla. It seemed significant that this challenge came once again in the 25<sup>th</sup> year at Sadhana Institute, Lonavla during the two months renewal programme which began with the official ten days course. Participation at the programme was the fulfillment of a lurking desire of almost a year.

The experience, as summed up then, meant: first, an insight into the silent presence of Christ in the gentle assistant teacher<sup>8</sup> who spoke little; second, the ten days rigor of sitting was a process of accompanying Jesus’ in his self emptying journey to Calvary; and third, the immersion in the technique of *dhamma* as a crucifixion-resurrection.<sup>9</sup> Let me explain.

The assistant teacher said little but was present much. The technique as reintroduced into India by Satya Narayan Goenka, a Burmese of Indian origin, was replayed through tapes and videos. His calm and quiet presence in the meditative hall had an effect which more than words could have. His presence was an experience of the power of good sentiments and vibrations send out constantly to the students. He was attracted from reading the book and took a course every year since. He considers himself an ordinary practitioner authorized to share the teaching.

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<sup>3</sup> The name given to the two months long self-discovery programme designed by the institute to assist in midlife transition and experience of wholeness. Cfr the brochure and/or website of the institute: [www.sadhanainstitute.org](http://www.sadhanainstitute.org).

<sup>4</sup> The teacher is SN Goenka, and his instructions and talks recorded in tapes are used by the authorized assistant teachers for the meditations courses across the country and abroad coordinated from Vipassana Research Institute, Igatpuri, Maharashtra; [www.vri.dhamma.org](http://www.vri.dhamma.org)

<sup>5</sup> The attempt in this paper is to bring together the personal narrative under the scrutinizing perspective offered by the on going applied psychological research a summary of which is contained in the DK Nauriyal et al, eds., *Buddhist Thought and Applied Psychological Research: Transcending the Boundaries*, New York, Routledge, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Puchakunnel sdb, presently a volunteer priest in Colombia, Latin America who himself was trained by Tony de Mello at Sadhana Institute in 1979-80.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. William Hart, *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as taught by S.N. Goenka*, London, Harper Collins, 1987.

<sup>8</sup> The assistant teacher was Peter D’Souza sfx. This is not an attempt to Christianize vipassana, rather, a statement of my entry point into vipassana with a Christian heritage.

<sup>9</sup> The initiation into the theory and practice of vipassana had a transformative effect which is being described through this metaphoric usage of ‘crucifixion-resurrection’. In other words, it is an attempt to use Christian language to describe an experience which per se does not call for religionising.

The course consisted of ten days of ten hours of sitting in meditation. The meditation consisted for the first three days in observing the natural breath and for the rest of the six days in observing one's sensations in the body.<sup>10</sup> It is this technique which for me became a 'self-emptying' and 'crucifying' experience. Let me summarize a bit more on the technique before elaborating on the content of the experience.

Mr Goenka hails from a trading family of Indian origin in Burma. There, in the capital city, he was a prominent businessman as well as socially acclaimed person. He learned the technique due to medical necessity from a government official cum teacher of the technique. The latter learned from a Farmer in his village. The tradition surrounding this technique of *vipassana* or insight meditation in Burma believed that it would find acceptance once again in its land of origin, India. It reached Burma, the golden land way back in 300 BCE, after Asoka the great sent teachers to spread the technique far and wide on having transformed himself with the practice.<sup>11</sup> The meditative technique goes back to Gautama, the Buddha or enlightened one, who became enlightened on having discovered this method, or having perfected this method from among the various types of meditative practices then prevalent in India.

### **The Technique**

The technique has three parts: *silā*, *samadhi* and *pragya (panna)*. The first is about five moral precepts which the practitioner takes before beginning on the path or the technique: not killing, not stealing, not indulging in sexual misconduct, not lying and not taking any intoxicants.

The *Samadhi* is about the practice of control or mastery over the mind. It is achieved by setting aside time for practice of concentration, or by sitting in meditation to observe the mind. This is achieved through the first three days of awareness of respiration, a process to calm the mind and sharpen it as an instrument of observation. The *pragya or panna* (in Pali) meaning wisdom consists in understanding the nature of the mind, of the body, of material world, and thus of all of reality. The law of nature or the law of God or law of reality according to this technique is experientially realizable in the actual sense experience level as an interchange of mind into matter and matter into mind. The unearthing of this truth through an experiential methodology of practice is what made *vipassana* a unique method ever since the time of Gautama, the enlightened.

The basic theoretical frame of the technique regarding mind-matter combination or relation begins with the reference to the four layers of the mind. The mind has first a *vijnana* or consciousness/cognition level of perceiving the object through any of the sense doors –

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<sup>10</sup> The power of neutral objective observation as deserving scientific attention was referred to by Nietzsche as early as 1887 when he said, 'a rigorous examination wanting to look our experiences as straight in the eye as if they represented a scientific experiment, hour after hour, day after day.' As quoted in John Pickering, "The first person perspective in Postmodern Psychology" in DK Nauriyal et al, eds., *Buddhist Thought and Applied Psychological Research: Transcending the Boundaries*, New York, Routledge, 2006, p.16. This tradition has been picked up by Pickering showing that 'there is growing recognition of the scientific character of the first person description of the inner mental field derived specially within meditative processes'.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1971.

eye, ear, tongue, nose, skin and brain. Second, it has the *sanya* or recognition level of identifying this or that object of this or that sense/perceptive door (entry point) by recognizing it as something known or similar to something known earlier as something appealing/pleasant or repelling/unpleasant. Third, there is *vedana*, which is a corresponding sensation generated in the body as result of this mind – object contact. Fourth, there is a *sankara*, a reaction of aversion or attraction, acceptance or rejection of the pleasant or unpleasant sensation generated. At this point, the technique holds that the liberation consists in an awareness of the operation of the mind at the fourth level by being equanimous and not reacting either with aversion or with clinging/craving.

An understanding of the fact of craving and aversion as causing misery to the sufferer was known to many teachers during and even before Gautama. His unique contribution, Mr Goenka acclaims, is that he alone made it possible that each person can experience it as actual at the sensational field of his or her body-mind combination. In other words, he showed the possibility of any person, irrespective of differences of diverse kinds standing to gain by practicing the technique and realizing for himself or herself the truth of reality.

What is the truth to be realized?

It is about the impermanence, the momentariness of the sensation which like wavelets, constantly arises and passes away. No sensation remains permanent. The credibility of the technique consists in the fact that the actual dissolution of the material bodily structure is experientially knowable as the truth, not merely known as a theoretical truth, but known as practical, actual, experientially true in the here and now, in the meditation. The experiential knowledge does something to the conditioned mind, which is acting even at the unconscious level by the logic of aversion and clinging to the unpleasant and pleasant sensations generated by the sense-object contact. In nutshell, the dissolution of sensations, arising and passing, leads to the dissolution of the bodily structure, a sum-total of sensations arising and passing, and leads further to the dissolution of the entire material structure pointing way to the Emptiness/Nothingness as the underlying truth of reality.

### **The Implications**

Now let me come to my reasons for describing it as a self emptying and crucifixion-resurrection process. For the Christian the life of Jesus Christ is remarkable because he gave himself to the last bit, even to the point of death. This self emptying is reminiscent of the rigorous sitting of Buddha from the age of twenty nine till thirty five when he proclaimed himself as having realized the truth, the path of *dhamma* or the law of nature. Discovering that the ego built around the name, the form, the body called ‘me’ has no real ‘I’ beneath it; that it is an essence-less, substance-less reality of constantly passing and arising wavelets at rapid speeds. The solidity apparently felt by the person is no solid reality in the final analysis but a mere radiation of wavelets. This awareness when concretely gripped in the process of the rigorous meditation becomes what can be actually termed as the christification experience. Jesus becoming the Christ is his own self

realization, turning him into the universal person, the cosmic *purusa*, the divine pure consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

It is a ‘crucifixion’ or cross-like experience on an apparent and deeper level. Firstly, the clinging and aversion polarities are like the two beams of the cross. Life experienced as it is in the body-mind complex is a constant interplay of the pleasant and unpleasant, wanted and unwanted, the positive and the negative, in short, a crisscrossing existence. Secondly, these two beams would not form a cross were it not for the nail at the intersection which keeps it as a horizontal and vertical or pleasant-unpleasant polar relation. Equanimity or discernment which keeps one nonattached and yet involved is like the nail. It is a process by which the ‘aversion’ to the unpleasant is neither suppressed nor evaded or reacted to negatively and the ‘clinging’ to the pleasant is not accepted unquestioningly. The tendency to react negatively to the unpleasant by generating aversion and to the pleasant by generating clinging is the normal tendency of the unconscious mind which in turn accretes as impurity in the mind. The meditative practice prevents that impurity formation process and thus clarifies and purifies the mind, enabling a harmonious and peaceful life. Attaining this equanimity and preserving it or persevering in it is a crucifixion-resurrection experience.

The technique as it is presented has rich experience content and is a strategy directed to ‘learn by doing’ and believing only after seeing or experiencing. The technique as it is presented claims to be non sectarian, distinct from anything of Buddhism in any of its sectarian versions. This is regarded as the pure teaching of Buddha the iconoclast, the *anattavadin*, the anti metaphysician and equally the compassionate and enlightened one. The realization claimed consists in the proposed epistemology (process of truth discovery) eventually turning into an ontology (explanation about the nature of reality). The presentation of a theory at the technique level, on realization of the epistemological truth turns out to be also meta-physical, or trans-physical.

### **A Critique**

What are some of the problems that immediately arise in the effort to integrate a new dimension of awareness and equanimity into one’s life? Actually one could say that it was always there in a lesser or hidden dose, and is being reactivated through this process. Just like, the two vital aspects of the technique, breath and sensations, were always there, and one was aware of them even without the technique. The process of meditation sharpens it and in the process certain benefits accrue.

The claim of the technique being non sectarian, however poses the question, as to how it got banished or disappeared from India two thousand years ago, five hundred years after its discovery. Similarly, one could ask as to what guarantee is there that this time round it wont be a threat to established religions and, in turn, wont replace any one of the existing religions? It could be answered that as ‘impermanence’ is the crux, the question neither of the future nor of the past really counts. On the other hand, the non soul experience while

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<sup>12</sup> The attachment to the Divine as a person is a Christian legacy. The nature of this person – as one in three – complicates and probably reveals the way beyond personhood.

realizable, can be all too threatening as a theoretical position. It is in this sense that the Christian acceptability of *vipassana* clinches on the ability of the meditator to see Christ's own self emptying as that which gave meaning to his life. His self emptying was not a pious saying, as it slowly dawns on all genuine followers. It does not become real until and unless one does it on the cross, as he underwent crucifixion. The process of this crucifixion on the cross does begin with the pain and joy involved in a life of equanimity spurred by the meditation is a realization of the Christian *vipassana* meditator.

Questions emerge also from the assumptions with which the technique begins. First, the assumption that one must leave behind all prior beliefs, practices and rituals for the duration of the trial of this technique. This is a crucial assumption. One is freely opting to go through the course. One opts after having heard or come to know from some similar experience. One is free to give it a try or not. One could ask whether the very expectation of this assumption being put into practice and promising a result thereby and eventual request of continuing with the practice of the technique for continued result – all of these put together – goes into the beginning of an alternative for one's present perception, mode of living and ritual practices. It is in this potential acceptance of something new – a new vision, a new practice and theory – that despite the claim not to be one more sect or organized religion among the many available, and just being a path, a non-sectarian universal path, that its turning out to be all that it denied lies. This is not equivalent to saying it has become so, or, to saying that some modifications on the present model is not possible. The emphasis lies on the fact that the willingness of the individual to submit to this requirement because of whatever has brought oneself to that position, offers the potential for the resurgence of what the technique claims it does not want to become.

Second, the assumption that the technique is only a technique pops up a question. It follows from the above, from the attempt to present it as available to all, as applicable to all, as non sectarian. This assumption that something can be universal, non sectarian arises from a particular epistemology, a particular way of looking at and seeing reality. The stress on the verifiability, the workability, the pragmatic tenor and the experientiability of the truth and that experience as the path to ultimate liberation, while remaining an epistemology, is also metaphysics. The technique promises to take one from the existentiality of *being* encountered at the level of respiration and sensation, undeniable verities, to the ultimate nature of reality itself as impermanent.

It does not remain merely a theoretical rhetoric but becomes through the practice an actual experience. The self is experienced as dissolvable: the body of the self into non-physical vibrations and wavelets; the mind/ego/I into either gross or subtle sensations. In other words, at the ultimate experiential level there can be no distinction between the non physical and physical, the mind and matter. Both, at the subatomic level, turn out to be wavelets of energy constantly floating and changing. This awareness, the experience of this truth, though begun as a pure technique, in its universalization of experience turns into a belief of and about the real-apparent continuum. The reality taken apparently as permanent, is dissected into the impermanent flux of sensations, the belief about this impermanence following an actual experience leads to regarding the permanence, solidity of the reality as not the full truth, rather, partial truth, the false belief. Truth can be arrived at only if one

presumed understanding of reality is replaced with another. For instance, that reality is impermanent; an actual experience in meditative state turns into false belief the need to hold onto permanence of the real. Therefore, it does not do away with belief, rather, replaces one with another. In other words, arriving at truth is a process of replacing one truth with another, that is, a rectification process is on in the search for the truth. Therefore the truth is actually a path, the *Dhamma*, in the case of *vipassana*.

The technique turns out to be an epistemological process (of de-construction) culminating in a metaphysical truth. The process of becoming aware of sensations, the experience dimension of the process of knowing, ends up with eliminating at the experiential level, both the concept forming mind and the judgment making mind. In other words, the process of dispassionate observation of the experience or flow of sensations leads to eliminating the knower, the questioner, the truth seeker. Truth becomes the elimination of ‘holding onto truth’; In other words, the inability to hold onto a permanent unchanging ‘I’ who owns truth, who defines truth, who is the truth. What is left then? The counter question would be, for whom? This is postmodernism being recovered from the interstices of human cultural spiritual history.

### **Non-Dual Approach to Religious Experience:**

Though in what preceded some problems were hinted at, my intention here, in the second part of this paper is to offer a possibility of integrating Christian mystical prayer experience and *vipassana* technique of meditation.<sup>13</sup> As for the Christian, investing in *Vipassana*, it can be argued, is not going counter to or disengaging with the Christian truth perception, rather it offers, a new mode of recovering Jesus the enlightened one as Christ the Buddha. It can be a recovery of the meaning of the cross, as the movement from Fullness to Nothingness and as such a Non-dual religious experience.<sup>14</sup>

This issue needs further elaboration. Only within the attempted frameworks to look seriously into the potentialities and possibilities of integrating different traditions as to blaze a trail can such efforts be truly evaluated. What follows, therefore, are a few comments from one such attempt to live through a non-dual religious experience. It will be substantiated by a review of the attempts made to research into the Buddhist thought and applied psychology.<sup>15</sup>

Firstly, it is to be noted that all attempts to integrate diverse religious paths begins with the belief in the possibility of entering into the faith of another tradition in its depth. It is a

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<sup>13</sup> At a later date may be even to compare and contrast the Salesian spiritual tradition with *vipassana* technique in order to propose an east-west integral educational strategy for dealing with youthful impulsiveness creatively.

<sup>14</sup> Reflections made after the first experience at Lonavla sadhana, George Thadathil, Salesian College, January 2004). The second stint at vipassana meditation was in January 2007 at Prarthanalaya, St Helens Convent, Kurseong. It was organized by the Xavier Board, the Dialogue Forum and the CRI. There were 17 participants and Fr Peter D Souza was the assistant teacher.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. DK Nauriyal et al, eds., *Buddhist Thought and Applied Psychological Research: Transcending the Boundaries*, New York, Routledge, 2006.

rewarding experience and brings in the learning that every religion to be true to itself needs to encounter the other at its depth. Daring to *be* the other is as important as being there for the other, or being with the other. The Christian model of an incarnational path consists precisely in this dimension of the divine becoming totally human as much as the Buddhist model of enlightenment is a human search into the nature of ultimate/absolute.

The description of the mystical journey of the soul in the *Ascent to Mount Carmel*,<sup>16</sup> finds a parallel, in the ten day journey of the *vipassana* technique. It is a movement from the gross to the subtle. Each day a new step, each day a new discovery, about the real nature of reality is placed before the meditator. The culmination is in the discovery of the ineffable, the real as the empty Nothingness. “By thought he is attained never”.<sup>17</sup> The silence and the discovery of the nature of reality through one’s own mind-body complex, by unwinding it, and dismantling it, and seeing it dissolving into pure wavelets and energy, one is led to the truth of the assertion that ultimately the real is NOTHING to be grasped at with thought. It is no thing. It is nothing that can be held on to. All solidifications cease, or come to nothing.

However, the question can arise that the *vipassana* technique is a human attempt whereas the mystical steps on the spiritual journey are grace filled moments of the discovery of the divine. Yet, there is also the growing conviction of the real as simultaneously, a human-cosmic-divine experience transcending easy dualisms. It is seen in the discoveries by the scientists, into the interstices of nature, matter, coming up with the human unexplainable and unfathomable dimensions within it. The journey into the Godhead by the mystic is rooted in the material and the human. The human attempt by the meditator is equally grounded in the ‘matter’ of the body and the ‘spirit’ of the soul/god/nothingness.

Secondly, the spiritual journey is probably in all traditions, a way of overcoming, letting go, or transcending the sense of ‘small self, ego, the I.’ Life itself is a process of arriving there from birth to death, through the natural process. The unhappiness experienced as a result enables one to look for ways of overcoming it, and some means or the other are had recourse to. The meditative technique is also a short cut, in a way, just a technique, a means to be applied in one’s daily life as not to fall into unhappiness. The ability to preserve equanimity, amidst the ebb and flow of life, is after all, what true happiness is about. It is achieved, in all traditions, by making conscious efforts on a prescribed path, following a certain set of expectations. In this regard, the parallels between the Law of *Dhamma* (the mindfulness as a discernment tool) and the Divine Providence (taking all that happens with an eye of faith) are striking. When Jesus said, not an iota of the Law will be discounted and when he said, I have come to fulfill the law, did he mean also the Law of *Dhamma*, of the Buddhist path, as much as the Law of the Jewish ways.<sup>18</sup> In an inter-cultural sense, ‘the

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<sup>16</sup> The intention is not to make any detailed comparison but draw attention to the fact that the encounter with one’s inner self/soul takes on the dimension of a journey to a discovery. For the electronic version of the text cfr. [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/john\\_cross/ascent.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/john_cross/ascent.html)

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, St Theresa of Avila and other Christian mystics.

<sup>18</sup> Holger Kersten, *Jesus lived in India: His unknown life before and after the Crucifixion*, Delhi, Penguin Books, 1981, 2001.

Cross' is indeed a fulfillment of the *Dhamma*, the Law of Nature. The Law takes its course, Nature takes its course, and there is a providential time for everything.

The Mystical path traversed by Christian saints and the experience of Christ on the Cross become sources for christianisation of the technique. The religious experience bordering on what could be termed mystical, at third sitting,<sup>19</sup> was the unique insight into the biblical verses, 'BE STILL and know that IAM GOD,'<sup>20</sup> 'I am Who I Am.'<sup>21</sup> and 'The Father and I are ONE.'<sup>22</sup> The experience of body dissolution, of mind and matter distancing and merging in the perfectly quiet and yet vibration filled sensation field beheld in the stillness of observation. The giftedness of it is equally real. There is no willful creation of this experience. It is not desired, but happens. You wait, and the Lord Manifests! If S/He so wishes, as it were.

Thirdly, the bodily indicator of equanimity as an attitude to life is the lack of tension in the body. The ability to BE: with oneself, in one's own body. The equanimous presence to oneself irrespective of what surfaces in the NOW is in psychological language a way of entering into a non-ordinary state of consciousness. In the scheme of 'Breath work,'<sup>23</sup> (Stanislaus Grof) the impassioned, non attached way of being present in the now is curative, transformative or liberative and is corroborated by the technique of mindfulness meditation. Empirical researches on the impact of meditation by transpersonal psychologists and the impact of cultural differences on orientation to violence among youth confirm the same.

'Vajrayana Buddhism creates situations of synergy, that is, situations in which the individual perceives that his or her goals merge with the goals of others. Benefiting other sentient beings is seen as also benefiting the self, because through such actions the individual advances on the path toward religious liberation and salvation. Selfishness is not abolished; rather, it is fused with altruism. In addition, the self is submerged in a network of concrete interpersonal obligations and reciprocal relationships, which may have a rather utilitarian character, but, nevertheless, stabilize the person's role in society'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The third ten day course attended was at Loyola Pastoral Centre, Matigara, Siliguri, from 20-31 January 2008. It was organized by the Dialogue Forum of Darjeeling.

<sup>20</sup> Ps. 46:10

<sup>21</sup> Ex. 3:14

<sup>22</sup> Jn. 14:10

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. Stanislaus Grof, with Bennett, H., *The Holotropic Mind: The Three Levels of Human Consciousness and How They Shape Our Lives*, New York, HarperCollins, 1992. See also, <http://www.omplace.com/articles/PathConstruct.html>; and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holotropic\\_Breathwork](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holotropic_Breathwork)

<sup>24</sup> Uwe P. Gielen, "Peace and Violence: A Comparison of Buddhist Ladakh and the United States" in Leonore Loeb Adler and Florence L. Denmark (eds.), *International perspectives on Violence*, London, Praeger, 2004, p.173.

Similarly, though the Christian liturgy has its emotional appeal yet it is the intellectual, rational(creedal) part that gets the focus. The emotions come across in a sanitized evolved status often not taking to account the more intense feelings that underlie the worshippers' psycho-somatic system. In this context, an initiation of the observational dynamic of mindfulness meditation, it could be argued from the personal experience of Christian meditators, can help as an alternative scheme just as the music and the sound usage in the charismatic prayer dynamics helps activate the emotional field of the worshipper.

'The Kingdom of God is within you'<sup>25</sup> is one biblical reference Goenka makes, in elaborating the *dhamma* technique. Further, in describing the need for devotion to be steadfast in the practice of the technique he praises the path of Jesus, and says as with other examples, that the true devotion (*sraddha*) consists in appropriating the qualities of the person being prayed to, or to whom devotion is expressed. Jesus' death on the cross and lack of even a trace of anger or resentment towards the persecutors: 'father, forgive them they know not what they do'.<sup>26</sup> These are indicators of the equanimity Jesus attained in his life by which he deserves the appellation, the Christ.<sup>27</sup>

Fourthly, one of the reservations of the Church regarding the Cosmic Christ and other religious traditions with their meditative practices probably have to do with the potential deterioration of religious experience into a godless experience. A nihilistic, non-theistic, atheistic experience of nothingness seems to underlie the direction of mindfulness meditation in comparison to object oriented deity meditations of much of Hindu tradition or the valuation of the discursive meditation of the Christian kind. In approaching 'nothingness' through meditation what one discovers is the potential or slow 'emptying' of all that has been held dear, 'held onto' as evaporating before one's 'eyes' as it were. The 'fullness', the solidity of being (Being is One, True, Good) as that which is, and therefore symbolic of the condition of truth disappears, melts down, dissolves into its opposite non-beingness.

Nothingness is beheld but without the possibility of naming, describing, pointing, because that would be contradicting the experience that surfaces as 'the experience of nothingness'. Metaphysically speaking, Being is conceived in the background of Non-being, and the disappearance of Being foregrounds Non-being; just as in wakeful consciousness Being is grasped as the truth undeniable, similarly, Nothingness or 'Non-being-ness' surfaces as its potential counterpart and accomplishes the passage from Fullness to Nothingness.

Nothingness as a metaphysical state - transforms itself into an experience of ontonomy<sup>28</sup> (being-[less]-ness) when the 'nothingness' is psychologically grasped as 'self-emptying'. The first notion of being resulting out of the first self-expression (operation) of being in the world is that through which the subject-object distinction in utterance happens as an

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<sup>25</sup> Lk.17:21

<sup>26</sup> Lk. 23:34

<sup>27</sup> cfr. SN Goenka, *The Discourse Summaries*, Bombay, Vipashayan Vishodhan Vinyas, 1989.

<sup>28</sup> A concept popularized by Raimon Panikkar in his distinction between heteronomy, autonomy and ontonomy. The connection with being is a primordial awareness. One could also perceive Heideggerian influence in this coinage.

activity of the 'ego'. The meditative analysis reveals that the mind creates matter, and the matter can be perceived as dwindling into mental states (energies) in the process of observing sensations. The substantiality of the mind-matter complex turn into a non-substantial essence-less, description-less state which is no state of 'being'. This psychic experience can only best be approached as 'self-emptying', as letting go, as not clutching at anything, as the 'dark night' as the godless ground of the mystical intuitive entry into the heart of all fullness as dark nothingness. The net result is an experience that is integrative of the rational and emotive aspects of the *sadhaka*/aspirant.

### **Jesus the Buddha (the enlightened One)**

The Jesus' principle of self emptying is symbolized in the cross.<sup>29</sup> It offers a model for dealing with the constant ups and downs, fluctuations of the affective as well as active world of psycho-somatic substance, the body-mind complex. This constant flux is to be lived with or lived through by nullifying the 'I/ego sense'. The failure to do so leads to 'being lost' in the care and concern of the world. Any attempt to hold onto a 'self' creates a problem. The Jesus' model of 'self-emptying' is a way out of all *dukha*/sin. The inability to see the impermanence of all events and states of modalities shows up the true nature of *dukha* as the real pain and suffering of a life that is inevitable. What the disciple is invited to realize (discover) is the connection between emptying of self and the impermanence of everything.

Living in the liberated mode means overcoming the desire, the urge to control the world of oneself - both of the subject within and the *lokah* around, including other humans. The dispassionate observation and surrender to the passing nature of reality ultimately brings to the realization that there is no substantiality even for the observer. This is the point of self-emptying. The cross for Jesus is the self emptying principle of neither solely verticalizing the divine (absolute) nor solely horizontalizing the material (or/human) but rather seeing the non-substantiality of both. This point of arrival is experientially a transition from the awareness of fullness (being someone, something), to the Emptiness or Nothingness which is non-describable and yet the opening to and background for fullness. The 'nothingness' of the 'here and now' given the impermanence of the momentary is the truth in which the meeting of the divine and the cosmic-human - the vertical and the horizontal - occurs to provide meaning-fullness. There is a constant movement from the emotional fullness, heaviness, being in the body with its weight to emptiness of the dissolved, body-less experience of the Buddha nature of nirvana.

According to Tibetan Buddhism, 'beneath the magic-like forms of the phenomenal world there is only *tongpanyi*, that is, emptiness or the void.' The ultimate goal of the human journey through life is the recognition that one's own true mind, *tongpanyi*, and nirvana are

<sup>29</sup> The nature of self-emptying which is the ideal of Christian vocation (even when it is the net result of a life fully lived) calls for analyzing scientifically the nature of self-emptying which is the goal that spiritualists have referred to. In analyzing, the Buddhist path (open to everyone in meditation as a technique) provides a measuring tool.

one and the same. ‘This insight, to be sure, is difficult to realize at the experiential level, but once it is achieved, violence and greed vanish – not only in theory, but (often) also in practice.’<sup>30</sup> What meditation does as confirmed through scientific observation of the brain activity is that there is lessening of the anxiety level, deepening of the intelligence capability and broadening of the transpersonal notion as to be able to attend to others and the world in more wholesome manner.<sup>31</sup> The cultivation of mindfulness is often seen as a way of inducing a quieter brain.

In these assessments, the pragmatic aspect of the technique stands out on the one side and the mystical potential on the other. Pragmatic, because it is a natural, rational, scientific way of analyzing the process by which one is taught and shown and begins to see for oneself how the mind generates matter and matter in turn generates mind. It becomes evident how the body, composed of past and present ingredients it is stuffed with, through the meditative rigour brings about certain clearing of the unwanted components which in turn leads to better health of mind and body. In order to arrive at and sustain this discipline a belief and trust in the experience it generates is necessary. The experience itself on the other hand is first of all generated out of the sheer determination to stick through with the meditation.<sup>32</sup> It is indeed a case of matter (the body through sensations) relinquishing itself to mind, and, mind (as a tool for analysis) shows the layers in the matter.

The above theoretical positioning leads to the discussion as to whether the problems in life (anger, jealousy, hatred etc), as ordinarily believed, are caused from the outside, or one can be lead to seeing the truth of it as fully caused from within, just like one paints a picture of a beauty and worships his or her created art work, or paints a demon and begins to fear the created artwork. This analysis while being true is a path of rectifying oneself in order to rectify the world, and given the nature of reality will the world ever be rectified is a question yet to be answered and remains a matter of faith. One can only believe in its possibility and keep on missionising the path. The other alternative too is self negating and is offered in the Christian elaboration of and justifications for interventions in the affairs of the world. The problem one experiences would not be there if the world (rest of what oneself is not) were not there. ‘No self no problem’ has a counter, in other words, in ‘no world no problem’, or even ‘no god no problem’. Because the world is there the problem arose is also equally true. Therefore, trusting in the reality of the world is what makes one to engage with the world seriously.<sup>33</sup> The non-duality of the observer-observed, self-world comes to the fore in the intimacy of encountering the truth.

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<sup>30</sup> Uwe P. Gielen, “Peace and Violence: A Comparison of Buddhist Ladakh and the United States” in Leonore Loeb Adler and Florence L. Denmark (eds.), *International perspectives on Violence*, London, Praeger, 2004, p.176.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. Daniel J. Goleman, “Destructive emotions” in DK Nauriyal et al, eds., *Buddhist Thought and Applied Psychological Research: Transcending the Boundaries*, New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 341-373.

<sup>32</sup> This reflection came from the third ten-day course done in January 2008 21-31 at Loyola Pastoral Centre, Matigara, where the assistant teacher was Shri LN Todi of Kolkata.

<sup>33</sup> I come to the above reading from a cultural point of view of seeking an explanation for the Christian worldview and the perfection attained in the external world and lack of an interest in rectifying the external world, in eastern cultures that take the inside and the self more seriously than the world.

Given that the sense of the ‘person’ is linked up 99 percent with the visceral, embodied and emotional aspects, the stress on the bodily sensation as the route to the discovery of wellbeing is only legitimate. As result it would be a flaw to think there is a discrepancy between intelligence and emotionality. Instead, it dawns on the practitioner that the greater intelligence is of the body dimension which is all the more linked with the unconscious.<sup>34</sup> The personal identity revolving around the ‘I’ feeling is a sustained and prolonged result of the emotional-body-related desires as being attributed to a centre, the ‘I’. This I is reduced to the intelligence and its bonds with the wider dimensions lost sight of and thus a split created. Overcoming this ‘loss’, or recovering the connectedness and true nature of identity of person is the project of the meditation.

It leads to the distinction ‘I am not the body, rather I have a body’ and even further that the ‘I’ is a mental construct of the series of images and perceptions resulting from the impressions of the body and its emotional visceral foundation.<sup>35</sup> The actual meditative experience leads to a shift in the depth of attention from one layer to another. The deepening of experience (into newer levels or layers) brings the realization that nothing affects personally because there is no ‘I’ to this person to whom or for whom something happens or does not. Even further, it gives access to a non-dual experience of both states being recognized as real: both emptiness and fullness are true of the absolute/ultimate reality. It is something comparable to the scientific assumption that ‘the unchanging perfect vacuum state is also the originator of all forms.’<sup>36</sup>

The scientific premise is that from neurobiology a day will come when how brain produces consciousness is established and their claim that consciousness plays no significant role in the universe will be proved. Buddhist, Meditator’s analysis is that how consciousness gives rise to the illusory reality of the world can be experientially proved and with such experience ‘a physical universe is irrelevant to the world of human experience, in which consciousness play a crucial role’<sup>37</sup> Here, instead of viewing these two great traditions as incompatible, it may be more fruitful to regard them as complementary like ‘focusing two eyes on the same reality’. An integration of the two perspectives can take place is the experience of the enlightened ones and remains a possibility for the meditator.

Non-dualism is a fact of experience in meditation as the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa-sutra* (30) says: ‘the mind is neither within nor without, nor is it to be apprehended between the two.’<sup>38</sup> In other words, the mind ‘has no place to lay its head’ meaning that ‘awareness

<sup>34</sup> Guy Claxton, “Nirvana and Neuroscience,” in DK Nauriyal et al, eds., *Buddhist Thought and Applied Psychological Research: Transcending the Boundaries*, New York, Routledge, 2006, p.100.

<sup>35</sup> Cfr. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>36</sup> “The current belief is that you have to understand all the properties of the vacuum before you can understand anything else.” Cole, K.C., *The Hole in the Universe: How Scientists Peered over the Edge of Emptiness and Found Everything*, New York, Harcourt, 2001, p.235 quoted in B. Alan Wallace, “Vacuum States of Consciousness: A Tibetan Buddhist View” in DK Nauriyal et al, eds., *Buddhist Thought and Applied Psychological Research: Transcending the Boundaries*, New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 120

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in William S Waldron, “The Co-arising of Self and Object, world, and Society” in DK Nauriyal et al, eds., *Buddhist Thought and Applied Psychological Research: Transcending the Boundaries*, New York, Routledge, 2006, p.175.

arises in dependence upon an ultimately indefinite range of causes and conditions and is therefore a function neither of the subject by itself nor of the world alone'. This interactive nature of the observed field or self-world is scientifically arrived at in 'colour' studies which states that it 'is a function of the world and our biology interacting'. This confirms again what Buddha declared 2500 years ago 'apart from conditions there is no arising of cognitive awareness' and this is realized in meditation.<sup>39</sup> This refers to the breaking down and building up or decomposition and re-composition or cognition and recognitions, perception and apperception, object provided and subject given simultaneity. It means 'the categories that are the stuff of experience' are the same categories that are the 'stuff of the world.' These are bifurcated for subsequent analysis and descriptive purposes.<sup>40</sup> The scientific description of the arising of the world parallels the Buddhist theoretical explanation which in turn is experientially available in meditation.

Finally, the ambivalence of Nothingness is best exemplified in the position that Emptiness does not divest fullness of its plenitude, rather, embellishes its nature by drawing attention to its infinity and ineffability. The subtext of the conference, it would seem, is an attempt to help overcome the fear of the unknown other – both the other of the religious worldviews and practices as well as the other of the psychological treatments for personality development and wellbeing. The threat of the other comes from the ambivalence towards 'Nothing' and anything that leads to 'nothing'. Therefore the attempt to address the issue becomes significant both from philosophical and theological perspectives for contemporary Christianity. Jesus died on the cross to liberate people from the pain and misery of being without God who loves. Eradicating suffering is the goal of both Jesus (the Christ) and Gotama (the Buddha). This meeting at the religio-philosophical level offers hope for a possible non-dual encounter. This paper has been an attempt to share the first hand experience of integrating Christian commitment to the path of the cross and the self emptying path of vipassana. It attempts to use the personal perspective as well as corroborate the scientific assessments of the impact meditation has on psychological wellbeing. The experience of reality as it is (*yatha bhutha*) gives a new perspective about the totality and that is non-dual because it is 'no self describing the world,' or, 'objects constituting the self,' but a revelation into the unfolding of being. This insight brings about the merging of divine-cosmic-human elements of reality. The path to reach the goal, it would then seem is therefore, equally Jesus' as well as of Buddha.

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<sup>39</sup> Cfr. Ibid., pp. 176-77.

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. Ibid., p. 181.

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