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Emptiness and Unknowing: An essay in comparative mysticism

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Abstract

Over the last fifty years the study of mysticism has been shaped by the debate between ‘perennialists’, who claim that mystical experiences are the same across different cultures, and ‘constructivists’, who claim that mystical experiences are shaped by, and hence specific to, particular religious traditions. The constructivist view is associated with the ‘discursive turn’ that has dominated the humanities for the last half century, emphasising cultural relativism. Nonetheless, the constructivist position is not without problems. Inspired in part by Lance Cousins’ 1983 comparison of Buddhaghosa’s *Path of Purification* and Teresa of Ávila’s *Interior Castle*, the present article seeks to bring out parallels in the contemplative exercises and the progress of the ‘spiritual life’ found in Buddhist accounts of meditation (such as the *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta*) and Christian apophaticism (as presented in *The Cloud of Unknowing*). The article seeks to establish specific parallels in the techniques of and approaches to contemplative practice in both traditions, as well as in the phenomenology of the experiences of the meditator (*yogāvacara*) or contemplative at different stages in the work of meditation and contemplation.

Keywords

mysticism, meditation, emptiness, Buddhism, apophaticism, *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta*, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, perennialism, constructivism

1. Comparative mysticism

In the autumn of 1978 as a second-year undergraduate at the University of Manchester I signed up for a course called ‘Mysticism’. The course was principally taught by Lance Cousins, but included a contribution on Jewish mysticism from Alan Unterman. At the first class Lance announced that everyone doing the course would be required to give a full fifty-minute lecture – he paused and repeated, ‘yes, I do mean *lecture*’ – on a Christian mystic. There were murmurings in the room. Even then I realised that this was something of a ploy to make sure the students on the course remained low in number yet committed. It worked. There were in the end just seven of us.

While I had attended Lance’s introductory lecture series on Buddhism in my first year, for me personally this course on mysticism represented the start of a period of

more or less ten years during which I studied closely with Lance, first as an undergraduate and then as his doctoral student, completing my PhD under his supervision in 1987. Certainly I owe my approach towards and understanding of Buddhist texts, thought, and practice to Lance. But I also learnt from Lance an appreciation of other traditions of religious thought and practice.

The text I was allocated for my lecture on Christian mysticism was *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The beneficial result, as far as I am concerned, was that the pressure of having to prepare a 'lecture' meant that I read carefully through *The Cloud* and made detailed notes. The downside – one that will be familiar to all students and ex-students – was that I ended up knowing a lot about *The Cloud* but rather little about Richard of St Victor, Walter Hilton, Ruysbroeck, Teresa of Ávila, and John of the Cross. Had I been allocated a different Christian mystic, what follows would no doubt take a rather different form.

Over the course we talked about things we called 'Christian mysticism', 'Jewish mysticism' and 'Buddhist mysticism', while avoiding for the most part discussing precisely what constituted the thing called 'mysticism' that unified all these different mysticisms. Not that the course neglected this issue. But the issue was assigned to an essay question: How far is mysticism a universal phenomenon?

For this question we were assigned readings by Zaehner (1957), Stace (1960) and especially Katz's then newly published collection *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Katz 1978a). What I learned from this reading was that the position I was temperamentally and intuitively predisposed to – no doubt by my intellectual upbringing and conditioning – namely, the perennialist universalist position, that somehow mysticism *is* a universal phenomenon, that mystics in different times and different places somehow by their different paths reach the same place, was considered intellectually problematic, deeply so.

The chapters assigned from Katz's book forcefully challenged the suggestion that mystics by their different paths, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, or even drugs, all arrive at some single experience which they all subsequently interpret as different in accordance with their doctrinal predispositions as God, Brahman, Nirvana, or even just a pleasant trip. From this perspective, then, there is not just one mountain with many different routes leading to the single summit, but rather there are many different paths ascending quite different mountains. That Christians experience God is because they follow a Christian path up a Christian mountain which precisely has God at its summit and not Nirvana. Buddhists, on the other hand, follow a Buddhist path up a Buddhist mountain which precisely has Nirvana at its summit.

What Katz argued at some length in his own contribution (Katz 1978b) to the volume was that there was no such thing as pure, raw, unmediated experience that can be separated and distilled from prior conditioning and posterior interpretation. All experiences are informed and shaped by their prior conditioning, and the manner in which they are subsequently presented cannot simply be dismissed and discounted as some wilful imposition on the experience after the event. This then is the constructivist position as opposed to the perennialist. Moreover, Katz argued that there is an inherent arrogance in the perennialist position (Katz 1978, 32, 40). If the Christian claims to have experienced being unified with God, who are we to come along subsequently and explain to him or her that, no, what you thought was God was

in fact Nirvana. Or that what the Buddhist thought was the selfless Nirvana was in fact the Advaita-Vedānta Ātman-Brahman.

The perennialists, such as Stace, as well as those such as Zaehner (who viewed mystical experience in terms of a hierarchy of nature, monistic and theistic mysticism) tended to see in mystical experience evidence of an encounter with the same ultimate reality across religions; for the Catholic Zaehner the highest mystical experience was a direct encounter with the reality of a divine being, for Stace, who seems to have become interested in Buddhism and Hinduism while serving in the Ceylon Civil Service, it was an experience of oneness with the absolute. The constructivists, resisting the accusation of reductionism, tended to adopt either an agnostic openness about the question of ultimate reality or a pluralistic position.

Thus Katz himself claimed to be agnostic on the question of whether mystical experiences are veridical or not, and suggested that his constructivist reading should not be taken as reducing mystical experience to 'mere projected psychological states' (1978b, 23). Yet it is not entirely clear that he can coherently avoid reductionism without committing to the position that only one account can be true, although there are no grounds on which to determine which one that might be. For Katz claims to take what mystics actually say about what they have experienced seriously (Katz 1978, 40), and part of what they say is that they have encountered a final reality beyond their psychological state. But since their accounts of that reality differ, they cannot all be right in this. Thus if we wish to avoid the conclusion that some at least are talking of 'projected psychological states', then we must conclude that some at least are confused about either the nature or the finality of that reality – or if not confused, talking about the same final reality using different language. Yet this is effectively to move away from the radical constructivist position and return to something akin Zaehner's or Stace's position.

The arguments of the constructivist certainly carry some weight, yet they are also not without various objections. In 1990 Forman edited a collection of essays that were presented as a counter to the constructivist position, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*. In his introduction, he criticised Katz's constructivist arguments in some detail and defended the reality of what he termed a 'pure consciousness event' as a cross-cultural phenomenon (Forman 1990b, 9–25).¹ This collection also included a contribution by Almond (1990) which made the point that the constructivist position is itself constructed. That is, it is informed and determined by certain specific intellectual trends and fashions that held sway in the latter half of the twentieth century.

What has been called 'the discursive turn in the humanities' is perhaps complete and, as far as the study of religious and mystical experience is concerned, we are perhaps now in the age of neuroscience (cf. Taves 2009, 56–57). Yet much of the force of the last fifty or more years of intellectual endeavour in the humanities has been directed towards persuading us of the extent to which we live in a world where there are no universal truths and no universal values. In reality there are a number of different worlds, each with its own set of truths and values; trying to position

¹ For summaries of the objections to the constructivist position see Marshall 2005, 181–97; Gellman 2017.

ourselves outside all these worlds in a super world where we can gaze down from on high from a single, absolute vantage point is futile.

As scholars, then, we tend to retreat into the world of our own scholarly specialisms, a world where we feel we can have some hope of learning the values and mastering the rules of what determines truth. In my case this became the world of Indian Buddhist texts. But the questions raised by apparent cross-cultural parallels do not go away and in many ways remain the most interesting and intellectually challenging. The problem is that these questions may lead one into strange in between worlds occupied by the ghosts and demons of critical theory and methodology where real scholars anyway do not venture and those who do are in danger of becoming hopelessly lost. Even worse, comparative studies involve venturing into the kingdoms of others where strangers who dare to enter risk arrest and summary trial. Yet one of the scholarly and academic virtues that I think Lance liked to encourage in his students was not to be in thrall of intellectual and academic fashions.

During the undergraduate 'Mysticism' course, while Lance's openness to and appreciation of Christian and Jewish mystical literature was certainly apparent, his own position in the emerging debate between perennialists and constructivists was not quite clear. But he did draw our attention to the essay by Peter Moore (1978) in Katz's collection. One of the points that Moore makes is that '[a]ny adequate account of mystical practices would have to include the whole programme of ethical, ascetical, and technical practices typically followed by mystics within religious traditions' (Moore 1978, 113). One of the problems of the constructivist thesis is perhaps that it is put forward by those who are too invested in the view that words are everything; the lives of yogins and contemplatives, by contrast, are informed not just by texts and doctrines but by a whole way of life that includes various kinds of spiritual exercise: thus 'mystics' may not *believe* the same things, but they often *do* similar things.

In 1989 Lance published an article comparing Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification* and Teresa of Ávila's *Interior Castle* in which he in part tried to take the approach advocated by Moore. He begins by alluding to the different positions and suggesting that the search for a single transcendental mystical experience is unhelpful; what he wishes to argue is that 'there is considerable *similarity* in the structure and stages of the mystical way as conceived in different traditions' (Cousins 1989, 103). He goes on to argue for a number of quite specific parallels in the structure and stages of the mystical path of Teresa's *Interior Castle* and Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification*. Whether or not one is convinced by all of these, the overall point that their 'models of the path [...] run parallel' seems persuasive:

Each begins with purification, each moves on to states of interiorization, joy and peace, then to trance phenomena, then to rejection of the world combined with non-normal acquisitions of knowledge, and each finishes with a transformatory knowledge which remains permanently accessible. (Cousins 1989, 120)

This structural similarity seems to me something that a hard constructivist account of mysticism tends to bypass. Thus, as Lance suggested, one of the shortcomings in the comparative study of mysticism has been the overemphasis on the ultimate mystical experience and a preoccupation with identifying a special kind of experience to be labelled and categorised as mystical. The tendency to proceed in this manner goes

back, I think, to William James who, in his chapter on mystical experience in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, listed its characteristics: ineffable, noetic, transient, passive (James 1902, 379–82). James saw this type of experience as encountered in a variety of different contexts. For James there may be all sorts of mystical experience, but he wants to see them all as sharing certain essential qualities. The mystical experience induced by alcohol or laughing gas shares certain essential features with the mystical experience encountered in prayer or expressed by the poet moved by a sunset. The difference between mystical experiences becomes one of intensity, not of essential quality.

Of course, part of the problem here is simply the word *mysticism* itself. ‘Mysticism’ is a word with a specifically Christian but complex cultural and religious history that is then abstracted from that context and applied as a universal cross-cultural category, often with an undue assumption that we all know what it means. It is a word that is used by different writers sometimes technically, sometimes vaguely and often inconsistently. The problem of the meaning of ‘mysticism’ and ‘the mystical’ becomes apparent if we try to render it in, say, Sanskrit or Pali. What is the Buddhist category that corresponds to ‘mysticism’? Perhaps *paramārtha*, the ultimate or highest sense, perhaps *guhya*, ‘private’ or ‘secret’, perhaps just *yoga*, ‘spiritual work’, perhaps *samādhi*, deep meditative and transforming thought.

As Lance also implied in his article, the tendency to focus on the special category of ‘mystical experience’ and its quality of ineffability suggests that we are dealing with something that bears no comparison to other experiences, yet much of what the mystics talk of has nothing of the ineffable about it: ‘Difficulties in description are the same as those which normally accompany any attempt to describe inner experience.’ (Cousins 1989, 109). This suggests that the problems of comparative mysticism are not so different from the problems of comparing experience cross-culturally more generally.

Falling in love is clearly to some extent a socially constructed experience. Some might argue that it is entirely so (Beall and Sternberg 1995), and that falling in love in southern India, say, in the sixth century has little in common with the experience of falling in love in northern Europe in the twenty-first. Yet when reading classical Tamil love poetry, admittedly in translation, I find it hard to dissuade myself that I do not recognise something of the experiences described. Here’s an example by the anonymous ‘Poet of the Foam on the Rocks’ from the *Kuruntokai* anthology:

People say, ‘You will have to bear it.’
Don’t they know what passion is like,
or is it that they are so strong?
As for me, if I do not see my lover
grief drowns my heart,
and like a streak of foam in high waters
dashed on the rocks
little by little I ebb and become nothing.
(Ramanujan 2014, 68)

The ‘interior landscape’ of the tradition of classical Tamil love poetry is highly stylised with a sophisticated conventional symbolism (Ramanujan 2014, 79–102), yet nonetheless appears to cross the bounds of culture. It also, as Fred Hardy

demonstrated, fed into the emotionalism of Indian devotional ‘mysticism’ as expressed in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (Hardy 1983).

In sum, rather than thinking that we are dealing with the special problems of some peculiar category of experience – call it ‘religious’ or ‘mystical’ – a more pragmatic and fruitful approach to comparative ‘mysticism’ might be to approach matters with the view that we are dealing with the problems of talking about interiority more generally. Certainly it seems to me that there are undeniable parallels and points of contact between the contemplative life as set out in certain medieval Christian texts and the *brahmacariya* or religious life set out in certain Buddhist texts. But these points of contact, these parallels, are not usefully explored by immediately appealing to the category of mystical experience, and thereby by seeking to identify the experience of Nirvana as merely an alternative interpretation of the experience of oneness with God. Rather they emerge when we begin to consider (a) specific techniques of and approaches to the contemplative life and Buddhist meditation, (b) the structure and progress of the contemplative life, and (c) the effect of that life on the one who follows it to its end. In short, the religious life as envisaged by certain Christian texts and Buddhist texts is considered to comprise meditative exercises, to be progressive and to be transformative. With this in mind I want to turn initially to one specific short Buddhist text, the *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta*, or ‘Shorter discourse on emptiness’, as an example of an early Buddhist account of the method and progress of contemplation that bears some comparison with what is found in *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

2. Emptiness

Like the other 152 discourses of the *Majjhima-nikāya* the *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta* (M III 104–109) is the end product of a process of oral composition and transmission of uncertain nature and length.² The substance of its content is put into the mouth of the Buddha, but in the form in which it comes down to us its relationship to a particular author is problematic. It is written in a formalized and elliptic style that renders its precise meaning obscure and open to interpretation. In reading the discourse we are thus in part at least dependent on other discourses as well as the Theravāda exegetical tradition to arrive at an understanding of the path of meditation it describes.

The *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta* takes the form of a dialogue between the Buddha and Ānanda. In truth it is more of a monologue than a dialogue. For Ānanda, having asked his initial question, remains respectfully silent for the rest of the discourse, taking in the instruction that the Buddha delivers. The Buddha describes to Ānanda how a monk might live ‘dwelling in emptiness’ (*suññatā-vihāra*). This practice of dwelling in

² Cousins 1983 has, of course, been particularly important in informing the debate on the oral composition and transmission of early Buddhist literature. In the case of the *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta*, essentially two recensions of the discourse survive, the Pali text of the Theravādins alongside Chinese and Tibetan translations of the Sarvāstivādin text. For a discussion of the differences and further references, see Anālayo 2011, II.683–88. The principal differences are (1) in the Sarvāstivāda version the move from the meditation on ‘nothingness’ directly to the ‘signless’ meditation, without the intervening stage of ‘neither perception nor non-perception’, and (2) in the Theravāda version a second account of ‘signless’ meditation.

emptiness is progressive. It begins by assuming the life of a Buddhist monk as part of a community in the forest. Removed from the town and people, the monk can live paying no attention to the town and people. His mind thus becomes empty of any consciousness of the town and people; it settles in a simple and unified awareness of the forest. It is free of all disturbances and distractions save those related to his awareness of the forest. This is characterized as a true, undistorted, and pure entry into emptiness.

The practice of dwelling in emptiness now proceeds by progressively simplifying the contents of thought. At each stage the mind is emptied of some relatively gross thought in order to pay attention to one that is subtler and simpler. At each stage the monk is described as becoming aware that his mind is empty of all disturbances save those that are connected with the simple idea his attention rests on. Thus the monk empties his mind of awareness of the forest to settle his attention in the unified awareness (*ekatta*) that is dependent simply on the perception of earth. He empties his mind of his awareness of earth to settle it in the unified awareness dependent on the perception of the sphere of infinite space; he empties his mind of awareness of the sphere of infinite space to settle it in the unified awareness dependent on perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness; he empties his mind of awareness of the sphere of infinite consciousness to settle it in the unified awareness dependent on the perception of the sphere of nothingness; he empties his mind of awareness of the sphere of nothingness, to settle it in the unified awareness that is dependent on perception of the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception.

At this point he has reduced his mind to such a subtle state of awareness that he can go no further. And yet he does. Emptying his mind of awareness of the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception, his mind settles in the unified awareness that is dependent on 'a concentrated state of mind that is without sign' (*animittacetosamādhī*). This is empty of all disturbances save the subtlest disturbance connected with the body and its six senses because of being alive (M III 107.34–108.1: *imam eva kāyaṃ paṭicca saḷāyatanikaṃ jīvitapaccayā*).

Now it seems the monk truly has gone as far as he can go. And at this point something happens: an inner transformation that is described in more recognizably and explicit Buddhist doctrinal terms. A knowledge arises that this place that he has brought his mind to is constructed (*abhisamkhata*), willed (*abhisañcetaṃ*), and that whatever is so constructed and willed is impermanent (*anicca*) and subject to cessation (*nirodhadhamma*). And with the arising of this knowledge all the defilements, all destructive emotions, the taints of greed, hatred and delusion are destroyed. He becomes awakened.

Certainly this short and schematic account of the practice of emptying the mind needs to be read alongside other discourses and accounts of Buddhist meditation found in the corpus of early Buddhist texts, as well as exegetical texts. In the *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta* the progression through each successive emptying of the mind is presented as unproblematic, almost routine. Elsewhere, however, it is made clear that the work of coaxing the mind to pay attention to the desired object of meditation, and only that object, is all but straightforward. The mind must overcome a number of obstacles. The list of obstacles most often mentioned in the texts is, of course, that of the five hindrances: desire for objects of the senses, which makes things other than the meditative object seem more attractive and interesting to the mind; ill will, which

causes the monk to become irritable at the thought of having to continue with his meditations; dullness and sleepiness, when the task of meditation produces in the monk lethargy and drowsiness; excitement and anxiety, when the monk becomes alternately excited at his progress and dejected at his lack of progress; doubt, when the monks begins to doubt that the work of meditation is a worthwhile pursuit at all.³ The *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna-sutta* (M I 118–22), or ‘Discourse on stilling thoughts’, sets out five progressive strategies for dealing with distracting and disturbing thoughts: (1) plagued by thoughts connected with greed or anger, try to direct the mind towards thoughts connected with desirelessness and friendliness; (2) if this fails consider how such thoughts are harmful to you; (3) if this fails, do not pay attention to them, distract yourself by doing something, such as chanting memorized texts; (4) if this fails, try to analyse just why you are thinking in this way; (5) and finally, if all else fails, grit your teeth and with an act of determination, force the thoughts from your mind.

3. Unknowing

I now turn to *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Such a leap is from a certain perspective somewhat arbitrary – a result of the circumstances that meant *The Cloud* was a text that I read almost forty years ago and whose account of the contemplative life I found strangely compelling, and which has thus stayed with me, from time to time coming to mind as I have worked on texts concerned with Buddhist meditation. But beyond that, as both Lance Cousins and Ninian Smart have suggested, there seems a special interest in trying to explore and articulate just what might be similar in accounts of meditative and contemplative practice from what are very different religious traditions (Cousins 1989, 103–04; Smart 1992, 103–04). In his attempt to read *The Cloud* through the eyes of Buddhaghosa, Smart tried ‘to get at the phenomenology behind the language’ (Smart 1992, 103). Smart essentially attempts to translate *The Cloud* into a less ramified idiom that Buddhaghosa might have been able to understand. Some of the correspondences I suggest are also indicated by Smart, but by taking as my starting point the specific account of the *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta*, I think it is possible to bring out several further parallels of meditative technique that highlight similarities in approach and structure.

A book of contemplation the which is called the Cloud of Unknowing in the which a soul is oned with God is the heading of a text written in Middle English sometime in the second half of the fourteenth century. The text amounts to some ninety pages in modern editions. It is of a very different character from the *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta*. It is a personal and intimate set of instructions and advice written by someone clearly of some experience in the work of contemplation and apparently addressed to a young man of twenty-four who is a novice in the work. The author is unknown, as is his precise background; and while he draws on well established traditions of Christian apophaticism that look back to Denys the Areopagite, the progress of the work is largely unsystematic.⁴

³ For the standard account of the hindrances and their removal, see D I 71–73.

⁴ On the work generally, see Hodgson 1944, li–lxxxvi. Hodgson 1944 is the standard scholarly edition; I quote the text as it appears in Underhill 1922, which modernizes English spelling but otherwise leaves the fourteenth-century English largely unchanged.

Nonetheless *The Cloud* begins by setting out the general scheme of the four degrees and forms of Christian men's living: (1) the common, (2) the special for those who have taken religious vows, (3) the singular for those following the contemplative life, and (4) the perfect for those who are in union with God. In addition the author works with the basic distinction between the active and contemplative lives. These are each divided into a lower and a higher, and in this division there is an overlap between the higher active life and the lower contemplative life (Underhill 1922, 98–100).

In the lower contemplative life it is quite acceptable to contemplate and meditate on God's works and attributes, on man's wretchedness and the passion of Christ, on his pity and compassion. Yet in the higher contemplative life the contemplative is striving after knowledge of God, and oneness with God. In this work such meditations become inappropriate and even a distraction. The contemplative must turn his mind away from them; he must cover them with a thick cloud of forgetting and enter into the darkness of the cloud of unknowing (Underhill 1922, 85–89).

The author of *The Cloud* addresses the practical problem of how to stop thinking about God's works and turn the mind elsewhere so as to enter the cloud of unknowing. The method is not to try immediately to empty the mind of any thoughts of God whatsoever. Rather one should avoid the temptation to think discursively about such matters. In order to help him in this task, the contemplative should take a single simple word of one syllable – love, God, sin – as the object of contemplation (Underhill 1922, 93, 188–96). But he should not attempt to analyse the word and reflect discursively on the concepts that it embraces. You should rather 'hold them all whole these words; and mean by sin, a *lump*, thou wottest never what, none other thing but thyself' (Underhill 1922, 189).⁵

4. Emptiness and unknowing

In all this there seem to me to be real parallels with certain Buddhist approaches to meditation and contemplation. As we have seen in the case of the *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta*, these are based in the first place on trying to narrow the focus of attention and to limit the proliferation of discursive thought.

The Theravāda commentarial tradition understands there to be thirty-eight objects for meditation handed down in the canonical texts, and two additional objects (Vajirañāṇa 1975, 69–70, 71). In setting out the different topics of meditation in his *Visuddhimagga* Buddhaghosa explains that certain subjects can be developed to the point of 'access' (*upacāra*) concentration but are not suited to the further development of concentration to the point of full 'absorption' (*appanā*). The underlying reason for this appears to be that certain topics are precisely too discursive in nature, for the development of concentration involves first the focusing of discursive thinking (*vitakka*) and examination (*vicāra*), and eventually their stilling altogether.⁶

Thus such meditations as recollection of the qualities of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha are practised in the first place by reciting and contemplating short

⁵ Wolters (1978, 103) renders this, 'Mean by "sin" the whole lump of it, not particularizing about any part, for it is nothing other than yourself.'

⁶ See *Vism* 111 (III.106–107), 212 (VII.66), 217 (VII.87), 221 (VII.91).

formulas listing their various qualities. While these types of meditation are suitable for initially steadying the mind in access concentration, they are not suitable for the higher stages of *jhāna* practice. To go beyond access concentration the meditator (*yogāvacara*) must take simpler objects of meditation, the breath, the concepts of earth, fire, water, or air in the form of ‘the spheres of totality’ (*kaṣiṇāyatana*); the emotions of kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. Significantly from the point of view of the present comparative exercise, these simpler meditation subjects may begin with the silent repetition of a simple word for ‘earth’, for example, in order to bring the mind towards resting on the simple concept of earth (Vism 125 (IV.29)). It is this approach to meditation that we must understand in the *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta* when it talks of the meditator’s consciousness being empty of all but the forest, all but the earth. This kind of meditation on certain simple non-discursive objects leads progressively through the first three stages of *jhāna* to the fourth. Here all discursive thought is said to have ceased and the mind settles in perfect balance and equilibrium, temporarily untroubled. The fourth *jhāna* or absorption is taken by the commentaries as the immediate basis for emptying the mind still further, by progressively attenuating the conceptual apparatus of the mind through meditation on the spheres of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception, as described in the *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta*. These ‘formless’ meditations are thus taken as advanced forms of meditation based on the fourth *jhāna*, and the Theravāda exegetical tradition reads the *Cūḷa-Suññata-sutta*’s account of the monk’s emptying his mind of awareness of the forest to become aware of the notion of earth as indicating progressive meditation using the earth *kaṣiṇa* (Ps IV 154).

There is in this meditation practice no overt or formal attempt to cultivate knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, metaphysics and doctrine. It is presented as a process of emptying the mind. Yet it is apparent from the account of the *jhānas* found elsewhere in the *Nikāyas* that this emptying of the mind is not a mere blanking out of the mind and its emotions,⁷ but involves purifying the mind and making it sensitive and receptive (*mudu*) in preparation for the liberating knowledge of awakening. The mind that reaches the fourth *jhāna* is described as purified (*pārisuddha*) and cleansed (*pariyodāta*), stainless (*anaṅgaṇa*), without defilements (*vigatūpakkilesa*), sensitive (*mudubhūta*), workable (*kammaniya*), steady (*ṭhita*), unshakable (*āneñja-ppatta*) (D I 76.13–15).

Returning to *The Cloud*, its tenth chapter describes how, as one tries to push down all discursive thoughts of God and his works below the cloud of forgetting and enter into the cloud of unknowing, the contemplative’s thoughts may be taken over by thoughts of liking or grumbling with regard to some men or women. Thoughts may be connected with wrath, envy, sloth, pride, covetousness, gluttony and lechery. These are, of course, the seven deadly sins but they are presented here in line with their original conception as the eight *logismoi* in the writings of Evagrius, that is, thoughts that come to distract and plague the ascetic as he struggles in his work of contemplation.⁸ In this sense they have a direct affinity with the five hindrances set out in Buddhist texts mentioned earlier (desire for the objects of the senses, ill will, dullness and sleepiness, excitement and anxiety, doubt). It is worth noting here also

⁷ See Cousins 1973, 120 on the role of ‘joy’ (*pīti*) in *jhāna*.

⁸ See, for example, Evagrius, ‘On the eight thoughts’ (Sinkewicz 2003, 66–90).

that the method of looking over the shoulder, as it were, of unwanted thoughts, described in chapter thirty-two of *The Cloud*, bears some resemblance to the methods for dealing with distracting thoughts found in the *Vitakkasaṅṭhāna-sutta*, also mentioned earlier.

We are told in *The Cloud* that as the contemplative struggles and strives in his work to penetrate the darkness of the cloud of unknowing that lies between him and his God, then God will

[S]ometimes peradventure send out a beam of ghostly light, piercing this cloud of unknowing that is betwixt thee and Him; and shew thee some of His privity, ... Then shalt thou feel thine affection inflamed with the fire of His love, far more than I can tell thee, or may or will at this time. (Underhill 1922, 164)⁹

The imagery of light in mystical literature is, of course, widespread. But this passage suggests to me something rather more than the use of imagery or metaphor. I am tempted to suggest a more specific correspondence with Buddhist accounts of the stages of meditation. Buddhist manuals devote considerable space to the discussion of *nimittas*, the ‘signs’ (*nimitta*) that appear in various forms at various stages of meditation practice.¹⁰ Technically *nimittas* are regarded as the simple conceptual objects of meditation. But at certain points they take the form of visual images seen with the mind’s eye – that is, precisely ‘ghostly’, as opposed to material, light. At the stage of the arising of access concentration in preparation for full absorption a significant transformation is said to take place in the *nimitta*. What is called the counterpart sign arises. Up to this point the meditator has been working to keep attention on the ordinary learning or training object of meditation (*uggaha-nimitta*). Eventually as the meditator works at keeping his or her attention on the object of meditation, the obstacles and hindrances that the mind puts in the way of contemplation subside and then the ‘counterpart sign’ arises. One should not be misled by this technical sounding terminology. The arising of the counterpart sign is understood as having an emotionally transforming and fulfilling effect on the meditator: it is described in vivid terms as bursting out of the acquired sign like the circle of a looking-glass drawn from its cover, like mother of pearl when well washed, like the circle of the moon emerging from behind a dark cloud, a hundred or a thousand times more purified. The arising of the counterpart sign is also associated

⁹ Marshall (2005, 3–4) briefly refers to scholars who ‘take issue with the prominence given to intense, private experience in the study of religion and mysticism’, among them Turner (1995). With reference to what he calls the ‘informal view around’ that the ‘mystical’ has ‘something to do with the having of very uncommon, privileged “experiences”’, Turner (1995, 2) comments: ‘when I read any of the Christian writers who were said to be mystics I found that many of them—like Eckhart or the Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*—made no mention at all of any such experiences and most of the rest who, like John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila, did make mention of “experiences”, attached little or no importance to them and certainly did not think the having of them to be definitive of the mystical.’ At the risk of simplifying Turner’s complex argument, I find it difficult to read a passage such as the one here quoted from *The Cloud* as not in some sense a description of an ‘uncommon, privileged experience’. Of course, it is possible to problematize what precisely is meant by ‘uncommon’, ‘privileged’, ‘experience’ and ‘mystical’.

¹⁰ Vism 124–27 (IV.27–31); Cousins 1973, 118–20. On *obhāsa* and the seeing of forms in meditation, see also M III 157–60.

with the arising of the particular kind of joy or happiness termed 'suffusing joy' (Cousins 1973, 120), which suffuses the whole body:

It is as if a skilled bath attendant or his pupil were to sprinkle bath powder into a bronze dish, and then knead it together adding the water drop by drop so that the ball of soap absorbed and soaked up the moisture until it was saturated with moisture, yet not quite dripping. In exactly the same way the monk suffuses, fills, soaks, and drenches this very body with the joy and happiness that come from seclusion, so that there is no part of his body that is untouched by that joy and happiness. (D I 74.1–9)

The author of *The Cloud* presents contemplative practice as involving an interplay between the hard work of contemplation and the grace of God. The hard work of contemplation lies in the struggle to put the distracting and inappropriate thoughts beneath the cloud of forgetting and to keep them there, preventing them from rising up above it. The rest is God's work – the stirring of love arising from the naked intent on God.

In the context of comparison with Buddhist meditation, one of the most striking aspects of the work of keeping unnecessary and distracting thoughts beneath the cloud of forgetting is the manner of dealing with thoughts occupied with oneself. This is dealt with most clearly in chapter forty-three:

Thus shalt thou do with thyself: thou shalt loathe and be weary with all that thing that worketh in thy wit and in thy will unless it be only God. For why, surely else, whatsoever that it be, it is betwixt thee and thy God. (Underhill 1922, 208)

The problem is that it is precisely oneself that gets in the way of coming closer to God:

[T]he proof, thou shalt find when thou hast forgotten all other creatures and all their works—yea, and thereto all thine own works—that there shall live yet after, betwixt thee and thy God, a naked witting and a feeling of thine own being: the which witting and feeling behoveth always be destroyed, ere the time be that thou feel soothfastly the perfection of this work. (Underhill 1922, 209)

What the author of *The Cloud* says here is that after the contemplative has pushed down thoughts of everything else below the cloud of forgetting, there still remains a bare awareness of one's own self, and that this must be got rid of to complete the work of contemplation.

There is a clear correspondence here with Buddhist notions of 'not-self' (*anattan*). The Buddhist doctrine of not-self is routinely presented in Buddhist textbooks as a philosophical and metaphysical position. That is, it is seen as equivalent to a Humean reduction of the self to fleeting impersonal mental phenomena behind which there is no enduring self. While it would be quite wrong in my view to deny that in Indian Buddhist systematic thought the doctrine of not-self does in significant respects indeed operate in this manner, the way in which the Buddhist doctrine of not-self in addition operates as a contemplative device to challenge, break down and undermine our sense of self-importance can be neglected in many modern presentations of Buddhist thought. The doctrine of not-self tends to be treated as if it were merely an intellectual position and a metaphysical stance. Meditation on not-self is treated as if

it were merely a matter of the intellect, when in truth it must be the most emotionally and psychologically challenging meditation there is: the meditation that brings home to us that there is nothing in the world of which we can truly say, 'I am this. This is mine.'

When Christianity and Buddhism are contrasted doctrinally, the two points that are routinely highlighted are the understanding of self and belief in God: Buddhism denies the existence of self, while Christianity affirms the existence of an immortal soul; Buddhism has no interest in God, while Christianity is all about God. I have suggested that at least in a contemplative text such as *The Cloud* there is a clear practical contemplative counterpart to the Buddhist notion of not-self. That is, affectively, in a practical contemplative and meditative context the two traditions may be much closer than might first appear.

Following the lead of an essay by Mahinda Palihawadana, 'Is there a Theravada Buddhist idea of grace?' (Palihawadana 1978), I shall conclude by drawing attention to the manner in which there may also be an affective and practical counterpart in the Buddhist vision of the meditative path to the notion of God's grace. As outlined here, at least some accounts of the Buddhist path can be understood as a series of successive meditations that constitute a step-by-step emptying of the mind and emptying of the heart. I use the word *heart* because the process indicated here cannot but involve a profound restructuring of the meditator's emotional being. The emptying of the mind brings the meditator to a point where he or she can go no further, and can do no more. As Palihawadana points out, it is precisely when the meditator has arrived at this point that the final awakening, the final purification, takes place. But it takes place not as a result of an act of will, but rather as consequence of the will's giving up, as a consequence of the realization of the will's limitations (Palihawadana 1978, 193).

This is not, of course, to suggest that Christians – at least those who pursue the contemplative life envisaged by *The Cloud* – must really believe in the doctrine of no self, nor that Buddhists must really believe in God's grace. But what we can say is that both traditions sometimes present the contemplative path, the path of purification, as a turning away from ordinary discursive thought by means of techniques of simplifying and emptying the mind. This process is not just an abstract dry and intellectual exercise, but in both traditions has profound emotionally transformative effects. The process becomes a struggle not just to keep certain thoughts at bay, but a struggle with one's own sense of self at the deepest and profoundest levels of one's being. Taken to its ultimate conclusion this process is transformative: one does not emerge from it the same person. For both the contemplative of *The Cloud* and the Buddhist meditator their relationship with the world, with self and with others is transformed. For a contemplative of *The Cloud* such a transformation is associated with being 'oned with God'. For the Buddhist meditator it is associated with the final going out of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion.

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Abbreviations

D	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
M	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

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