Children's Spirituality and the Practice of Meditation in Irish Primary Schools: A Phenomenological Exploration

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A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Foirfe chun fónaimh

Submitted to Waterford Institute of Technology

December 2016

DECLARATION

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A paper, based on the thesis, has been published in the International Journal for Children's Spirituality in early December 2016.

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MATTHEW NOEL KEATING   **19 December 2016**

ABSTRACT

Children's Spirituality and the Practice of Meditation in Irish Primary Schools: A Phenomenological Exploration

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This thesis explores the child's experience of meditation in the context of a whole-school practice in Irish primary schools and its impact on children's spirituality. There has been limited research into the impact of meditation on children, in particular on its *spiritual* fruits in their lives. This research seeks to discover and describe how children experience the practice of meditation, the practical benefits, if any, they consider they gain from it, and the nature of its impact, if any, on their spirituality.

The research uses a phenomenological, hermeneutic, mystagogical methodology. Using purposive sampling, seventy children, aged from 7 to 11 years, were interviewed. The study is original in that the interview protocol contained novel processes designed to elicit from children their experience, if any, of the transcendent in the practice of meditation and in its depth of analysis of the spiritual fruits of the practice. These processes include photo-elicitation and an original method, the Selection Box, designed to enable children to reflect on the comments of their peers. These methods proved to be very effective in giving voice to the views of the children, enabling them to give metaphorical expression to their experience of the transcendent through the practice of meditation. These methods may have application in other areas of human sciences research.

The research identifies four themes linked to the experience of meditation: simplicity, serenity, self-awareness and heart-awareness and presents a phenomenological description of the child's experience of meditation. It identifies three pragmatic benefits: that meditation calms and restores, generates energy and confidence, and improves decision-making. Regarding spiritual fruits of the practice, the work presents a heuristic model showing how meditation deepens children's self-awareness, awakens the heart to the true-self, nourishes their spirituality and inspires them toward more authentic living. The study stresses the importance of personal spiritual experience and concludes that the regular practice of meditation has the capacity to enkindle and nourish the innate spirituality of children, counter the tendency toward 'true-self denial' and build community self-presence. It supports the introduction of meditation in primary schools on a whole-school basis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to the many people who have assisted in the preparation of this dissertation.

I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Michael Howlett for the opportunity to undertake this research under his supervision and for his unfailing courtesy, his consistent encouragement, his professional guidance and his constant support over the past three years. He helped to make this undertaking a labour of love and learning. His advice to make presentations on the developing work to international conferences was discerning and helped me greatly to integrate my learning from the research.

I wish to thank Dr Bernadette Flanagan, former Director of Research at All Hallows College, Dublin for supporting my application in the first instance and acting as a critical friend from time to time. I am grateful to her and to Dr Michael O'Sullivan, Director of SpIRE for helping me to understand research as a contemplative practice. I wish to thank Dr Patricia Kieran, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and Dr Paul Clogher, Waterford Institute of Technology for their encouragement at a key stage in the process. I am deeply thankful to the administrative, library and IT staff of Waterford Institute of Technology for their ready support at all times.

I would like to thank the principals, coordinators and teachers of the four schools that participated in this research for their full and thoughtful cooperation with the research. I was made to feel very welcome every time I visited and it was deeply inspiring to witness their commitment to the meaningful whole-school practice of meditation.

I want to say a special word of thanks to the seventy children who participated in the research for their openness and generosity of spirit. Their willingness to meet with me and to talk openly and deeply about their experience of the practice and its benefits and fruits in their lives is greatly appreciated. I was very often inspired by their words of wisdom and humbled by the simplicity and depth of their spirituality. I thank their parents for their permission to speak with their children.

I wish to acknowledge my appreciation to fellow travellers on similar journeys for the opportunities to talk about my research and to hear about theirs; in particular Dr Bernadette Masterson, Ken Hannaway, Sr Evelyn Byrne pbvm and Dr Cora O'Farrell - their willingness to engage openly and meaningfully about researching spirituality was very helpful.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to my wife Mary; her incredible patience and encouragement and unfailing support in so many ways ensured that this dissertation was brought to

completion in good time. I want to thank our daughter Elaine for her assistance along the way and our sons Fergal and Brendan for their constant support.

My heart filled with joy at the very recent birth of my grand-daughter Ella; may she grow in consciousness of her true-self and live her life from that deep awareness. I dedicate this thesis to her.

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Chapter 1

Background, Context and Objectives

"[Children] are able, in their simplicity, to catch and hold God by love."[1]

1.1   Background

This study explores the spirituality of children and the child's experience of meditation in Irish primary schools. This chapter outlines the background and context of the research, its core aims and the overall layout of the thesis.

The wisdom traditions assert that adults who engage in the practice of meditation find that it deepens their inner lives, leads to increased self-awareness and transforms how they live in the world. In addressing the positive outcomes of meditation, it may be useful to distinguish between the pragmatic, practical *benefits* (physical and psychological) and the *fruits* (spiritual) of meditation. The physical and psychological benefits of mindfulness and meditation practices[2] have been explored in research, mostly through quantitative research, but there has been considerably less research exploring the participants' *experience* of the practice and their perception of its fruits in their lives.[3] While there has been much research in recent

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[1] Madeleine Simon, *Born Contemplative: Introducing Children to Christian Meditation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1993), 2.

[2] Mindfulness and meditation are both contemplative practices; while they have much in common, they are not the same. Mindfulness is defined as 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.' [See Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994).] The intention in mindfulness is to develop greater awareness and acceptance of the moment-to-moment flow of consciousness. By comparison, meditation aims to restrict awareness to a single stimulus such as a word, mantra or object with a view to excluding distractions from attention. Meditation also results in greater awareness and acceptance of the moment-to-moment flow of consciousness (because thoughts, feelings and senses tend to intrude repeatedly, especially in beginners), but the intention is not to engage with them or fight against them, but to let them go. Because they have much in common, research on both is included in this chapter.

[3] See Cristiano Crescentini et al., "Mindfulness-Oriented Meditation for Primary School Children: Effects on Attention and Psychological Well-Being," *Frontiers in Psychology* (2016). See also the 2007 report for the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services which cautions that "Many uncertainties surround the practice of meditation. Scientific research on meditation practices does not appear to have a common theoretical perspective and is characterized by poor methodological quality. Firm conclusions on the effects of meditation practices in healthcare cannot be drawn based on the available evidence. Future research on meditation practices must be more rigorous in the design and execution of studies and in the analysis and reporting of results." Maria B. Ospina et al., "Meditation Practices for Health: State of the Research," *Evidence Report/Technology Assessment* 155(2007): v. In addition, see

decades on the spirituality of children this author has uncovered very little research into the child's experience of meditation practice. A small research project in a single Australian primary school did seek to examine the role of meditation in enhancing the relational lives of children - in particular their relationship with God - by analysing and interpreting children's drawings after a meditation session; it concluded tentatively that the practice 'appears to enhance children's sense of and relationship with God.'[4] Graham and Anderson are currently conducting research in schools in two Catholic dioceses in Australia "to identify the impact, over time, of Christian meditation on the religious and spiritual development of children and young people in the context of Catholic education."[5]

More has been written about the benefits – physical and psychological - than the fruits of meditation.[6] Jonathan Campion has explored the research on meditation and education with a particular focus on its role in promoting mental health.[7] Sarah Hennelly has conducted a mainly quantitative study into the immediate and sustained effects of the .b mindfulness programme on adolescents' social and emotional well-being and academic functioning and concluded the .b practice was "viable and effective in mixed-gender secondary schools across different year groups, and has the potential to benefit adolescents in ways which reflect their diverse pre-existing strengths and challenges."[8] Katherine Weare has also explored the benefits of mindfulness for children concluding that it can to have beneficial results "on the emotional wellbeing, mental health, ability to learn and even the physical health of [the] students."[9] Greenberg and Harris, who reviewed the state of research on contemplative practices with children and youth in 2012, suggest that "interventions

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Madhav Goyal et al., "Meditation Programs for Psychological Stress and Well-Being," *Comparative Effectiveness Review* 124(2014).

[4] Marian de Souza, Brendan Hyde, and Tanya Kehoe, "An Investigation into the Effects of Meditation with Children in a Catholic Primary School," *International Journal of Childrens Spirituality* 19, no. 3-4 (2014): 209.

[5] See http://ccyp.scu.edu.au/download.php?doc_id=15241&site_id=27&file_ext=.pdf

[6] See, for example, Heather Buttle, "Measuring a Journey without Goal: Meditation, Spirituality, and Physiology," *BioMed Research International* 2015(2015). See also Crescentini et al., "Mindfulness-Oriented Meditation for Primary School Children: Effects on Attention and Psychological Well-Being."

[7] Jonathan Campion, "A Review of the Research on Meditation," *The Meditatio Journal: Education* 1, no. 1 (2011): 29-37. See also Jonathan Campion and Sharn Rocco, "Minding the Mind: The Effects and Potential of a School-Based Meditation Programme for Mental Health Promotion," *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion* 2, no. 1 (2009).

[8] Sarah Hennelly, "The Immediate and Sustained Effects of The .B Mindfulness Programme on Adolescents' Social and Emotional Well-Being and Academic Functioning." (Oxford Brookes University, 2011).

[9] Katherine Weare, "Evidence for the Impact of Mindfulness on Children and Young People," (2012): 23.

which nurture mindfulness may be a feasible and effective method of building resilience in universal populations of children and youth."[10]

This interdisciplinary study is informed by literature from the fields of spirituality, psychology, contemplative psychology, integral theory, Christian mysticism and philosophy. It is original in that it sets out to discover *what it means to the child* to sit still and silent in meditation in the context of a whole-school practice and to explore to what extent the practice impacts on the spirituality of the children. The study also aims to explore the *children's perceptions* of its *benefits* and *fruits* in their lives, if any, and to reflect on the value of meditation as a whole-school practice. This research was inspired by a previous minor study by this researcher.[11]

1.2   The Context of the Research

This study explores the child's experience of meditation in the context of a whole-school practice in primary schools in Ireland. This section briefly outlines that context, explaining what is meant by the practice of meditation and how it has been practiced on a whole-school basis; it also gives some background information about the Irish primary education system which offers a unique blend of Church ownership and patronage of faith-based schools and state support for Irish primary schools.

It was originally intended to limit the research to Christian schools which had adopted the whole school practice in the context of a project which was being promoted by Christian Meditation Ireland (CMI). However, at the outset, I became aware of a multi-denominational school which practiced a form of guided meditation for eight years, where every child meditated in class *every day*. Although the initial intention was to explore the impact of the practice of meditation, *as practiced in the Christian tradition*, it was decided to include the multi-denominational school in the study. The differences between the practices will be explored in more detail in chapter six as the insights arising from the study are discussed. The multi-denominational school was included in the research, not with a view to making a comparison of outcomes between the two practices but to enable some reflection on

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[10] Mark T. Greenberg and Alexis R. Harris, "Nurturing Mindfulness in Children and Youth: Current State of Research," *Child Development Perspectives* 6, no. 2 (2012): 165.

[11] Matthew Noel Keating, "To Explore the Contours of the Child's Experience of Christian Meditation" ((Unpublished M.A. Thesis) All Hallows College, Dublin, 2013). This was a minor thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the award of a Master's degree in Applied Christian Spirituality accredited by Dublin City University.

the extent to which children experienced a sense of mystery through both practices; to what extent, if any, did either form of meditation heighten the children's awareness of an energy or a life-force which transcends them.

1.2.1 The Practice of Meditation

All the major religions of the world embrace meditation as a spiritual practice. In essence, meditation is about being in the present moment, letting go of thoughts and distractions and the demands of the ego. It is about self-presence. Meditation then is the simple practice of sitting in the present moment, in Silence. Practitioners use the breath or a sacred word to help still the mind; thoughts arise spontaneously in the human mind and practitioners choose to hold their attention on their breath or chosen word to help them desist from entertaining the thoughts and distractions that inevitably arise. Every time they become aware they have lapsed into thought, they return their attention to their word. Chapter three explores the practice of meditation in more detail and examines the distinction between secular mindfulness and faith-based meditation and outlines what is distinctive about Christian meditation.

1.2.2 Promoting the Practice of Meditation in Primary Schools

In recent years the practice has been introduced to many schools around the world – particularly in the diocese of Townsend in Australia and the United Kingdom. It is now being made available in 29 countries, supported by Meditatio and the World Community for Christian Meditation.[12] The Australian experience has been outlined in the book "Coming Home,"[13] which is an excellent resource for introducing the practice into schools. In the United Kingdom, DVDs have been produced explaining the practice and describing the experience of the schools which introduced it.[14] As noted above, some limited research has been conducted in both cases – and also on the '.b' and 'paws' mindfulness programmes - which show that pupils, teachers and

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[12] Jim Green, *The Heart of Education: Meditation with Children and Young People* (London: Meditatio-World Community for Christian Meditation, 2016), 14.

[13] Ernie Christie, *Coming Home: A Guide to Teaching Christian Meditation to Children* (Singapore: Medio Media, 2008).

[14] *Christian Meditation with Children: An Introduction* and *The School Journey: The Story of Christian Meditation in UK Primary Schools*, both published by Meditatio and available from Goodnewsbooks at http://www.goodnewsbooks.net/

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principals are pleased with the practice and believe it has been of real benefit to the children.

This study is set in the context of a particular project which has been promoting the practice of Christian meditation to Irish primary schools on a whole-school basis. The practice is compatible with the Religious Education programme, *Alive O* which notes that through the programme "children learn different expressions of prayer: vocal, meditative, contemplative and prayer through movement; and different forms of prayer: prayers of petition, of thanksgiving, of praise, of sorrow and repentance and of intercession."[15] The intention is that each child in each of the 130 participating schools will have the opportunity to meditate with their class and teacher *at least* once per week; the ideal is that the whole school does so at the same time each week, so that the whole school falls silent for the duration. Children are encouraged to meditate for one minute per year of age. When a school applies for inclusion in the project, the school staff undertakes an in-service programme before the teachers introduce the practice to their pupils. The project supplies resources to the school including a Meditation Timer CD. Children from other faith backgrounds or none are invited to participate in the practice using a neutral word or a sacred word from their own tradition or they may choose to sit-out the event in line with existing school policy.

The practice has been promoted in Irish Primary schools over recent years and, by June 2016, over 130 schools had opted to introduce it as a regular weekly practice on a whole-school basis, involving over 28,000 children. This means that every child in every class meditates with their teacher at least once a week, in almost all cases the whole school at the same time. Many schools meditate twice each week and in some cases every day. When the practice has taken root in a school, it is intended that children meditate for one minute per year of age so that ten year-old children meditate for a period of ten minutes and so on. The size of schools in the project vary considerably – the largest having almost eight-hundred children and the smallest just eighteen.

Although the demographics and culture of Irish society have changed dramatically in recent years resulting in greater pluralism and diversity, the

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[15] John Paul Sheridan, "The Alive-O Programme," http://www.catholicireland.net/the-alive-o-programme/. A new RE programme for primary schools *Grow in Love*, based on a revised primary RE curriculum, was introduced in September 2015. Meditation is wholly compatible with the new programme.

patronage of Irish schools has changed very little; primary schools are categorised in the Department of Education database as denominational (naming the denomination), inter-denominational or multi-denominational. Of the 3124 mainstream primary schools in June 2016, a total of 3022 were under the patronage of the various churches in Ireland and saw themselves as faith-based schools while just 102 were described as multi-denominational. Of the 3022 faith-based schools, 3019 were Christian, 2 were Muslim and 1 was Jewish. Of the Christian schools, 2809 were Catholic, 175 were Church of Ireland, 18 were inter-denominational (patronage shared between denominations), 15 were Presbyterian, 1 was Methodist and 1 was Quaker. In other words, 97% of Irish primary schools came under the patronage of one of the Christian churches in Ireland, including 90% under Catholic patronage, while just 3% were under alternative patronage.[16] By contrast, Census 2011 found that 84.2% of respondents defined their religion as Catholic[17] and a survey in 2012 indicated that just 35% of those polled stated they attended a weekly religious service.[18]

It is worth noting that while attendance at Mass continues to decline in Irish society, the percentage of parents baptising their children has not. For example, an Irish Times family values poll in early 2015 indicated that up to 93 per cent of parents baptised their children, while only a third of children were taken to Mass regularly. Official figures appear to reflect this. In 2003, 64,249 baptisms took place on the island of Ireland, according to *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae*, the Catholic church's statistical yearbook. A decade later, the figure had risen to 67,937 baptisms (+5%) while the population had increased by 625,000 (+15%) to 4.951 million inhabitants.[19] It is clear that the children attending Catholic primary schools come from a range of family backgrounds, including secular and home environments that are no more than nominally Catholic and these would include many children from families who do not attend Sunday Mass or who have become alienated from the institution of the Church. Many Catholic schools therefore serve local communities

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[16] Source: http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/Key-Statistics-2012-2013.pdf. Accessed 28 January 2014.

[17] xSource:http://www.cso.ie/en/newsandevents/pressreleases/2012pressreleases/pressreleasecensus2011profile7religionethnicityandirishtravellers/). Accessed 28 January 2014. The results of census 2016 were not available at the time of going to press.

[18] Irish Catholic Newspaper, 17 March 2016. See Andrew O'Connell, "Who Still Goes to Mass Nowadays?," *The Irish Catholic* 2016.

[19] See Irish Times, 30 November 2015. http://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/baptisms-remain-popular-as-mass-attendance-declines-1.2448687 Accessed 30 November 2015.

which are Catholic in name more than in practice; these schools vary in the degree to which the ethos of the school is visibly religious. Kate Adams notes that "schools with their own faith affiliation are able to ground their approach to spirituality in their own religious traditions. Schools with no such affiliation, do not have that grounding."[20] While this is clearly so, it may overstate the case in Ireland today. While school management and principals may be deeply committed, schools in the secular Ireland of today inevitably vary in the extent to which individual staff members actively practice the faith and are personally committed to the religion in which they give religious instruction.

1.3   Background of the Researcher

My interest in this research arises from my professional and personal life experience. I have spent forty years in the education sector at second level in Ireland; I taught for seventeen years as a second-level teacher before changing schools to become principal of a large co-educational secondary school. Some thirteen years later I accepted a position as education officer with a religious congregation responsible for the trusteeship of seventeen second-level and twenty-four primary schools, supporting principals and boards of management. In addition, I am a committed meditator, of twelve years standing, in the tradition of Christian meditation practice. In my last year of service in the education office I became aware that the World Community for Christian Meditation, through its outreach *Meditatio*, was promoting the practice of Christian meditation with children in primary schools in the United Kingdom. With a number of others I began to explore the possibility of promoting the practice with schools in Ireland and upon retirement undertook to act as voluntary coordinator, for Christian Meditation Ireland, of the practice with children in Ireland. I continued to coordinate that project whilst simultaneously conducting this research.

I took on the role of project co-ordinator for Christian Meditation Ireland because I am convinced meditation has important fruits for adults and children alike and that the practice for children is a gift for life. Through this research I wanted to put that conviction to the test and see what evidence could be found in the contemplative traditions, and in particular in the Christian contemplative tradition, to

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[20] Kate Adams, "Spiritual Development in Schools with No Faith Affiliation: The Cultural Ambivalence Towards Children's Spirituality in England," in *Global Perspectives on Spirituality and Education*, ed. Jacqueline Watson, Marian De Souza, and Ann Trousdale, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 23.

support it. I also wanted to explore what children perceived they gained from the practice and to what extent did they experience the expected fruits of the practice, if at all.

Clearly, my background is a potential source of bias or prejudice in this investigation. Throughout the research I have been conscious of the potential conflict of interest between my role as national coordinator of the project and my role as researcher. Nonetheless, it is important to note that while it is clear that prejudice or bias can act as a hindrance to "objectivity," it is not necessarily so. Indeed, Gadamer presents a positive view of prejudices in his approach to hermeneutics.[21] He notes that while all people bring their own pre-suppositions or horizons to bear on any text, which may limit their capacity to remain fully open to potential interpretations of the text, these prejudices should not be understood as *merely* negative or as necessarily limiting understanding. While they can sometimes distort one's way of seeing and understanding, they can also be productive and may actually promote understanding. He writes, cited by Linge, that

> Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word [pre-judgment], constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are … simply the conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us. This formulation certainly does not mean that we are enclosed within a wall of prejudices and only let through the narrow portals those things that can produce a pass saying, 'Nothing new will be said here.'[22]

In other words, as one's prejudices become apparent to one, they can also become the focus of questioning in their own turn. The dialogical interplay that occurs in the process of interpretation can be the very means by which potential bias is clarified and worked through. The important thing is that one names where one is coming from and remains open to having one's pre-suppositions laid bare. The methodology in this thesis has sought to do this. While Bryman notes that absolute objectivity is impossible in any research,[23] I have striven to ensure that my personal values, my professional background and my world-view and research paradigm have not unduly influenced the conduct of this study, the gathering and analysis of data or

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[21] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J Weinsheimer and D. Marshall (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989/1960).

[22] Quoted in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkley: University of California Press, 1977), 9.

[23] A. Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

its findings. This open acknowledgement of the potential for bias in research is made explicit here as a first step. The questions of credibility and reliability are addressed again in chapter four which sets out the methodology underpinning the research.

As I began this study I was conscious of the need to immerse myself totally in the research and to take in what it offered without bias or pre-judgement, to go out to the children and

> immerse myself completely in what is there before me, look, see, listen, hear, touch, from many angles and perspectives and vantage points, each time freshly so that there will be continual openings and learnings that will connect with each other and with prior perceptions, understandings and future possibilities … [to acknowledge that] each stopping place is but a pause in arriving at knowledge … that there is no limit to our understanding or sense of fulfilment, no limit to our knowledge or experience of any idea, thing or person.[24]

1.4   Aims of the Study

The overall aim of the research is to explore "what is the child's experience of the practice of meditation on a whole-school basis in Irish primary schools and what is the nature of its impact, if any, on children's spirituality?" In particular it is intended to seek answers to the following questions:

1. How do children perceive and describe their experience of the practice of meditation?
2. What practical benefits, if any, do the children consider they gain from the practice?
3. Does the practice impact on the spirituality of children and, if so, what is the nature of its impact on children's spirituality?

In addition the study aims to give a voice to children, to present an account of their experience of meditation and its benefits and fruits in their lives, in their own words, and to reflect on the usefulness of the chosen methodology and its related methods as a means of doing so.

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[24] Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994), 65.

1.5   What is Original about this Study

This study is original in several key respects. The research paradigm is qualitative while most extant research has been quantitative. Often what is most interesting about people cannot be measured, with the result that simpler issues may be examined at the expense of the more complex and important areas of research may be ignored.[25] Secondly, this study explores not alone the child's experience of meditation but also its *spiritual fruits* as perceived by the children. While de Souza, *et al.* suggested that the practice of Christian meditation '*appears to* enhance children's sense of and relationship with God' (my italics), this study provides original insights regarding the *spiritual fruits* experienced by the children, described by the children themselves.[26]

The study is situated in a critical realist paradigm and uses a hermeneutic, phenomenological and mystagogical methodology, the reasons for which are set out in Chapter 4.

1.6   The Organisation of this Thesis

The thesis contains seven chapters, each of which addresses a different aspect of the research. **Chapter One** sets out the context of the study, the research background, the objectives of the study and the contribution it makes to knowledge. The literature review, which is presented in chapters two and three**,** explores, inter alia, the academic study of spirituality and, in particular, research on the spirituality of children, the tradition of Christian meditation, and developments in contemplative psychology. The outcomes of these reviews informed the development of a framework for the design of this research. **Chapter Two** outlines the spiritual foundations underpinning the study; it explores the nature and characteristics of children's spirituality and examines how it may be nourished. **Chapter Three** explores the practice of meditation and what the wisdom and religious traditions say about its capacity to nurture the human spirit. It explores, in particular, the practice of meditation in the Christian tradition and how its regular daily practice is said to

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[25] David Hiles, "Paradigms Lost - Paradigms Regained," in *18th International Human Science Research Conference* (Sheffield, UK1999). Accessed 12 December 2013 via http://www.gdufs.biz/A%20summary%20of%20the%20paper%20presented%20to%20the%2018th%20International%20Human%20Science.pdf
[26] de Souza, Hyde, and Kehoe, "An Investigation into the Effects of Meditation with Children in a Catholic Primary School," 209.

nurture the spiritual development of the meditator. **Chapter Four** sets out the design of the study and identifies critical realism as the philosophical paradigm underpinning it. It justifies the choice of a hermeneutic, phenomenological, mystagogical methodology as the most appropriate for the nature of the study. It explains how the participants were chosen and sets out the method of data collection and analysis. It explores ethics and methods in researching children, with a particular focus on researching the spirituality of children.

      Chapter Five outlines the nature of the data gathered, how it was analysed and sets out the insights arising from that analysis. **Chapter Six** draws together the main findings of the study and discusses them in light of the literature review. And finally, **Chapter Seven** returns to the research questions posed in Chapter One and summarises the insights arising from the study. It also explores the strengths, significance and limitations of the study and its contribution to knowledge; it examines some implications for practice and indicates potential directions for future research. A number of appendices follow, which outline the materials prepared for the process of recruiting participants and the interview protocols and aids used to animate the conversations with the children.

Chapter 2

Children's Spirituality: Nature and Nurture

"We are already one. But we imagine we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we already are."[27]

"Who can say when, in any child, the dance with God begins?"[28]

2.1   Introduction

In order to provide a context and a direction for this study, this chapter reviews the literature on the nature of spirituality, its definitions and characteristics, and in particular the spirituality of children before outlining the concept of spirituality underpinning this study. I reflect on the importance of nurturing children's spirituality and the possibility that the practice of meditation might make a contribution towards doing so, a theme that is explored further in chapter three. Key sources for the literature review included the *International Journal for Children's Spirituality*, *Spiritus*, the *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* and International Handbooks on spirituality and religious and moral education; academic databases were searched for relevant articles from peer-reviewed journals and PhD theses.[29]

2.1.1   Spirituality as Relational, Transformative Lived Experience

Many people today choose to describe themselves as spiritual rather than religious. They seek gain insights into the meaning of life and to explore what it means to live an authentic life, but outside the context of institutionalised religion. Only after the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965) did the word *spirituality* appear in common usage in its modern understanding.[30] To describe the human capacity for spirituality, Waaijman uses the expression 'primordial spirituality' because

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[27] Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 308.

[28] Walter Wangerin, *The Orphean Passages: The Drama of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 20.

[29] The ERIC, JSTOR, PsychInfo, PubMed, CINAHL and ATLA databases were searched using the phrases child*, spirit*, meditate* and nurture and subsets thereof and articles which addressed any of the core themes of the study – children's spirituality and the practice of meditation with children, were considered.

[30] Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 3.

this type of spirituality belongs to the basic processes of human existence. This type of spirituality is beyond or prior to the type of spirituality as it is institutionalized in the schools of spirituality, such as Hinduistic, Buddhist, and Jewish, Christian and Islamic spirituality. In a sense it is 'original', because it touches the origins of human beings and society.[31]

For David Perrin, spirituality refers to a fundamental capacity in human beings which

is expressed within human experience before people identify that experience with a particular religious or spiritual set of beliefs, rituals, or ethics. Spirituality, as an innate human characteristic, involves the capacity for self-transcendence: being meaningfully involved in, and personally committed to, the world beyond an individual's personal boundaries.[32]

For Philip Sheldrake spirituality points to the deepest values and meanings by which people seek to live and implies some kind of vision of the human spirit and of what will assist it to achieve full potential.[33] Jennifer Mata takes a similar approach.[34] However, as Perrin reminds us, "authentic spirituality is not simply to be identified with the interior and private life of the individual … with only one part of the life of the person, cut off from other aspects."[35] Instead, it is deeply relational: it is, according to Griffith and Griffith "a commitment to choose, as the primary context for understanding and acting, one's relatedness with all that is."[36] Marian de Souza considers that "living with an awareness of one's relationality is the essence of human spirituality."[37] She understands growth in spirituality as an ever-deepening connectedness, at ever-higher levels of consciousness, along a relational continuum giving rise to experience of the transcendent and leading ultimately to the dissolution

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[31] Kees Waaijman, "Challenges of Spirituality in Contemporary Times," in *Spirituality Forum III* (University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines2003), 1. Available via http://www.isa.org.ph/pdf/Waaijman.pdf accessed 4 December 2014.

[32] David B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 20.

[33] Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, 2.

[34] "Spirituality is an innate human characteristic, a potential we are all born with, which allows us to connect with something beyond us (transcendence or the divine), feel part of the greater universe and be connected to otherness. Spirituality encompasses the individual capacity and the essence of life, providing humans with a window to greater consciousness and more profound understanding of being, meaning and purpose." Jennifer Mata, *Spiritual Experiences in Early Childhood Education: Four Kindergardners, One Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 18.

[35] Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 17.

[36] James L. Griffith and Melissa Eliot Griffith, *Encountering the Sacred in Psychotherapy: How to Talk with People About Their Spiritual Lives* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2002), 15.

[37] Marian de Souza, "A Concept of Human Spirituality," *International Association of Childrens Spirituality Document Archive*(2013), http://www.childrenspirituality.org/documents/concept-of-spirituality.pdf.

of boundaries between the self and Other.[38] The theme of relationality is also identified as a distinctive characteristic of contemporary Christian spirituality in the writings of Wilkie Au,[39] John Philip Newell,[40] and Donal Dorr.[41] Sheldrake also observes that, for Christians, spirituality may refer to "the complex mystery of human transformation in the context of a dynamic relationship with God."[42]

In recent decades, as the study of spirituality has become an academic field in its own right, there has been much discussion on the meaning of spirituality in that context. Mary Frohlich considers spirituality to be that which guides "the living and concrete human person in dynamic transformation towards the fullness of life"[43] and, for her, spiritual living means attending "with as much authenticity as one can muster to the truth of one's own experience."[44] Sandra Schneiders, another influential voice in the development of spirituality as an academic discipline, offered various definitions of spirituality over a 20-year period before concluding that spirituality, as the subject matter of the academic discipline, was best defined as "the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."[45] Kees Waaijman notes that in one's daily life, "as a rule, spirituality is latently present as a quiet force in the background, an inspiration and an orientation."[46] He posits that spirituality is essentially about "divine-human transformation"[47] and adds that "the area of reality studied by the science of spirituality is the divine-human relational process."[48] Such study, he says, "belongs epistemologically to the type of investigation that concerns

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Wilkie Au, *By Way of the Heart: Toward a Holistic Christian Spirituality* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1989).

[40] John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2014).

[41] Donal Dorr, *Integral Spirituality: Resources for Community, Justice, Peace and the Earth* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990).

[42] Philip Sheldrake, *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology and Social Practice* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010), KIndle location 762 of 2860.

[43] Mary Frohlich, "Critical Interiority," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 7(2007): 77.

[44] "Spiritual Discipline, Discipline of Spirituality: Revisiting Questions of Definition and Method," in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 68.

[45] Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," ibid., ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows, (The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 6. In Christian spirituality, these formal categories are specified by Christian content: the horizon of ultimate value is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ and the project involves the living of his paschal mystery in the context of the Church community through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[46] Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 1.

[47] Ibid., 424.

[48] Ibid., 425.

human experience"[49] noting that, beginning in the 1960's people began to understand the deepening of the inner life of the Christian involved

> the growing discovery and development of self-consciousness as the ground of one's own being, the experience of the absoluteness of God, of Christ, in the interior centre of this being. [50]

The work of the theologian Karl Rahner informed this shift; he famously wrote that: "the devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic,' one who has 'experienced' something, or he will cease to be anything at all."[51] Waaijman argues that this perspective broadened the area of spirituality to include "the experience of becoming persons, the experience of one's own being, religious experience, the experience of transcendence, the experience of faith, one's socio-cultural experience."[52] The turn to 'experience' implied a move away from an exclusively theological perspective and introduced the human sciences to the study of spirituality. Schneiders adopts a similar view: because spirituality studies experience *as experience*, "whatever enters into the actual living of this ongoing integrating self-transcendence is relevant, whether it be mystical, theological, ethical, psychological, political, or physical."[53]

Recent years have seen a deepening interest in the interface between spirituality and well-being. Chris Cook has written extensively on the topic of spirituality and mental health and sought a definition of spirituality that might be used in the clinical practice of psychiatry. In a literature review of 263 papers on addictions[54] he found that issues of relationship, transcendence, and meaning and purpose in life were commonly encountered in practice. That body of literature also highlighted relationality as a key component of spirituality. Cook's research ultimately led to the following definition of spirituality for the field of psychiatry:

> Spirituality is a distinctive, potentially creative and universal dimension of human experience arising both within the inner subjective awareness of individuals and within communities, social groups and traditions. It may be experienced as relationship with that which is intimately 'inner', immanent and personal, within the self and others, and/or as relationship with that which is wholly 'other', transcendent and beyond the self. It is experienced as being of fundamental or ultimate importance and is thus

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[49] Ibid., 523.

[50] Ibid., 385.

[51] Karl Rahner, "Christian Living Formerly and Today," in *Theological Investigations Vol 3*, (London: 1967), 15. Quoted in Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 386.

[52] *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 389.

[53] "Theology and Spirituality," 267.

[54] Chris Cook, "Addiction and Spirituality," *Addiction* 99(2004).

concerned with matters of meaning and purpose in life, truth and values.[55]

While Cook acknowledges that this definition is overly long and lacks clarity and precision, he suggests it might be regarded as a way of defining an area of conversation, rather than a concept as such.[56] The Association of American Medical Colleges sees spirituality as "the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose, and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature and to the significant or sacred."[57]

Despite the many definitions that have been offered over recent decades, there is now widespread agreement that spirituality, like other abstract concepts such as goodness, defy precise definition. Because there is little agreement about definitions of spirituality, this discussion has, of necessity, been exploratory rather than definitive. However, there appears to be a consensus that spirituality is an innate, dynamic, relational human capacity "which continually seeks articulation and expression in human life."[58] This raises the question of how spirituality manifests in children – internally, to the children themselves, and externally to others, through the voices of children and their observable activities and behaviours.

2.2   Children's Spirituality

Despite the growing awareness of the innate spiritual capacity of the human person, it was a common understanding – in fact a serious misunderstanding – that spiritual awareness required a cognitive capacity beyond the reach of children and that their

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[55] This definition was adopted within the Royal College of Psychiatrists position statement on spirituality and religion. See "Recommendations for Psychiatrists on Spirituality & Religion, London, Royal College of Psychiatrists.," *Royal College of Psychiatrists Spirituality and Mental Health Special Interest Group Publications Archive*(2013), http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/ps03_2013.pdf.
[56] "How Spirituality Is Relevant to Mental Healthcare and Ethical Concerns," *Royal College of Psychiatrists Spirituality and Mental Health Special Interest Group Publications Archive*(2013), http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/Chris%20Cook%20How%20Spirituality%20is%20Relevant%20to%20Mental%20Healthcare%20and%20Ethical%20Concerns.y.pdf.
[57] C. Puchalski and B. Ferrell, *Making Health Care Whole* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2010), 25.
[58] Brendan Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008b), 29.

spiritual lives developed only in parallel with the capacity for language.[59] Because researchers tend to be products of the contexts in which they find themselves, this commonly-held view resulted in a misguided approach which regarded children as "too young for 'spirituality'."[60] Berryman suggests that "We have an unspoken theological heritage of ambivalence, ambiguity, and indifference toward children that still outweighs our understanding of children as a means of grace."[61] Writing in the 1960's Ronald Goldman took the view that spiritual awareness was something extraordinary, to be equated with the unitive experiences of the mystics, and was something unknown in childhood; he rejected the possibility that it might be a very ordinary aspect of young children's everyday experience.[62] Hay and Nye observe that it wasn't until the following decade that Alister Hardy spoke of spirituality as an innate human disposition which opened the possibility that children were indeed capable of experiencing the deeper aspects of life.[63] He had invited members of the public who may have had a spiritual or religious experience which was different from, or more than, their everyday self to write an account of it and submit it to him. Over the following two decades, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as the data was analysed by Edward Robinson, evidence of spiritual awareness in early childhood emerged very strongly.[64] His findings gave impetus to a developing interest in exploring the spiritual lives of children. Sofia Cavaletti first published "The Religious Experience of the Child," in Italian, in 1979.[65] In 1989, Joanne Taylor explored children's use of metaphor and how their drawings amplified their verbal

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[59] Hay notes that even James Fowler tended to stress the development of intellectual and moral reasoning in children, downplaying their innate spirituality. See David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Revised ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998), Kindle location 515 of 2836.

[60] Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009), Kindle location 448 of 2696.

[61] Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* (New York: Moorehouse Publishing, 2009), 197.

[62] Ronald Goldman, *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

[63] David Hay, Rebecca Nye, and Roger Murphy, "Thinking About Childhood Spirituality: Review of Research and Current Directions," in *Research in Religious Education*, ed. Leslie J. Francis, William K. Kay, and William S. Campbell, (Macon, Georgia: Smyth and Helwys Publishing Inc., 1996). See also Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 172 of 2836.

[64] Edward Robinson, *The Original Vision: A Study of the Religious Experience of Childhood* (Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit, Manchester College, 1977).

[65] It was published in English in 1983. See Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: The Description of an Experience with Children from Ages Three to Six*, trans. The Missionary Society of St Paul the Apostle (New York: Paulist Press, 1983). She went on to publish a second book regarding older children: *The Religious Potential of the Child: 6 – 12 Years Old: A Description of an Experience*, trans. Rebekah Rojcewicz and Alan R. Perry (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2002).

responses.[66] Three years later, Robert Coles published his seminal work "The Spiritual Life of Children," based on thousands of interviews with children over thirty years.[67] His capacity for active listening led him to a deep appreciation of their lived personal experience of the mysterious in life. He came to see that children too were capable of a deep spiritual awareness.[68] Tobin Hart's research confirmed likewise.[69] Their conclusions suggested that children might actually have particular spiritual capacities and experiences which are much less common to adults whose more rational mind-set may limit access to a child-like kind of knowing. Brendan Hyde posits that spirituality lies beyond the rational, and is to be found in a person's inner wisdom, sense of compassion and deep meaning.[70] And Hart suggests that a

> child's openness and directness of perception allows for this intimate and intuitive perception of the world; the child seems to dwell nearer the light. For a child, a worldview does not have to be carefully crafted in logic and language. It can be built from direct spiritual experience and housed in a feeling, an image, or a sense of belonging or truth.[71]

In other words, because children have a natural capacity for wonder, they feel the pulse of the spirit directly and intimately.[72] Annemie Dillen holds that "children are competent subjects who can also think for themselves - to a certain degree" and stresses the "need to take into account children's ideas and their own competences."[73] And Hart considers that "While children may not have the language or thinking capacity of an adult, they have the capacity to open to the deep currents of consciousness. Through that opening may come a still, small voice, a pearl of insight."[74] It is now widely accepted within the field of children's spirituality that children do have an innate capacity for spirituality, even if they lack the capacity to

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[66] Joanne Taylor, *Inner Wisdom: Children as Spiritual Guides* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989). Adrian Gellel has undertaken some very interesting research into nurturing spirituality through symbol literacy, See Adrian Gellel, "Engaging Young People with Spiritual and Moral Languages through Art and Narrative," in *Spirituality and the Whole Child: Interdisciplinary Approaches (15th International Conference on Children's Spirituality)* (Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, UK. 2016). See also "Nurturing Spirituality through Symbol Literacy in Religious Education," *Journal of Religious Education* 58, no. 3 (2010).

[67] Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (London: HarperCollins, 1992).

[68] See ibid., 14 and 308. See also Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 571 of 2836.

[69] Tobin Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2003), 6.

[70] Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness*, Kindle location 1132 of 2008.

[71] Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, 9.

[72] Ibid., 11.

[73] Annemie Dillen, "Religious Participation of Children as Active Subjects: Toward a Hermeneutical-Communicative Model of Religious Education in Families with Young Children," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality,* 12, no. 1 (2007): 46.

[74] Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, 19.

verbalise their spiritual experience; and this aptitude manifests itself in spiritual experiences in the course of their ordinary, everyday lived experience. In other words, all children have access to the spiritual domain and can have active spiritual lives.[75]

Hay and Nye undertook a major study into the spirituality of children. They concluded that while the particular expression of a child's spirituality was linked to their personality, every child had a capacity for spiritual experience.[76] They described that capacity as "an entirely natural and universal human predisposition" which transcends religious-secular boundaries.[77] Kirmani and Kirmani concluded likewise that "all individuals regardless of their religious or non-religious beliefs experience spirituality."[78] Nye describes children's spirituality as "an initially natural capacity for awareness of the sacred quality to life experiences" which is mediated by their capacity for relational consciousness.[79] This awareness can be conscious or unconscious or may fluctuate, but nonetheless impacts on feelings, thoughts and actions and calls children towards 'being in relation' to all that lies beyond themselves – both in specific experiences and through imaginative, playful or reflective activity. Waaijman agrees, suggesting that while spirituality awakens in the context of direct relationships, "the spirituality of the children is indigenous."[80]

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[75] Writing in 1996, Hay, Nye, and Murphy said "Our position is akin to that of Rahner. We conceive of an innate spiritual capacity in childhood, but recognise that this may focus in particular ways and take different and changing forms as the child's other capacities develop." See Hay, Nye, and Murphy, "Thinking About Childhood Spirituality: Review of Research and Current Directions," 60. Quoted in Mary Ann Hinsdale, "'Infinite Openness to the Infinite:' Karl Rahner's Contribution to Modern Catholic Thought on the Child," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), Kindle location 7635 of 12703.

[76] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 1250 of 2836. They suggested that the experiences of children formed a continuum: "At one end are those who perceive spiritual matters in terms of questions or principles. Then there are those who go on to make unconscious or conscious associations with the traditional spiritual language of religion in their attempt to articulate these questions and find meaningful ways of answering them. Finally, at the other end of the continuum are those who have experienced their spirituality directly and personally in the form of religious insights."

[77] Ibid., Kindle location 1589 of 2836. They had initially posited that children experience spirituality through awareness-sensing (being attentive to spirituality, especially their awareness of it), mystery-sensing (awareness of the mysterious and incomprehensible in life-experience) and value-sensing (recognising emotions and feelings as indicators of what is meaningful in life). Their interview protocols were predicated on these categories.

[78] Mubina Hassanali Kirmani and Sanaullah Kirmani, "Recognition of Seven Spiritual Identities and Its Implications on Children," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 14, no. 4 (2009): 382. They conclude also that individuals experience spirituality in unique but common ways that can be categorised into seven spiritual identities which they names as: 1) Senso-centric; 2) Socio-centric; 3) Eco-centric; 4) Cosmo-centric; 5) Geneo-centric; 6) Chrono-centric; and 7) Transo-centric.

[79] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 293 of 2696.

[80] Waaijman, "Challenges of Spirituality in Contemporary Times," 10.

Karl Rahner's theological anthropology - according to which human persons, including children, are fundamentally oriented toward God[81] - provides support for the growing consensus that children are innately spiritual beings. Rahner sees faith as arising from one's experience of the 'mysticism of everyday life.'[82] For him, childhood is 'infinite openness' and authentic spirituality calls for an "attitude in which we bravely and trustfully maintain an infinite openness in all circumstances . . . despite the experiences of life which seem to invite us to close ourselves."[83] As one grows and develops, it is in the unfolding of one's personal history that one simply realises what one already is.[84] According to Mary Ann Hinsdale, the 'mystagogical' character of theology, the idea that learning what faith means comes from within one's own existence and experience and not merely by indoctrination from without, was enormously important to Rahner.[85] Children have a natural, open and holistic relationship with all of Reality and their innate perspective on the world is non-dual. With respect to children, Rahner is concerned with not only what a child *is* in the sight of God, but *how God, as mystery, is revealed* in the experience of childhood.[86] He considered that the experience of God is not the privilege of the individual mystic but is available to everyone.[87] It was his opinion that human beings had a primordial perceptual knowledge of God:

> an implicit but true knowledge of God perhaps not reflected upon and not verbalized — or better expressed: a genuine experience of God, which is ultimately rooted in their spiritual existence, in their transcendentality, in their personality, or whatever you want to name it.[88]

According to Rahner, childhood

> must take the form of trust, of openness, of expectation, of readiness to be controlled by another, of interior harmony with the unpredictable forces with which the individual finds himself confronted. It must manifest itself as freedom . . . as receptivity, as hope which is still not disillusioned.[89]

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[81] Hinsdale, "'Infinite Openness to the Infinite:' Karl Rahner's Contribution to Modern Catholic Thought on the Child," Kindle location 7251 of 12703.
[82] Ibid., Kindle location 7212 of 12703.
[83] Ibid., Kindle location 7392 of 12703.
[84] Ibid., Kindle location 7297 of 12703.
[85] Ibid., Kindle location 7204 of 12703.
[86] Ibid., Kindle location 7210 of 12703.
[87] Ibid., Kindle location 7215 of 12703.
[88] Rahner, Faith in a Wintry Season, 115. Quoted in ibid., Kindle location 7218 of 12703.
[89] Karl Rahner, *Ideas for a Theology of Childhood*, vol. 8, Theological Investigations (London: Darton, Longman & Todd,, 1971), 47. Quoted in Hinsdale, "'Infinite Openness to the Infinite:' Karl Rahner's Contribution to Modern Catholic Thought on the Child," Kindle location 7373 of 12703.

Rahner considered that human beings were called to adopt this child-like nature at any and every age, leaving them open and vulnerable to mystery, to 'discovering' who they truly are in God.[90] He believed that the innate spirituality of children found expression not in the extraordinary but in the ordinary. Berryman observes that, for Rahner, the fundamental condition for the possibility of experiencing of God was "openness (self-transcendence) to God's self-communication … [in] even the most humble acts of our daily routine."[91] Hay found likewise, advising that "researchers need to focus on the perceptions, awareness and response of children to those ordinary activities which can act as … signals of transcendence."[92]

Kate Adams suggests that "of all the elements of children's development, the spiritual is the least well understood despite the fact that the field of children's spirituality has developed considerably over the last two decades."[93] Accordingly, "understanding what 'spirituality' is remains a highly debated and contested issue within academia."[94] Indeed, attempts to define it may in fact confine it and exclude elements which contain inherent richness and depth. Nye asserts that, if one accepts that spirituality is indeed an innate human characteristic, then any definition of spirituality must not depend on having adult capacities; otherwise people with limited intellectual capacities (including children and those with any form of brain damage) would be excluded.[95] She suggests a number of factors to be considered in framing any definition: that children's spirituality is more natural than taught, that their perception has a more mystical quality than that of many adults so that childhood may represent a more fertile ground for spirituality than adulthood, that the spirituality of childhood carries over into adulthood, that spirituality is profoundly relational, and that children are comfortable with not knowing because they are constantly learning and the search for meaning is an everyday activity.[96] She

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[90] As it says in the New Testament, "Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." See Matthew 18:3

[91] Quoted in Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* 159.

[92] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 662 of 2836.

[93] Kate Adams, Rebecca Bull, and Mary-Louise Maynes, "Early Childhood Spirituality in Education: Towards an Understanding of the Distinctive Features of Young Children's Spirituality," *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* (2015): 2.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 330 of 2696.

[96] Ibid., Kindle location 430 of 2696.

stresses the importance of casting a broad net, of having a definition that does not exclude important elements of spirituality.[97]

Writing from the perspective of healthcare, Smith and McSherry pointed to the challenges of providing for children's spirituality when there was a lack "of explicit descriptions of the manifestation of spiritual awareness during childhood,"[98] particularly according to their development stage as a child. While it is now widely accepted within the academy that children have access to an innate spirituality, there is a growing consensus that it is not possible to provide a precise definition of children's spirituality and scholars including Tobin Hart, Elaine Champagne, Brendan Hyde, Anna Giesenberg, Jane Bone, Kate Adams, and David Hay and Rebecca Nye, have focused instead on describing the characteristics of children's spirituality. The understanding of children's spirituality underpinning this study is outlined below in section 2.2.2, following a review of what the literature has to say about the characteristics of children's spirituality.

2.2.1 Characteristics of Children's Spirituality

Sofia Cavalletti observed two key characteristics of children's spirituality; according to Nye, she saw "deep joy and a sense of pure wonder as core strengths in children's spirituality capacities."[99] Rebecca Nye identified a common core characteristic in the accounts of the children she interviewed about their spiritual experience. She recognised "a distinctive property of mental activity, profound and intricate enough to be termed 'consciousness,' and remarkable for its confinement to a broadly relational, inter- and intra-personal domain. In short, she identified a common thread tying together the spirituality of the schoolchildren and she named this core characteristic of children's spirituality '*relational consciousness*.' Out of it arises "meaningful aesthetic experience, religious experience, personal and traditional responses to mystery and being, and mystical and moral insight."[100] As described by Boyatzis, Hay and Nye suggest that "children's relational consciousness emerges

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[97] She notes, for example, that for many years, before Carol Gilligan's research with women, the understanding of moral development was based exclusively on male experience.

[98] J. Smith and W. McSherry, "Spirituality and Child Development: A Concept Analysis," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 45, no. 3 (2004): 308.

[99] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 1791 of 2696.

[100] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 1280 of 2836.

prior to religious socialisation and beliefs: children are spiritual beings first and are then acculturated (or not) into a religious tradition that narrows intuitive spiritual dispositions, practices and experiences."[101]   Nye identified four broad contexts or forms in which relational consciousness manifested itself: *child-self-consciousness, child-people-consciousness, child-world-consciousness* and *child-God-consciousness*. Her research developed a framework for children's spirituality which comprised a number of dimensions; it outlined the circumstances in each *context* in which relational consciousness was expressed, the *strategies* children pursued to maintain their sense of the spiritual, the *processes* that characterised the changing ways in which relational consciousness was expressed over time and the *consequences* for the child of relational consciousness in the life of the child.[102] Hay and Nye suggest that it may well be a distinctive quality of children's spirituality that, though perceived as special, it is regarded as altogether more 'ordinary' than most adults assume; in other words, it has an everyday rather than a dramatic quality about it.[103]

Through his research, Tobin Hart identified five spiritual capacities through which children's spirituality seemed to naturally flow: *wisdom, wonder/awe, the relationship between self and other, seeing the invisible*, and *wondering* in relation to the ultimate questions of life.[104] Elaine Champagne saw children's spirituality as rooted in *modes of being* and she highlights three spiritual modes of the child's being: *sensitive* (how they perceive and experience their environment through the senses), *relational* (the quality of those experiences from a spiritual perspective) and

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[101] Chris J. Boyatzis, "Examining Religious and Spiritual Development During Childhood and Adolesence," in *International Handbook of Education for Spirituality, Care and Wellbeing*, ed. Marian de Souza, et al., (New York: Springer, 2009), 53.

[102] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 1346 of 2836. The consequences (effects or outcomes), whether explicitly expressed by children or inferred by the researcher from the children's conversations, were subdivided into *elements* as follows: Calmness and Peacefulness, Holiness, Goodness, Oneness, Impressed, Wonder, Quest for Understanding, New Clarity, Sense of Worth, Thankfulness, Strangeness, Perplexed and Frustrated, Inner Conflict, Embarrassed, Ridiculed, Undermined, and Search for Supportive Comparison.

[103] Ibid., Kindle location 1538 of 2836.

[104] Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, 10. *Wisdom* referred to that way of knowing that emerges through an opening of heart and mind and Hart maintains that children, although they lack the language and cognitive ability of adults, have an innate capacity for being able to get to the heart of the matter. *Wonder* referred to the way in which the world is sensed by children through feelings such as awe, connection, and insight and joy. The *relationship between self and other* reflects how the spiritual life is lived out at the intersection of one's own life and that of others. *Seeing the invisible* refers to their capacity to relate with openness to mystery and paradox. And, finally, *wondering* refers to the child's capacity to engage with questions of ultimate meaning despite their lack of fluency of language and their under-developed cognitive skills.

existential (how they experience life in time and space). These modes do not reflect attitudes or styles of action, rather they attempt to describe the spiritual dimension of the *being-in-the-world* of the child, to make visible essential facets of the being of the child.[105] Because children relate to the surrounding world, and the world within, through their senses and their emotions, in other words, *holistically*, "in order to recognise their spirituality, one needs to listen not only to their limited verbal language but to what they communicate with their whole body and person ... The *sensitive* mode of being of children allows one to witness what inhabits them, it gives one access to *who they are*."[106] Regarding the relational mode of being, Champagne observes that "a good quality of relationships and internalisation [of their relationship with their parents] allows [children] to discover the closeness in the distance, the presence in the absence: a very fundamental experience in spirituality terms."[107] It is also their relational mode of being which enables children to initiate and participate in the unfolding of their inner experience, freeing them from inner preoccupations. Champagne concludes that attending to these three modes of being can make one a better witness of young children's spirituality.[108] Brendan Hyde identified four characteristics of children's spirituality in Australian primary schools naming them as "the felt sense, integrating awareness, weaving the threads of meaning, and spiritual questing." [109] For him, the child's search for meaning and connectedness lie at the heart of their spirituality.[110] Anna Giesenberg suggests that even very young children display spiritual characteristics and traits including compassion, love, wonder, awareness, joy and a sense of beauty and notes that these characteristics were *not emergent* in young children but were *already present* and that they became observable under the right conditions.[111] Jane Bone explored aspects of everyday spirituality that seemed to permeate the early childhood settings in her study and identified three core themes: spiritual 'withness' (connected to intersubjectivity and

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[105] Elaine Champagne, "Being a Child, a Spiritual Child," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 8, no. 1 (2003): 44.

[106] Ibid., 45-46.

[107] Ibid., 47.

[108] Ibid., 52.

[109] Brendan Hyde, "The Identification of Four Characteristics of Children's Spirituality in Australian Catholic Primary Schools," ibid.13, no. 2 (2008a). This paper was based on Hyde's doctoral research: "Identifying Some Characteristics of Children's Spirituality in Australian Catholic Primary Schools: A Study within Hermeneutic Phenomenology" (Australian Catholic University, 2005).

[110] *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness*.

[111] Anna Giesenberg, "The Phenomenon of Preschool Children's Spirituality" (Queensland University of Technology, 2007), 259.

shared understanding), the spiritual in-betweenness (as liminal space and moments of epiphany). and the spiritual elsewhere (the world of the imagination, of spiritual becoming, metamorphosis and transformation); these themes "constructed a dynamic sense of everyday spirituality" in the early childhood settings.[112] Gellel describes spirituality "as a fundamental human dimension which is the underlying force of human existence both at a communal level and at the individual level."[113] Spirituality comprises three core elements: connectedness and belonging, awareness and the development of a way of life and these components "are embedded and interact with other dimensions of human life, and use worldview, cultural and family beliefs, meta-narratives and traditions as interpretive frameworks.[114]

As well as pointing to the everyday nature of children's spirituality, the literature also contains examples of children caught up in moments of awe and wonder which often appear to have a transcendent quality to them. Tobin Hart tells the story of 8-year old Miranda who spent an hour in the sea, with the water up to her waist, "swaying in the surf in the same spot" for ninety minutes and who announced when she came out that "It was amazing. I was the water. I love it and it loves me. I don't know how else to say it."[115] And Elaine Champagne describes two-and-a-half year old Katie who became transfixed while playing in the sea with a sea-gull's feather for half-an-hour – feeling its texture and allowing it to float away and be carried back to her on the waves.[116] Brendan Hyde offers a series of similar vignettes: in one, a child asks her mother where she was before she was born.[117] And Cora O'Farrell notes the comment of a child in a recent study who asked "*Do you ever think if you weren't born, what would you be doing now?*"[118]

Adams, Bull, and Maynes, who carried out a critical literature review of early childhood spirituality, note that identity is a key theme regarding relationship with

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[112] Jane Bone, "Everyday Spirituality_Supporting the Spiritual Experience of Young Children in Three Early Childhood Educational Settings (Jane Bone)" (Massey University, 2007), 229-30.

[113] Gellel, "Nurturing Spirituality through Symbol Literacy in Religious Education," 44.

[114] Adrian-Mario Gellel, "An Emerging Approach to Spiritual Development through Religious Education in Maltese Schools," in *Global Perspectives on Spirituality and Education*, ed. Jacqueline Watson, Marian De Souza, and Ann Trousdale, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 62.

[115] Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, 47.

[116] K. Adams, B. Hyde, and R. Woolley, *The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008), 61.

[117] Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness*, 14.

[118] Cora O'Farrell, "An Exploration of Children's Experiences of a Process Which Provides Opportunities for Spiritual Expression and Development" ((Unpublished EdD Thesis) Dublin City University, 2016), 108.

the self, and that "within identity, the search for meaning and purpose in life emerges as another central tenet of spirituality."[119] Adams notes that while the social and cultural development of children helps them to explore questions of identity, the spiritual line of development probes questions of meaning at a deeper level.[120] Most of the core aspects of children's spirituality mentioned are experienced in a positive, life-enhancing way for children. A number of writers however, also draw attention to some of the more troubling aspects of children's spirituality such as doubt, anxiety, loss, bereavement, anxiety dreams and nightmares.[121] Kate Adams stresses the importance of acknowledging the shadowy worlds that exist alongside the lighter, inspirational ones in order to gain a fuller picture.[122]

An important characteristic of children's spirituality is that it develops in stages. While spirituality is innate and already present in the very youngest of children, the child's awareness of their spirituality grows and develops along with their other capacities, where the conditions are right. Just as every seed contains all that it shall become, elements of the spirituality of the child will unfold and flourish, each in its own time. Hay and Nye note that the German researcher Maria Bindl was one of the first to give an account of this, in the 1960s, in her study of more than 8,000 drawings on religious themes by Catholic children aged from 3 to 18 years. [123]

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[119] Adams, Bull, and Maynes, "Early Childhood Spirituality in Education: Towards an Understanding of the Distinctive Features of Young Children's Spirituality," 4.

[120] Kate Adams, "The Rise of the Child's Voice: The Silencing of the Spiritual Voice," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 30, no. 2 (2009): 115. In light of this it is not surprising the Elaine Champagne developed the construct of three modes of being – sensitive, relational and existential – as a means of describing the spirituality of children Champagne, "Being a Child, a Spiritual Child."

[121] Adams, Bull, and Maynes, "Early Childhood Spirituality in Education: Towards an Understanding of the Distinctive Features of Young Children's Spirituality," 6. See also Kate Adams, "The Dreaming Child: Dreams, Religion and Religious Education," *British Journal of Religious Education* 30, no. 1 (2008).

[122] *Unseen Worlds: Looking through the Lens of Childhood* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010), 13.

[123] See Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle Location 595 of 2836. See also Maria Bindl, *Das Religiose Erleben Im Spiegel Der Bildgestaltung: Eine Entwieklungs- Psychologie Untersuchung (the Religious Experience Mirrored in Pictures: A Developmentasl Psychological Investigation)* (Freiburg: Herder, 1965). Bindl was influenced by the work of Rudolf Otto. It was he who popularised the term 'numinous' to describe the nature of the spiritual experience, that sense of awe-filled experience of the Other. For him, "the numinous is supra-rational – but not irrational – in that the experience is inexpressible … It can be discussed but not defined because it is 'absolutely primary and elementary datum.' One may be guided so that the numinous has the opportunity to stir, and one must cooperate with the initiative of the numinous for a spiritual experience to occur, but a numinous experience cannot be taught nor can it be initiated by the human will; the numinous can only be awakened and evoked. See also Scottie May and Donald Ratcliff, "Childrens' Spiritual Experiences and the Brain," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications*, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2004), 159.

She, like Hardy, [124] was open to a non-rational element in religious experience which goes beyond language. Her analysis suggested to her four developmental phase s: the first covered the years up to age six or seven in which God is experienced *naively* in an I-Thou relationship, and she named this phase "naïve relatedness to the Wholly Other.' In the second phase, which she called 'decline in spontaneous experience of the numinous,' the powerful experience of the `Wholly Other' begins to fade as reason takes over from fantasy. The third phase, 'narcissistic reversion toward one's own self' takes over at puberty and self-preoccupation closes off awareness of the `Wholly Other'. She considered that a fourth phase can arise in the later teenage years with a return to a 'consciously striven-for relation to transcendence.'[125] Hay reflects that Bindl's findings are in accord with the later work of Tamminen[126] who encountered very high levels of report of religious or spiritual experience in children up to the age of about twelve or thirteen years, followed by a steep decline. Montessori too reflected on the stages of spiritual development in children; she used the metaphor of 'the spiritual embryo' to describe the child's development from birth to about three years.[127] It seems that the child's spiritual development takes place continuously, alongside all other aspects of the child's development, albeit out of sight, in the ordinary moments and events of the everyday. Indeed, the spiritual appears, understandably, to occur in conjunction with all other areas of the child's development in a complex manner. Micheline Moriarty concurs; she has developed a model of children's spirituality which she says represents a process of development rather than a state of being.[128]

Having surveyed the development of thinking regarding childhood spirituality, Hay suggested that the process of induction into post-Enlightenment

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[124] As far back as 1965, Hardy had suggested that there is a form of awareness, different from and transcending everyday awareness, which is potentially present in all human beings and which has a positive function in enabling individuals to survive in their natural environment. See Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 155.

[125] Leslie J. Francis, William K. Kay, and William S. (Eds.) Campbell, eds., *Research in Religious Education* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1996), 54.

[126] Kalevi Tamminen, *Religious Development in Childhood and Youth: An Empirical Study* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1991).

[127] Maria Montessori, *The Formation of Man* (Amsterdam: Montessori Pierson Publishing Company, 1955/2009), 60.

[128] Micheline Wyn Moriarty, "A Conceptualization of Children's Spirituality Arising out of Recent Research," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 16, no. 3 (2011): 271. Her model includes four inter-linked dimensions (consciousness, relationality, roadmap and identity). These four dimensions are not so much in a state of equilibrium as representing "a progression from consciousness and relationality to roadmap, and then to identity (and perhaps further circles of development, like a spiral." See ibid., 282.

European culture may be responsible for "suppressing or even repressing the natural spiritual awareness of children."[129] Nye confirms that in her experience, "despite all the effort leaders put in, a lot of children seem to grow out of faith rather than into it. Having learned the songs, the stories, and made friends, children can all too easily tread water spiritually."[130] Indeed, Heather Ingersoll suggests that the Church itself contributes to this problem by giving so much space to adult faith and failing "to provide sufficient space for children to explore, develop and share their spirituality."[131]

Hay contends that, in the post-modern world, social pressures hostile to relational consciousness have the capacity to diminish one's awareness of it in one's life and children are especially vulnerable. He suggests that the innate spirituality of children is currently "being obscured, overlaid or even repressed by socially constructed processes" that contradict it; that "our spiritual heritage, both religious and secular, is being eroded."[132] Observing that the most powerful influences on one's pre-suppositions are those of which one is least aware, he fears the consequent "artificial gulf between two paradigms of knowing - that is, relational consciousness and the supposedly detached methods of empirical science."[133] He is concerned that this gulf remains extremely powerful in the popular imagination of post-modern society. He counsels that

> for many children in primary school their natural spiritual awareness undergoes a process of becoming orphaned, steadily isolated to a greater or lesser degree from two of the major modes of cultural expression. It is isolated from religious tradition through the operation of secularisation and also because the religious institutions sometimes seem to have forgotten their spiritual roots. Spirituality is also often cut off from science, the dominant contemporary mode of reflective discourse, because conservative forms of empirical science claim to distance themselves from human subjectivity, and in some cases to deny its importance or even its reality. This isolation is a learned isolation into which children are educated.[134]

He suggests that because "relational consciousness seems to lie at a deep, almost primeval level" it can be easily overlooked or mislaid.[135] He worries that

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[129] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 613 of 2836.

[130] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 460.

[131] Heather Nicole Ingersoll, "Making Room: A Place for Children's Spirituality in the Christian Church," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 19, no. 3 & 4 (2014): 164.

[132] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 1672-98 of 2836.

[133] Ibid., Kindle location 1697 of 2836. The next chapter will explore the question of ways of knowing in considerable detail..

[134] Ibid., Kindle location 1726 of 2836.

[135] Ibid., Kindle location 1755 of 2836.

when this dimension of their being is not acknowledged and nourished, children can forget who they truly are. The loss of this vital aspect of human identity in modern society might be labelled as 'true-self denial.' [136]

It is also characteristic of children's spirituality that it can be challenging for children to give an account of it. Laurence Freeman suggests that many people can remember an experience of God from their early childhood; perhaps an experience of overwhelming love, of uncontainable joy, of nature or, very often for children, of profound oneness with everything around them. He notes that while a child can have that experience very profoundly and totally, nonetheless

> a child has no concept to be able to label that experience, to describe it. And what happens of course is that the images, the concepts of God with which the child is shaped and formed in its religious development often bear no relationship to the experience that it has had; and very often, even if he (*sic*) talks about that experience or shares it, it isn't related to God, to the real presence of God. [137]

Waaijman observes that the challenge of spirituality is to respect the 'language' of primordial spirituality; that it is important to "listen to the primordial language of the children" and wonders if theologians – and I would add, academics - are not sometimes prisoners of their own institutionalised language:

> When we have the courage to listen to reality, to the growing interest in spirituality in the different areas of human life, then we would discover a type of spirituality that has the same structure as the primordial spirituality in the Middle East as has been described in the Bible, the same primordial spirituality as we have seen in the different forms of indigenous spirituality … The challenge of spirituality is: to discover and to strengthen the primordial spirituality, beyond the institutionalised forms of the traditional schools but presupposed by them. We should respect and strengthen this primordial spirituality both in its indigenous and in its secular forms. [138]

Rahner reflected on the challenge of verbalising spiritual experience, even for adults; he notes that while language offers the possibility of doing so, it also constrains because conceptual reflections will inevitably fail to capture it adequately. While he acknowledged that it is possible to talk about God without being spiritual,

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[136] I return to this concept of 'true-self denial' in Chapter 6, where I discuss how the data from this study suggests that meditation can help to bridge this gulf, or, more accurately, to expose the illusory duality it misrepresents.

[137] Laurence Freeman, "Aspects of Love 3," ed. Meditatio (Singapore: World Community for Christian Meditation, 2013), 5.

[138] Waaijman, "Challenges of Spirituality in Contemporary Times," 14. Note: The original quote has the word 'than' after 'human life' on the second line but I have substituted it with the word 'then' which would seem to be the author's intention.

he argues that the converse was also true: it is possible to be spiritual without talking about God or without having the language or concepts to do so.[139] For Rahner, "regarding the experience *of* God, there is nothing inherently different between the *nonverbal* appreciation of children and adults, even though adults might talk about the mystery of God's presence in a very different way than children do."[140] Hay and Nye observe that while the child's capacity for spirituality "is separate from and prior to the discursive intellect … it is certainly a matter with which the intellect becomes preoccupied" as the child develops.[141] They note that

> in Martin Heidegger's language, it amounts to the disclosure that we are already immersed in Being, before ever there is an analysis into 'this and that', 'subject and object.' Because it is so primal, it is something that we can see particularly clearly in children … [Children have access to an] all-pervasive pre-verbal knowingness, [which] because it pre-dates the potent analytical emphasis of grammar, encompasses an awareness of our indissoluble link with the seamless robe of reality.[142]

They suggest that, in the end, the only way to explore the question of the child's experience of spirituality is *to listen* to what children have to say.[143] Clive and Jane Erriker concluded likewise: that truth, for children, was related to their personal narratives that had been constructed out of their individual experience and was dependent on the contours of their individual psychologies and *one needed to listen* carefully to children to understand their spirituality.[144] Nye goes further: for her,

> spirituality is not something that likes to be confined in words – which makes writing (and reading) about it horribly difficult! It is more 'felt–sense', drawing on non-verbal insights, vision, sound, touch and so on. It can be a powerful kind of knowing that … also shapes our ways of being.[145]

Noting that adults are more inclined to talk than listen to children about spirituality, she cautions that this may reinforce children's consciousness of their lack of fluency regarding their spiritual experiences. "Yet, when given free rein, children can talk at length, and in depth, about most spiritual issues, including the purpose of life, the mystery of death, their experience of God, the question of

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[139] Karl Rahner, "The Experience of God Today," in *Theological Investigations Xi*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974).

[140] Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* 160-61.

[141] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 1589 of 2836.

[142] Ibid., Kindle location 1592 & 605 of 2836.

[143] Ibid., Kindle location 708 of 2836.

[144] Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness*, 53.

[145] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 206.

suffering and the reality of evil."[146] However, Nye suggests that such verbal expression represents merely the tip of the iceberg, suggesting that

> non-verbal spiritual expressions and responses are at least as important, not just for younger, less verbal children, but also for those with fluent enough language. In valuing what children can have to say about spiritual life, we need to be very careful that they do not infer that a verbal approach is the only way to spiritual perception. The wrong kind of focus on spiritual talk might indirectly teach children to dismiss the powerful ways in which insight comes to us non-verbally.[147]

Hyde too speaks of the importance of not just listening to children but also being attentive to references to the spiritual; he concludes that "the spirituality of children … can be nurtured if parents and others who work with children have appropriate techniques for respectfully *listening to* (and *for*) and acknowledging seriously the individual characteristics of each child's spirituality (my italics)."[148]

The growing understanding of the child's innate capacity for spirituality was acknowledged globally in 1998 with the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;[149] it acknowledged spirituality as an innate capacity in children. It "reflects an unprecedented value for the subjective worlds of children"[150] and, as noted by Nye, refers to the *spiritual* and *religious* rights of the child.[151] Thus, all who care for children have an ethical responsibility to recognise and respond to spirituality as it is presented within all human beings and they must be equipped to recognise, understand and deal with this dimension.[152] The convention also recognises the importance of enabling children to express their voices on important matters and decisions affecting them.[153] The right to a spiritual life in childhood is important not merely for the child's development throughout their childhood but has

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[146] Ibid., Kindle location 714 of 2696.

[147] Ibid., Kindle location 725 of 2696.

[148] Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness*, 60.

[149] United Nations, "U.N. Convention of the Rights of the Child," ed. UNICEF (New York: United Nations, 1989).

[150] Diane Hogan, "Researching 'the Child' in Developmental Psychology," in *Researching Children's Experience: Methods and Approaches*, ed. Sheila greene and Diane Hogan, (London: Sage, 2011), 35. While reference to meeting a child's spiritual needs is *explicit* in just a few clauses, recognition of these needs is *implicit* throughout the Convention. A clear duty is placed on all relevant bodies to ensure that a child's spiritual well-being is nurtured in the same manner as his or her physical and intellectual well-being.

[151] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 496 of 2696.

[152] R. Jackson and A. Monteux, "Promoting the Spiritual Well-Being of Children and Young People with Special Needs," *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care* 1, no. 1 (2003). Four articles (17, 23.3, 27.1 and 32.1) make reference to their spiritual rights and another six (2.1, 14.1, 14.3, 20.3, 29.1(d) and 30) plus the preamble mention religious rights.

[153] Malcolm Hill, "Ethical Considerations in Researching Children's Experiences," in *Researching Children's Experience*, ed. Sheila Greene and Diane Hogan, (London: Sage, 2005), 61.

important consequences for their adult spiritual lives too. Both childhood spiritual impressions and childhood spiritual experiences can have life-long impact on adult spiritual life.[154] Kate Adams notes that "there are wider cultural issues which affect attitudes towards children, particularly in relation to their spirituality."[155] She stresses that "if adults are to fully understand children's spirituality, it is essential that children's voices are heard in the debate."[156]

In summary, while it is not possible to offer a precise definition of children's spirituality, there is a consensus that it is multi-dimensional and its characteristics can be described and recognised. Many writers, including Adams *et al.*, have suggested that such descriptions are sufficient to enable meaningful research into the spirituality of children, especially in light of the growing understanding "of the distinctive features of young children's spirituality compared to other areas of development."[157] Children's spirituality finds expression in their ordinary everyday activities through their relational consciousness of self, other, the world, and the transcendent. Because this lies at a deep, preverbal level, it can easily be overlooked by adults who must take time to listen actively to what children have to say not just verbally but through their body language, metaphor and symbol, and their creative and artistic expression. It cannot be easily compartmentalised – it flows into and across all aspects of the child's life experience as they encounter and discover new things every day. Their spirituality finds expression, in particular, in moments of joy, wonder, and awe. Linked to their developing sense of relational consciousness is a growing awareness of personal identity; this awakening gives rise to questions of meaning and purpose in life which may find expression in wondering and questioning. While adults seek certainty, children are comfortable with not knowing, with liminality; they are willing to allow life to unfold its meaning to them. Children have a more holistic way of seeing and being in the world; they are open to the mysterious in life in ways that adults may not always recognise. Children's spirituality develops in stages, moving from a naïve relatedness to the transcendent to self-preoccupation in their teenage years; Western society tends to suppress their

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[154] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 563 of 2696.
[155] Adams, "Spiritual Development in Schools with No Faith Affiliation: The Cultural Ambivalence Towards Children's Spirituality in England," 24.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Adams, Bull, and Maynes, "Early Childhood Spirituality in Education: Towards an Understanding of the Distinctive Features of Young Children's Spirituality," 11.

natural spiritual awareness although a desire for relation with the transcendent can resurface in later teenage and adult life. However, development is rarely in a straight line or under adult control. Its expression can be deeply insightful and intense one minute – as the data from this study will demonstrate - and invisible the next.

2.2.2 How Children's Spirituality is Understood in this Study

I consider that Sandra Schneider's definition captures quite powerfully the essence of what is commonly understood by spirituality.[158] Although no child could explain it in those words or have the capacity to understand it cognitively, nonetheless, her description captures the kernel of the concept. The child's formative years are very much a case of whole-hearted involvement in the project of life-integration and are directed at self-transcendence. While it seems clear that, as the child's capacities grow and develop, they may become more and more *conscious* of the process, nonetheless their innate spirituality is part of the human condition from the moment of birth, planted like a seed within the heart of the child, and is often given joyous expression in their lives even when the child is not overtly conscious of it *per se*. It is when that involvement begins to be *consciously* directed towards the ultimate value one perceives that one can be said to be becoming spiritually aware. The lived experience of spirituality as described by Schneiders is captured somewhat differently by the theologian Dermot Lane in his definition of faith, which he defines as

> a love of truth, a personal dedication to truth and a practical living out of life according to truth. An insight into the truth of God followed by a personal response to that insight which affects daily living.[159]

I suggest that Lane's definition of faith is actually an acceptable definition of spirituality within any world-view that acknowledges the transcendent, while the first sentence on its own might well satisfy even those who do not acknowledge any transcendent dimension to life. Frederick Buechner's understanding of

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[158] She defined spirituality as "the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives." Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," 6. In Christian spirituality, these formal categories are specified by Christian content: the horizon of ultimate value is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ and the project involves the living of his paschal mystery in the context of the Church community through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[159] Dermot A. Lane, "Reconstructing Faith for a New Century and a New Society," in *New Century, New Society: Christian Perspectives*, ed. D.A. Lane, (Dublin: Columba Press, 1999), 168.

faith/spirituality is also compatible with this perspective.[160]

The understanding of spirituality underpinning this research is related to the concept of the true-self which is another way of describing, in Christian terms, Schneider's 'ultimate value that one perceives' and Lane's 'truth.' The concepts of the false-self and the true-self have appeared in various guises in the fields of psychology, philosophy and spirituality. These are related to what Tyler calls "the two great streams of interpretation of the psyche" by the disciplines of psychology on the one hand and theology/spirituality on the other.[161] Donald Winnicott posited that it is not the adult caregiver who shapes the true-self of the child but rather, as described by Thermos, that "the adult acts as a caretaker of the gift called 'true self' which is given to the infant like a seed."[162] Roberto Assagioli's concept of the 'higher-self' (or 'transpersonal-self') is another approach to the concept of the true-self. Assagioli, the founder of psychosynthesis, considered that the psychological and spiritual approaches to understanding the human person are not mutually exclusive and he developed a framework which recognised the fundamental spiritual nature of the human being. His theory of psychosynthesis, distinguishes between 'self-actualisation' ('the awakening and manifestation of latent potentialities of the human being') and what he described as 'the realisation of the Self' ('the experience and awareness of the synthesising spiritual centre,' responding to the experience of one's deepest callings in life).[163] More recently, in the field of mental health, John Swinton, David Fontana, Victor Schermer and Larry Culliford[164] have also argued

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[160] Frederick Buechner, *The Clown in the Belfry: Writings on Faith and Fiction* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 21. Buechner is a renowned Presbyterian theologian and prize-winning author. He has written of faith that: [It] is different from theology because theology is reasoned, systematic, orderly whereas faith is disorderly, intermittent, and full of surprises. Faith is different from mysticism because mystics in their ecstasy become one with what faith can at most see only from afar … Faith is closest perhaps to worship because like worship it is essentially a response to God and involves the emotions and the physical senses as well as the mind, but worship is consistent, structured, single-minded and seems to know what it's doing while faith is a stranger and exile on the earth and doesn't know for certain about anything. Faith is homesickness. Faith is a lump in the throat. Faith is less 'a position on' than 'a movement toward,' less a sure thing than a hunch. Faith is waiting. Faith is journeying through space and through time.

[161] Peter Tyler, *The Pursuit of the Soul: Psychoanalysis, Soul-Making and the Christian Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 4.

[162] Vasileios Thermos, *In Search of the Person: 'True' and False' Self According to Donald Winnicott and St Gregory Palamas*, trans. Constantine Kokenes (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2002), 12.

[163] Roberto Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques* (London: Viking Press, 1971), 37-38.

[164] See for example John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering a Forgotten Dimension* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001). David Fontana, *Psychology, Religion and Spirituality* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003). Victor L. Schermer, *Spirit & Psyche: A New Paradigm for*

for a pyscho-spiritual paradigm that incorporates spirituality as an essential aspect of the human person, a way of viewing human development "that brings spiritual understanding into conjunction with science-based ideas regarding the mind and its development."[165] Schermer considers that there seems "to reside in the newborn a component of self which possesses a purity, wholeness, untarnished innocence and spontaneity, a pristine ego … which is the developmental seed of the psycho-spiritual self."[166] He considered that a key premise of such a psycho-spiritual paradigm was the unity of mind, body and spirit and that "we are all possessed of a divinity within."[167]

Thomas Merton also engages with concepts of false-self and true-self albeit they are not wholly congruent with the psychological concepts. Thomas Merton's concept of the true-self[168] clarifies the concept of truth in Lane's definition from a Christian perspective, perhaps from any world-view incorporating a theistic perspective. He considered that "there is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation [meditation], and the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular."[169] For him, the discovery of the true-self was an experience of finding God in which each human person transcends the superficial, egoic false-self and discovers their true essence, deep in the centre of their being.[170] He described it as follows: "Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate

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Psychology, Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy (London: Jessica KIngsley Publishers, 2003). Larry Culliford, *The Psychology of Spirituality: An Introduction* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011). Daniel Helminiak is another important contributor. His work, which links the disciplines of neuroscience, psychology and theology, sees the human spirit as one dimension of the human mind which can be known through experience of oneself – the other element of mind being the psyche. See Daniel A. Helminiak, *The Human Core of Spirituality: Mind as Psyche and Spirit* (Albany, NY.: State University of New York, 1996). And *Brain, Consciousness and God: A Lonergonian Integration* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2015).

[165] Schermer, *Spirit & Psyche: A New Paradigm for Psychology, Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy*, 29.

[166] Ibid., 115.

[167] Ibid., 29.

[168] Rohr has described the true-self as 'who we are in God and who God is in us.' Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2013), 16. Indeed Rebecca Nye has suggested that a definition of spirituality for children might be: "God's way of being with children and children's way of being with God." See Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 273 of 2696.

[169] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: A New Dirctions Book, 1961), 7.

[170] The New Testament refers to the true-self variously as the hidden self (Ephesians 3:16; 1 Peter 3:4) and the inner self (2 Corinthians 4:16).

experience of Being[171] … [which] is totally different from the experience of self-consciousness."[172] Richard Rohr has described the true-self, more simply, as 'who we are in God and who God is in us.'[173] In essence, for this study, spirituality is understood to be about awakening to one's true-self, and living life from that perspective.

The definitions and descriptions of spirituality considered above speak of a dynamic, conscious involvement in a process of transformation of the person's understanding of what it means to live an authentic life; they speak of a journey of discovery, of transformation, of self-realisation, of self-transcendence. This transformation involves an awakening to mystery, awakening to an ineffable inner truth, and choosing to live out one's life guided by that it. In essence, for this study, spirituality is understood to be about awakening – consciously or unconsciously - to the mystery that is one's true essence, within and without, and allowing oneself to be guided by that inner truth, resulting in greater clarity of perception and authenticity of response to the challenges of everyday life. In other words, spirituality means waking up to this essential truth and living one's life out of that profound way of seeing and being. This review of the literature makes clear that children have an innate capacity for spirituality long before they develop a fluency of language and thought.[174] As children grow and develop they become ever more conscious, perceptually if not conceptually, of that innate capacity. I agree with Ursula King when she suggests that it may be more appropriate to speak of the 'spiritual potential' of children rather than children's spirituality.[175] I posit that every child has an innate spiritual potential which is awakened and developed when the circumstances are right but to which access can also be closed off, especially in children, when circumstances are unfavourable. This raises the question: how can

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[171] Being is "ontologically seen to be beyond and prior to the Cartesian subject-object division."

[172] Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1968), 24.

[173] Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 16. Merton expressed it as follows: The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God. But whatever is in God is really identical with Him, for His infinite simplicity admits no division and no distinction. Therefore I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in Him. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 37-38.

[174] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle Location 148 of 2696.

[175] Ursula King, "The Spiritual Potential of Childhood: Awakening to the Fullness of Life," *International Association of Childrens Spirituality* 18, no. 1 (2013): 6.

this potential be awakened and nurtured? What circumstances promote "its ability to grow, embrace and suffuse all experiences of human life."[176]

2.2.3   Nurturing Spirituality in Children

First and foremost, their innate potential must be recognised, especially by parents and teachers. Nye notes that because of the childlike nature of children's spirituality, because it does not neatly conform to accepted norms or use conventional expression, because it remains hidden, it can be easily missed. And while it often feels deeply significant and important to the child, it can seem to them not to matter to adults in their lives or to other children. For this reason, especially in post-modern society, it is fragile and vulnerable, and can find itself submerged if neglected, ignored or misunderstood.[177] Nye notes that this "begs the question of how children's spirituality is nurtured … We need to ask how children's initial inclination to recognize the sacred in their day-to-day life experiences can be sustained."[178] Berryman cautions that while "we cannot give children spirituality … we can take it away."[179] In other words, failure to nourish the spirituality of a child means that their capacity to access it may be severely diminished, even lost. King observes that

> our individual development from birth to death may be likened to a progressive unfolding of the potential we carry within ourselves, much of which we never fully actualise, so that our spiritual awakening and progress remain incomplete and, more often than not, completely underdeveloped and woefully inadequate for being fully alive.[180]

It seems clear then that the spiritual capacities of children "need to be nurtured if children are to grow into holistic people who are developed not only cognitively, but also socially, emotionally and spiritually."[181] I noted earlier (page 28) Hay's observation that in many so-called modern, developed countries in the Western world the process of induction into post-modern culture may be responsible for "suppressing or even repressing the natural spiritual awareness of children."[182] In

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[176] Ibid.
[177] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 300 of 2696.
[178] Ibid., Kindle location 386 of 2696.
[179] Jerome W. Berryman, "Spirituality, Religious Education, and the Dormouse," in *The Search for a Theology of Childhood - Essays by Jerome W. Berryman from 1978-2009* ed. Brendan Hyde, (Ballarat, Victoria: Modotti Press, 2013), Kindle location 2173 of 4876.
[180] King, "The Spiritual Potential of Childhood: Awakening to the Fullness of Life," 6-7.
[181] Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness*, 19.
[182] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 613 of 2836.

such a culture, the spiritual experiences of children are often not nurtured and affirmed because parents and teachers are so busy "they either do not have time to notice them or they do not know what it is they should be looking for and, when and if they do see it, they do not know how to nurture it."[183] Nye offers six principles (space, process, imagination, relationship, intimacy and trust – under the acronym SPIRIT) for supporting and nourishing children's spirituality.[184] She suggests that "children especially need help to value the often quiet, slow, iterative qualities of 'processing' since so much else in their lives does not."[185]

A core question for this study is to explore if meditation impacts on the spirituality of children, if it can contribute to awakening and/or nourishing their spirituality. Madeleine Simon has no doubt and describes children as born contemplatives because "They have not reached the stage of logical thought and are able, in their simplicity, to catch and hold God by love."[186] Hart agrees, noting that "children … have an inherent openness to mystery, wonder, and delight. They are natural mystics."[187] Although John Cassian, the mediaeval monk who brought the ideas and practices of the Desert Fathers, including meditation, to the West, was not writing about children, the following observation is relevant nonetheless:

> No one is kept away from [meditation/contemplation] by not being able to read, nor is rustic simplicity any obstacle to it, for it lies close at hand for all if only they will, by constant repetition of this phrase, keep the mind and heart attentive to God.[188]

Cynthia Bourgeault, a great proponent of silent prayer, says that in their hearts children are so open to the movement of the spirit in their lives, to the presence of Jesus as friend and to the embrace of God as Love, that they take to the practice of meditation very easily.[189] Because children live in the present moment, and from the heart, they are open to stillness and to simply being with God without the need to interpret, understand or analyse. John Main wrote that

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[183] Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness*, 19.

[184] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 1028 of 2696.

[185] Ibid., Kindle location 1154 of 2696.

[186] Simon, *Born Contemplative: Introducing Children to Christian Meditation*, 2.

[187] Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, 49.

[188] See John Cassian, *John Cassian: Conferences*, The Classics of Western Spirituality Series (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), Conferences 10:14.

[189] She notes that "Far from being advanced, it is about the simplest form of prayer there is. Children recognize it instantly … perhaps because, as the sixteenth-century mystic John of the Cross intimates, "Silence is God's first language." Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2004), 4.

> The wonderful beauty of prayer is that the opening of our heart is as natural as the opening of a flower. To let a flower open and bloom it is only necessary to let it be; so if we simply are, if we become and remain still and silent, our heart cannot be but open, the Spirit cannot but pour through into our whole being. [190]

Pope John Paul II stressed the need to develop in children an attitude of attention which would nourish their innate amazement in the face of creation. This called for the child to "be led to a real and profound interior silence which is the first prerequisite for listening."[191] Indeed, it would seem that, in introducing children to meditation, one doesn't so much teach children how to meditate, as make them aware that meditation enkindles and develops their natural capacity to experience the Divine in their lives. This study explores its capacity to do so.

2.3   Conclusion

In this chapter I reviewed the literature with a view to exploring the concept of spirituality as a relational, transformative lived experience, including definitions from those involved in the academic study of spirituality. I then explored the nature of children's spirituality and concluded that spirituality is a primordial, universal human pre-disposition which is available to children and which manifests in their lives as relational consciousness. It is multi-dimensional and impossible to capture in words; accordingly the literature concurs that no satisfactory definition of spirituality for children has yet been agreed.[192] Instead the literature suggests that it is sufficient for most research studies to describe rather than define what is understood by the concept. The understanding of spirituality underpinning this study centres on the concept of the true-self as developed by Thomas Merton; other theistic religions also give expression to concepts of the true-self. While this research approaches the definition from a specific religious context, that of Christianity, the understanding of spirituality used in this study can be seen as holistic, more broadly applicable and not

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[190] Quoted in Simon, *Born Contemplative: Introducing Children to Christian Meditation*, 14. The original quote is from John Main, *Community of Love* (London: Continuum, 1999).

[191] Pope John Paul II, "Address to the National Congress of the Italian Association of Catholic Teachers", 6 December 1984. Reported in translation in *l'Osservatore Romano*, 14 January 1985.

[192] De Souza, Bone and Watson suggest that "it might be better to understand spirituality … as an attempt at translation from experience to language, rather than a definition of a tangible thing." Marian de Souza, Jane Bone, and Jacqueline Watson, eds., *Spirituality across Disciplines: Research and Practice* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), vii.

limited to any one religion.[193] I noted how children's spirituality appears to develop in stages and how it seems to be vulnerable to suppression as children reach their teenage years; this is especially so in the Western world which suffers from what I have named 'true-self denial.'

I observed that because it is difficult for children to give verbal expression to spiritual experience, researchers need to be very attentive to its non-verbal expression; this has implications for the design of the research. I stressed the importance of nurturing the spirituality of children and explained how this study was designed to examine if the practice of meditation impacts on the spirituality of children and, if so, what is the nature of that impact. A core question then, for this study, is whether meditation can awaken and nourish the spirituality of a child who practices meditation regularly in a whole-school context.

The next chapter will explore the nature of meditation practice, particularly in the Christian tradition, and its capacity to promote perceptual knowledge and nurture human flourishing. It reviews the literature on the stages and states of human consciousness and explores the capacity of children to experience deep states of consciousness through the practice of meditation.

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[193] Such a holistic approach is supported by Mata-McMahon. See Jennifer Mata-McMahon, "Reviewing the Research in Children's Spirituality (2005-2015): Proposing a Pluricultural Approach," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* (2016). Published online May 2016. Accessed 03 June 2016. http://www.tandfonline.com/action/showAxaArticles?journalCode=cijc20. For further discussion on the true-self in other religiouns, see the penultimate footnote in Section 3.4 of this thesis.

Chapter 3

The Practice of Meditation: Nature & Nurture

According to the great sages, there is something in us that is always conscious, that is literally conscious or aware at all times through all states, waking, dreaming, sleeping. And that ever present awareness is Spirit in us.[194]

3.1   Introduction

This chapter explores the nature of meditation practice and clarifies what is distinctive about the practice in the Christian tradition. Section 3.2 explores the capacity of meditation to promote perceptual knowledge and nurture human flourishing; it also examines the link between meditation and the stages and states of human consciousness and its contribution to understanding how children can experience very deep states of consciousness despite their limited cognitive ability. Section 3.3 explores the form and distinctiveness of the meditation practice which prompted this study, the Christian tradition of meditation as recovered and promoted by the Benedictine monk John Main. Section 3.4 examines what the literature has about the capacity of meditation to nurture human flourishing and section 3.5 reviews the literature on meditation and children. The insights uncovered in this and the previous chapter will inform the design of this study, a core aim of which is to discern what impact the practice has, if any, on children's spirituality.

3.2   The Nature of Meditation

Humankind has been associated with meditation practice for thousands of years; the earliest written records of meditation come from the Hindu traditions of Vendantism in ancient India and go back approximately 3,500 years to around 1500 BCE.[195] The ancient scriptures of Hinduism, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, put *dhyana* - the exercise of stillness and non-judgemental attention - at the centre of human

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[194] Ken Wilber, *One Taste: Daily Reflections on Integral Spirituality* (Boston, Mass.: Shambala Publications Inc., 2000), 64.

[195] See George S. Everly and Jeffrey Lating, M, *A Clinical Guide to the Treatment of Human Stress Response* (New York: Springer, 2013), 201.

growth and well-being.[196] While the first written records of Buddhist meditation go back to the first century preceding the Christian Era, the practice appears to date at least to several centuries before then.[197] And the practice of meditation in the Christian tradition can be traced to the Desert Fathers and Mothers at the end of the third century CE. Meditation was popularised in the West with the spread of transcendental meditation (TM).[198] Based on Buddhist practice, meditation was developed as the holistic practice of *mindfulness* for the reduction of stress at the University of Massachusetts by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the early 1970's[199] and it has spread world-wide in the field of holistic medicine. Nataraja notes that there are countless variations of meditation practice, and to be fully understood each one must be considered within the context of the particular culture in which it is practiced;[200] that context includes the intention behind the practice, what each tradition sees as the purpose of meditation.

Meditation practices can be said, by and large, to fall into two main categories: the two forms may be called *focused-attention* meditation and *open-monitoring* meditation. Focused attention meditation generally involves a process of sitting in silence, with the aim of being still in body and mind; this stillness is brought about through the narrowing of focus to the object of meditation, a word or a phrase or the physical sensation of the breath or even an object of some kind. Whenever the practitioner becomes aware that their attention has wandered and they realise they are caught up in their thoughts or emotions, the meditator gently but firmly brings their attention back to the meditation object. In the Buddhist tradition this is usually the breath while in the Christian tradition the meditator focuses on a word or mantra. Open-monitoring meditation, such as mindfulness, involves paying attention to whatever comes into ones awareness; this may be, at any given moment, a thought, emotion, or body sensation. Practitioners are advised to simply become aware of whatever is currently in awareness, to follow it, as it were, until something else emerges – but without trying to hold onto it or change the content of awareness

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[196] Green, *The Heart of Education: Meditation with Children and Young People*, 10.
[197] Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 4.
[198] Maharishi Mahesh Yogi introduced the TM technique and TM movement in India, in the mid-1950s and embarked on a series of word tours from 1958 to 1965 promoting and teaching the practice.
[199] Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness* (New York: Bantam Books, 2013, 1990).
[200] Shanida Nataraja, *The Blissful Brain: Neuroscience and Proof of the Power of Meditation* (London: Octopus Publishing, 2008), 18.

in any way. John Kabat Zinn, for example, defines the practice of mindfulness meditation as 'the intentional cultivation of non-judgemental, moment-to-moment awareness.'[201]

Just as traditions vary in their intention, different versions of meditation practice have begun to be promoted within schools in recent years.[202] The version used in the denominational schools in this study is that of Christian meditation in the John Main tradition, which is a form of focused-attention meditation. While the practice remains much the same across focused-attention meditation in different traditions, the intention may vary and I will return to the matter of intention later in the chapter. It is a common understanding of focused-attention meditation across the traditions that human experience is mediated by the bodily senses and interpreted by the mind which seeks to make sense and meaning of experience; they also share an understanding that the practice of meditation heightens awareness of the experience of the present moment by using focused attention to quieten the self-conscious mind.

Diverse traditions, including the Christian tradition, recommend that adults meditate twice each day for a period of twenty to thirty minutes each time; as a rule of thumb, children are encouraged to meditate for one minute per year of their age, ideally every day.[203]

3.2.1   Meditation and Ways of Knowing

The practice of meditation developed in the wisdom and religious traditions of the world because they were understood to promote greater self-awareness, individual and communal well-being and human flourishing.[204] Han de Wit is one of a number

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[201] Jon Kabat-Zinn, "Mindfulness Meditation: What It Is, What It Isn't, and It's Role in Health Care and Medicine " in *Comparative and Psychological Study on Meditation*, ed. Y. Haruki, Y. Ishii, and M. Suzuki, (Delft, Netherlands: Eburon, 1996), 161.

[202] See, for example, Clive Erricker and Jane Erricker, eds., *Meditation in Schools: A Practical Guide to Calmer Classrooms* (London: Continuum, 2001). Green, *The Heart of Education: Meditation with Children and Young People*. Jeannie Battagin, *A Child's Way: How to Teach and Practice Christian Meditation with Children* (Singapore: Medio Media, 2012). Christie, *Coming Home: A Guide to Teaching Christian Meditation to Children*. Cahrles Posnett and Patti Posnett, *Meditation and Education: The Gift of Simplicity* (London: World Community for Christian Meditation, 2013). Helen E. Lees, *Silence in Schools* (London: Institute of Education Press, 2012).

[203] Christie, *Coming Home: A Guide to Teaching Christian Meditation to Children*, 44.

[204] Han F. de Wit, "The Case for Contemplative Psychology," (2001). For de Wit, this is an inner flourishing that occurs in the depth of our being and manifests itself in how we live our everyday lives. *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, trans. Henry Jansen and Lucia Hofland-Jensen (Pittsburgh, PA.: Duquense University Press, 1999), 32. De Wit

of academic scholars who have developed the field of contemplative psychology which sought to understand and describe how meditation gives rise to personal insights. He saw it as a shortcoming that conventional scientific psychology had formulated an image of the human being that ignored the spiritual perspective.[205] Conventional psychology takes a profane view of the individual and posits that body and mind are experienced as two different entities, while in the meditative traditions "body and mind gradually come to be seen as two experiential qualities of one human existence."[206] Western culture, from the time of Plato, has tended to view the world through a dualistic lens; the mind is drawn to an *either/or* way of seeing the world and is perplexed by any experience that is beyond words and images. By comparison, the Eastern mind-set tends to be contemplative, non-dual. It views the mind and body "as a psycho-physical unity that is essentially spiritual in nature."[207] It is comfortable with uncertainty and paradox and is open to the mysterious. Richard Rohr suggests that such a mind-set is capable of 'full-access knowing,'[208] which is not irrational, but pre-rational, rational and trans-rational all at once. The contemplative mind-set holds back from labelling or categorising so it can see things as they are, whole in themselves, distinct from "the words and concepts that become their substitutes."[209] While the Western mind-set is uncomfortable with uncertainty and seeks to know the truth of spirituality with the same certainty as empirical knowledge, the contemplative way of seeing acknowledges that "mystery can indeed

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asserts that "people who travel the contemplative path can no longer be described and explained satisfactorily by conventional psychology."

[205] Over the course of the twentieth century Western society developed into a distinctly psychological culture. Entire generations in our culture have grown up with the concept of humanity that was drawn up by Freud and they interpreted their experiences by means of this concept. These concepts give shape to our understanding of what it means to be human. See *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 23-25.

[206] *Contemplative Psychology*, trans. Marie Louise Baird (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Dubuesne University Press, 1991), 10. It is important to note, however, that while contemplative psychology is based on a spiritual image of the human being, nonetheless, it is *not theocentric* but, like conventional psychology, *anthropocentric* because its central question is "what happens psychologically to people in their thoughts, words and deeds when they walk the contemplative path?"

[207] Ibid., 186. When body and mind are experienced as a unity, the body becomes the physical basis of contemplative action; it becomes the manifestation of compassion in the world. Ibid., 191.

[208] Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 34.

[209] Ibid., 35. In the words of Tony de Mello, the contemplative appreciates, that 'by dissecting her petals no one ever gathered the beauty of the rose.' Anthony de Mello, *The Prayer of the Frog, Vol.1* (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1988), 253.

be known without being solved … without being understood."[210] It accepts that one can experience and intuit – one can *know* - that which cannot be described in words.

The two ways of seeing the world, the profane and sacred, lead to two distinct ways of knowing. Reflecting on the differences between the natural and the human sciences, Romanyshyn observes that they require different ways of knowing and being:

> A researcher, for example, cannot fully or truly understand an historical event, or a work of art, or a dream through modes of explanation which apply in the natural sciences. A work of art, or a dream, or an historical event requires more than cause-effect analysis or reductive explanations. They require description and interpretation, which stay rooted within the human experience and the cultural-historical context of its expression.[211]

Contemplative psychology posits two kinds of knowledge, *conceptual* and *perceptual* (or experiential) knowledge.[212] This arises in part because it views the mind as an element of the totality of experience. In other words, it acknowledges that *not alone can one think about experience but one can also experience one's thoughts*.[213] The wisdom traditions regard the mental domain as empirical. They acknowledge that one's thoughts impact on one's words and deeds; they understand that one's mental view, one's words and one's deeds are inter-dependent. But, of the three, the mental is unique in that it can only be experienced in the *first-person*, while the other two domains can be explored in *third-person* mode also. While conventional psychology seeks to *acquire knowledge,* contemplative psychology seeks wisdom. This highlights an important distinction: scientific psychology is a form of *third-person psychology* while contemplative psychology is a *first-person* psychology which takes into account private experience available only to the individual subjectively.[214] From the perspective of contemplative psychology, it is a serious drawback of conventional psychology that, because it sees introspection as

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[210] Gerald May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 30.

[211] Robert D. Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2013), 238.

[212] Gendlin has also developed an approach to the concept of experiential knowledge in which the felt-sense is followed and allowed to articulate itself. He considers that the living interaction of an organism with its environment is prior (both in time and philosophically) to abstract knowledge about its environment. This interaction is ultimately a kind of knowing which occurs prior to abstract, conceptual knowledge. See Eugene T. Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997). Les Todres has also engaged with this topic. See Les Todres, *Embodied Enquiry: Phenomenological Touchstones for Research, Psychotherapy and Spirituality* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[213] de Wit, *Contemplative Psychology*, 78.

[214] Ibid., 31-32.

unempirical, it limits itself in its methodologies to exploration in the third-person only. Bertrand Russell, referred to this form of first-person knowledge as *knowledge by acquaintance,* as distinct from third-person knowledge *about* something.[215] This concept of perceptual knowledge mirrors Michael Polanyi's concept of tacit knowing, which Dale Cannon construes as "a relational knowing of reality." [216] Cannon goes on to suggest that "acquaintance knowing, extended by articulate culture, is the primary kind of human knowing."[217] While conceptual knowing is generally connected with the reasoning mind, perceptual knowing (or knowing through awareness) is often connected metaphorically with the heart. Of course, such a distinction raises questions about the validity of perceptual knowledge. De Wit suggests that, for perceptual knowledge, "the concept of truth or falsehood refers … to the *quality of awareness* in our perceptual activity,"[218] which, if insufficient, can give rise to *perceptual ignorance* and/or *perceptual confusion.* Even where one's perception in itself may be unbiased, one's *conscious* perception[219] may be false if, for example, it only provides a part of what is perceptually given. In other words, the way in which one experiences the world is dependent on how one dresses it up mentally, with one's thoughts.[220] *Perceptual ignorance* can arise because of one's conditioning, habitual patterns, desires and fears, or one's conceptions of what one should seek or avoid.[221] A key aim of meditation practices is to eliminate perceptual ignorance by freeing one's awareness from being conditioned by one's thoughts.[222] On the other hand, *perceptual confusion*[223] arises when one 'confound(s) *the*

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[215] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912).
[216] Dale Cannon, "Construing Polanyi's Tacit Knowing as Knowing by Acquaintance Rather Than Knowing by Representation: Some Implications," *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 2(2003): 26.
[217] Ibid., 26 and 41.
[218] de Wit, *Contemplative Psychology*, 88-89. The italics in this quotation have been added by this researcher, not by de Wit.
[219] *Conscious perception,* which is sometimes referred to as *apperception,* arises where we notice the stream of our experience. See *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 126-27.
[220] Ibid., 146.
[221] *Contemplative Psychology*, 89.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Although confusion is the appropriate term here, the individual experiencing perceptual confusion does not feel at all confused; on the contrary he or she may 'feel' very certain about the truth of their experience! But, in fact, they are confusing the thought about the experience and the experience itself, so they are not 'reading' the situation properly – they do not see what is really happening. Perhaps a term such as *misperception* or *perceptual misreading* expresses the situation more clearly. However, in this thesis, I will continue to use de Wit's terminology.

experience of [a] thought with the *experience that the thought is about*.'[224] Such as when one, *without being aware one is doing so*, mistakes one's thoughts about an experience to be the experience one's thoughts represent or when one adds the contents of one's thoughts to an actual experience.[225] Because of perceptual ignorance and perceptual confusion, the world as one 'knows' it is in fact a *conceptualised experience*; it is reality *as one thinks it to be*.[226] It is reality dressed up with the concepts one has applied to it, without being conscious of having done so.[227] The practice of meditation leads to the dissolution of conceptualised experience and helps to eliminate perceptual ignorance and confusion.[228] As Jack Finnegan observes "Contemplation is a state of fluid awareness that sees through to the inner nature of reality and makes new modes of knowing possible."[229]

3.2.2 Meditation and Nurture

De Wit asserts that contemplative psychology can help one to understand why meditation nurtures the fundamental humaneness of human beings.[230, 231] Because meditation helps the practitioner to realise how one's thoughts give rise to *conceptualised experience*, he or she becomes keenly aware that their perception is distorted because of perceptual ignorance and confusion, so he or she learns to see

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[224] de Wit, *Contemplative Psychology*, 90.

[225] For example, when at twilight, we mistake a bush in the distance for a person waving at us, or while standing on a rope in the dark we experience standing on a snake or, when fearful, we experience a person approaching us as a threat. "On the Methodology of Clarifying Confusion," in *Current Issues in Theoretical Psychology*, ed. William J. Baker, et al., (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science Publishers B.V., 1987), 43.

[226] "The world as we know it" refers to our daily experience and the mental experience that is added or substituted in the form of an inner commentary - that is, the world is understood or interpreted by the human being. This world is real in the sense that the conceptualised aspect that we have added to it really exists in our minds (the mental domain). This world is illusory in the sense that, to some extent, it exists only in our minds.

[227] Michael Washburn, in noting that human beings are prone to perceptual confusion, describes it as arising when we "confuse [our] projected conceptual maps of experience for experience itself." Michael Washburn in the Foreword to de Wit, *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*.

[228] *Contemplative Psychology*, 96.

[229] Jack Finnegan, *The Audacity of Spirit: The Meaning and Shaping of Spirituality Today* (Dublin: Veritas, 2008), 33.

[230] De Wit notes that this fundamental quality of humaneness manifests as courage in times of personal adversity and as compassion when confronted with the adversity of others. And when faced with prosperity, of self or others, it manifests as *joy*. de Wit, *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 3-4.

[231] *Contemplative Psychology*, 24.

more clearly. In this way, the innate humaneness of the human person is promoted and nurtured. This process, in which one's fixation on egocentric, conceptualised experience becomes unravelled and dissolved, results in insight into the human condition and promotes an inner flourishing which ultimately leads to compassionate action in the world.[232] From the perspective of contemplative psychology, to know reality fully, one must come to *know beyond [conceptual] knowing*.[233] Indeed, the wisdom traditions regard one's growing capacity for contemplative action (and speech) as the only true indicator of one's progress in meditation practice.

Meditation draws one's awareness to the constant, often futile, mental agitation, which leads to absentmindedness.[234] As one meditates in silence and stillness, the only movement is in one's stream of thoughts. The practitioner begins to meditate by focusing their attention on a single object and as soon as he or she notices that they have been caught up in thoughts, they direct their attention back to the chosen focal point, without judgement or emotion but with great patience. Every time they do this, they are conscious of having escaped from their thoughts and they become (even fleetingly) aware of their content; but also, for that moment at least, they are no longer imprisoned or captivated by them – they have objectified them. The unpredictable movement of the mind is made visible because of the stability that is offered by the stillness and silence of meditation technique. Over time practitioners make valuable discoveries about their thoughts: they learn that thoughts arise *involuntarily* and continuously and that the stream of thoughts has a *very compelling* nature;[235] they also learn how readily human beings *identify themselves with their thoughts* and they learn that this is ultimately *an illusion*. Regular practice of meditation sharpens one's ability to distinguish between *seeing one's thoughts* and *being in thought*. In other words, between seeing conceptualised experience for what it is as against being caught up in one's conceptualised experience and confounding it for reality.[236] The practitioner comes to recognise, as a thought passes through the

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[232] *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 173.
[233] Anthony de Mello, *Awareness* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1990), 123.
[234] de Wit, *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 201.
[235] Ibid., 211.
[236] *Contemplative Psychology*, 111. It is important to understand that meditation is neither thinking about oneself or the world nor suppressing thoughts about oneself and life but involves seeing through one's fixation on thoughts and how one's failure to see that impacts on one's perception. The traditions warn, however, that while one can choose to let go of our thoughts, one must not repress them. The discipline of mindfulness must be applied with great gentleness and flexibility. If

mind, that it is a just thought and that the important thing is not the absence of thoughts, but not allowing themselves to be imprisoned by them. They discover that such wakefulness is an aspect of the human mind that can be cultivated.[237] And that one's innate humaneness is nurtured by the practice.

Through the regular daily practice of meditation, the practitioner builds on this capacity by seeking to access such open-minded consciousness in a disciplined ongoing manner, and learns to *live from* a consciousness that is free from being fixated on or captivated by the contents of thought. When one learns to consistently observe one's stream of experience without fitting it into concepts and representations, deep insights arise that give clarity to how reality looks when it is viewed from the perspective of unconditional egolessness. Such ongoing open-mindedness creates a space in which one's discriminating awareness can become active and remain so; and it is this discriminating awareness that leads to insight and knowledge, *perceptual knowledge*.[238] The dualist perspective that splits the world into things which are mine and not mine dissolves into a more unitive way of seeing.[239] One becomes less and less of a mystery to oneself as one develops first-hand self-knowledge.[240] As discriminating awareness penetrates one's entire experiential space it brings everything - the worlds of ego and egolessness - into the light.[241] One gradually discovers that one can live joyfully outside the stream of one's egocentric reality. One realises that this is the space in which one's

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one fights one's thoughts, trying to bury them, one then becomes captivated by that, so one is no longer free but remains captive to the stream of one's thoughts.

[237] *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 130-32.

[238] Ibid., 218.

[239] James E. Loder writes that "the dynamic that is the human spirit "can be characterised as a coherent pattern of knowing which draws into an undifferentiated whole the many splintered ways we are taught to think … [and] its power to shape cognition is familiar to us in acts of creativity and scientific discovery." See James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs, Co.: Howard & Howard, 1989), 2-3.

[240] de Wit, *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 225-27. One's inner emotional world, with its internal running commentary, also requires the continual attention of discriminating awareness. For example, one can be jealous of someone and be simultaneously angry at oneself for being jealous. Discriminating awareness also offers a way of working with emotions based on sharpening our awareness of the emotional qualities of experience, instead of coping with them by either suppressing them or acting them out. See *Contemplative Psychology*, 138.

[241] One might say that the resulting insights unmask unreality (ego) and reveal reality (the true-self). Expressed in theistic terms, one might say that the disciplines of insight lead to knowledge of God, not conceptual but perceptual knowledge of God; they reveal a divine reality and induce one to turn towards it. One discovers that the kingdom of God is within (Luke 17:21) and one begins to consciously live life from that perspective.

fundamental humanity is grounded and that it gives access to a rich and deep reality.[242] By letting go of what one tends to cling on to "one's attention relaxes from its default subject/object trajectory" and one begins to discern an inner spaciousness which is not only a place one goes to or rests in during meditation but it also becomes, over time, a place from which one sees reality in a new way.[243]

Contemplative psychology helps to explain how the practice of meditation nurtures the human person by clarifying conceptualised experience.[244] It gives rise to perceptual knowledge, a direct, non-conceptual form of knowing that cannot be contained in the conceptual dualities of known and knower, of experience and the one who experiences.[245] Through the regular practice of meditation one sees how one's thinking makes one the author of one's own 'reality' and one's conceptualised experience is instantly seen for what it is and its power to direct or rule one's life is removed.[246] In other words, meditation nurtures human development because it "invites an openness to modes of awareness and perception beyond our present conscious edges."[247] In addition, it makes one aware that one's knowledge is relative to, and part of, the state of mind one presently dwells in.[248]

Meditators also realise the inadequacy of language to express perceptual knowledge. This requires the practitioner to have the courage to *enter into uncertainty* because it is impossible to understand contemplative prescriptions completely until one has experienced that to which they refer, because that perceptual knowledge comes after the fact.[249] Both ways of knowing – the conceptual and the perceptual - are important; they complement one another because they counteract each other's shortcomings.[250] Together they unite head and heart,

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[242] de Wit, *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 228-29.
[243] Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Shambala, 2016), Kindle Location 513 of 4494.
[244] de Wit, *Contemplative Psychology*, 99.
[245] Perceptual knowing is not an experience itself but rather a way of experiencing: an egoless way of experiencing.
[246] de Wit, *Contemplative Psychology*, 98.
[247] Dr. Jack Finegan in a slide presentation for the Masters in Applied Christian Spirituality, at All Hallows College, Dublin in March 2013.
[248] de Wit, *Contemplative Psychology*, 104.
[249] Evocative language (aphorisms, myth, poetry, stories, koans) on the other hand, plays a very different role to descriptive or prescriptive language; its purpose is to point to, awaken or evoke a particular state.
[250] de Wit, "On the Methodology of Clarifying Confusion," 47. De Wit observes also that the awareness strategy clarifies for us whatever arises on-stage: our sights, sounds, smells, taste, touch,

intellect and intuition; they awaken and nourish one's innate humaneness and lead to compassionate action.

3.2.3   Meditation and the Stages of Growth of Human Consciousness

Like de Wit, Ken Wilber, a contemporary American philosopher and a pioneer in the field of transpersonal psychology, carried out, over many years, an extensive exploration of the wisdom traditions of the world. He was very deeply interested in the nature of human consciousness and he studied how the wisdom traditions explored the development of human consciousness subjectively and how other disciplines did so objectively. He came to see human development as a progressive movement through stages of human consciousness. For example, he learned from Piaget's research that cognitive development could be mapped into key stages and that each new stage builds on the previous one in very concrete ways and that it is not possible to skip a stage. At the same time as a child grows in cognitive ability, he or she is also growing in other ways: physically, learning to walk and run; also learning to communicate, at first non-verbally and later in words, developing complex language and reading skills; learning the difference between right and wrong and so on. All of this growth has been shown to develop in stages, each stage building on the previous one. And all the while, a child's sense of 'self' is gradually growing too. Wilber refers to the range of attributes, capacities and skills that human beings develop as they grow from childhood to adulthood as *lines of development*.[251] While many early researchers thought in terms of a *single* line of development, research has shown that human beings progress at different speeds along different lines of development. A given person may be very highly developed in, say, logical thinking, but poorly developed in emotional feelings; or vice-versa.[252] Each of these lines of development unfolds in common progressive phases and can be plotted

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and thoughts, our conceptual knowledge and how all of these intermingle. Conversely, because this clarification has no language, we need to make use of our conceptual strategies to be able to give expression to the truth we have discovered.

[251] These include cognitive, physical, communicative, and moral development and so on.

[252] Howard Gardner introduced the concept of *multiple intelligences*, showing that people have a variety of intelligences, such as cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, musical intelligence, aesthetic intelligence, kinesthetic intelligence, and so on. See Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). Most people excel in one or two of those, but do less well in others and very poorly in some This is very useful knowledge and it can be enormously helpful to our quality of life if we are aware of our strengths and our weaknesses along the different lines.

through a number of recognisable stages. Each stage represents a progressive and permanent milestone along the evolutionary path of one's own unfolding.[253] Developmental researchers have mapped these stages along their respective lines of development and attempted to determine their underlying structures i.e. the underlying pattern or architecture of each stage.[254]

As a person develops, there inevitably comes a time when they move between stages. The process begins when a person finds himself or herself opening up to *an elusive (perceptual) awareness* of a stage beyond their current stage. They may from time to time experience '*aha*' moments or peak experiences which open their potential for expanded knowing and ways of being; they experience "profound altered glimpses into [their] own higher possibilities."[255] In time they find their capacities begin to grow beyond the stage they are at and they experience a new phase (or condition) of being as new perspectives open up, new ways of seeing or experiencing reality. Initially this new phase is experienced as temporary; however, when they manage to appropriate those capacities, that way of seeing, on a permanent basis, they realise they have reached a new and recognisable *stage* of development. The core point here is that each *stage* on any line of development represents the *permanent acquisition* of a capacity to *consciously* master the corresponding energetic components of one's being.[256] Wilber cautions that these stages (or levels) of development should not be seen as rigid rungs in a ladder but as fluid and flowing waves of unfolding.[257]

Wilber discerned that in exploring human consciousness one must take into account not alone the *subjective* experience of the individual (one's perceptions of

[253] Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World* (Boston, Mass.: Integral Books, 2006), 8.

[254] The number of steps or stages used is a matter of choice and depends on the circumstances and purpose of the analysis - often a simple scale of three is sufficient. For example, the emotional development of an individual might be mapped over three stages and labelled as ego-centric, ethnocentric and world-centric. These stages might also be typified as being related to *body* (egocentric, pre-conventional, pre-rational), *mind* (ethno-centric, conventional, rational) and *spirit* (world-centric, post-conventional, post-rational).

[255] Ken Wilber, The Integral Vision: A Very Short Introduction to the Revolutionary Integral Approach to Life, God, the Universe, and Everything, (Boston: Shambala, 2007), http://www.mcs-international.org/downloads/085_the_integral_vision.pdf. 39.

[256] *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*, 25.

[257] *The Integral Vision: A Very Short Introduction to the Revolutionary Integral Approach to Life, God, the Universe, and Everything*. 75. Wilber refers to the unfolding stages as 'waves' to emphasise the fact that these levels are not rigidly separate and isolated, but, like the colours of a rainbow, gradually shade into each other. *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy* (Boston, Mass.: Shambala Publications, Inc., 2000), Kindle location 309 of 6605.

one's inner experience) but one must also consider the corresponding *objective* realities out in the world (what actually happens in the brain as one 'has' the experience). Likewise one needs to consider how the culture in which one lives conditions the experience and how the structures of society give or deny form to it. These perspectives may be represented diagrammatically as shown in **Figure 3.1**.

Figure 3.1: The AQAL Model

Each quadrant represents a different perspective on the world; because the model weaves together insights from so many academic disciplines of knowledge,

including the natural and social sciences as well as the arts and humanities, Wilber refers to his model as the AQAL[258] model or as Integral Theory.

His map emphasises the importance of exploring any event or experience from a variety of perspectives.[259] The same concept of stages of development therefore applies to the other quadrants as well.[260] For example, Jean Gebser,[261] who examined the *historical* development of human consciousness, mapped the unfolding structures of consciousness as moving from *archaic* to *magic* to *mythic* to *mental* to *integral* and higher, as shown in the lower left quadrant in **Figure 3.2** below. While individual researchers have focused on the stages of development along the different lines independently,[262] most noticed that development appeared to be holonic.[263]

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[258] AQAL means All quadrants, all lines implying that a comprehensive exploration of any issue requires that it be examined from the perspective of each of the quadrants and each line of development. He cautions, however, that although he regards the map as the most complete and accurate map available at this time, we must never confuse the map for the territory. See *The Integral Vision: A Very Short Introduction to the Revolutionary Integral Approach to Life, God, the Universe, and Everything*. 18.

[259] He cautions, however, that although he regards the map as the most complete and accurate map available at this time, we must never confuse the map for the territory. See ibid.

[260] Wilber notes how evolution in the quadrants correspond. He suggests, for example that "To say cognitive development evolves from formal to post-formal is to say that cultural evolution moves from modern to postmodern." See *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy*, Kindle location 3261 of 6605.

[261] Gebser's central thesis is that humankind undergoes radical shifts or mutations in consciousness. He submitted that the human mind/consciousness has seen four evolutionary surges and we are currently emerging into what he called the integral/a-perspectival consciousness. Though the development of consciousness can be attributed to every other field of study, Gebser particularly focused on culture. Gebser cautioned against using terms like *evolution*, *progression*, or *development* to describe the changes in structures of consciousness that he described, noting that, while biological evolution is an *enclosing* process which adapts a species to a limited environment, the unfolding of awareness is, by contrast, a process of *opening-up*.

[262] Some of the more important lines of development include: the cognitive line (or awareness of what is, researched by Piaget); the moral line (awareness of what should be, researched by Kohlberg and Gilligan); the emotional or affective line (the full spectrum of emotions, researched by Goleman and Gardner); the needs line (such as Maslow's needs hierarchy); the self-identity line (or "who am I?," such as Loevinger's ego development and Cook-Greuter); the values line (or what a person considers most important, a line studied by Clare Graves and made popular through Spiral Dynamics by Beck and Cowan); orders of consciousness (researched by Gebser and Kegan); the aesthetic line (or the line of self-expression, beauty, art, and felt meaning); the psychosexual line; the spiritual line (where "spirit" is viewed not just as Ground, and not just as the highest stage, but as its own line of unfolding; the interpersonal line (how I socially relate to others).

[263] A holon is a whole that is part of other wholes. Ken Wilber, *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Third Edition ed. (Boston: Shambala Publications, 2001), Kindle location 4563 of 10114.

In other words, each new stage includes and builds on the whole of the previous stage.[264]
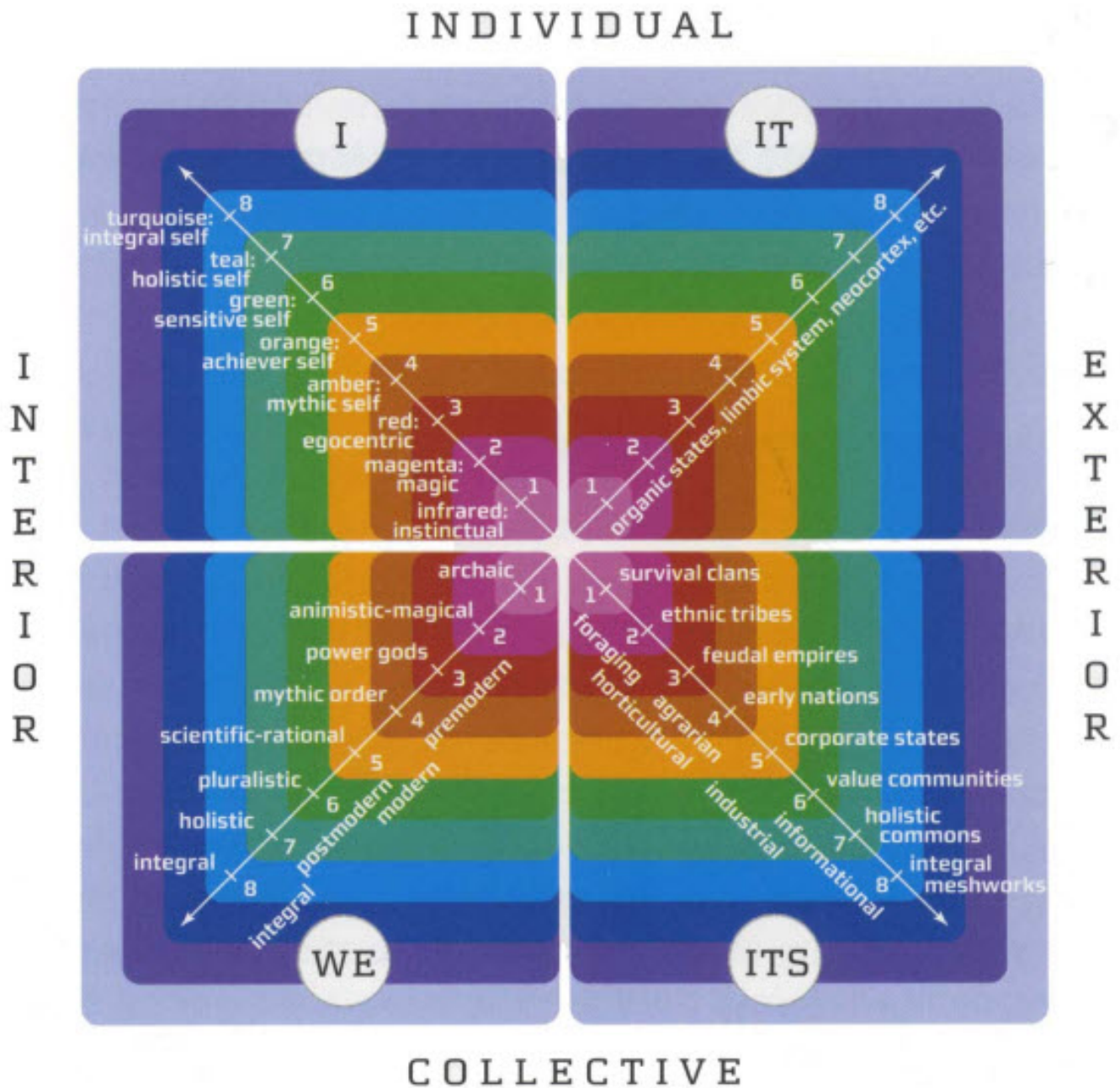
Figure 3.2: Aspects of Human Development (across the four quadrants)

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[264] For example, in the Upper Right quadrant, we know that atoms combine to become molecules which combine to become cells which combine to become organisms, but, in nature, one can't skip molecules and go directly from atoms to cells. In other words, at each point in evolution, what is the whole of one level becomes merely a part of the higher-order whole of the next level.

Robert Kegan, the development psychologist who explored the human activity of meaning-making and the relationship between the individual and society, has observed that the fundamental process of development might be described as the subject of one stage becoming the object of the next.[265] In other words, at each stage one is able to stand back and observe the previous stage with some objectivity. Those researching the different lines of development each named their stages in language appropriate to their discipline. Reviewing their research, Wilber observed that the "various codifications of the developmental levels appear to be simply different snapshots taken from various angles, using different cameras, of the great rainbow of consciousness."[266] Wilber conceived that the *overall development of human consciousness* might also be considered to develop through stages. He mapped the stages of human consciousness development relative to the stages of growth identified by other theorists from a range of disciplines, as depicted in Figure 3.3 below.[267,268] His map shows the structural stages of the development of human consciousness mapped vertically, with each stage represented by a different colour.[269]

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[265] Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). Or as Wilber phrases it: "it is not simply that the subject of one stage becomes the object of the subject of the next stage, but that the 'I' of one stage becomes the 'me' of the 'I' of the next stage." See Wilber, *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*, Kindle location 2384 of 6744.

[266] *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Kindle location 5442 of 10114.

[267] Wilber names and describes his stages of consciousness as follows: Infrared (archaic, sensorimotor); Magenta (magical-animistic); Red (egocentric, power, magic-mythic); Amber (mythic, ethnocentric, traditional); Orange (rational, world-centric, pragmatic, modern); Green (pluralistic, multicultural, postmodern); Teal (beginning integral, low vision-logic, systemic); Turquoise (global mind, high vision-logic, higher mind). Wilber sometimes suggests two further stages: Ultra-Violet and Clear Light. *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*, 251. (Figure 3.3 is taken from Chapter 2 of *Integral Spirituality,* Figure 2.4, page 69)

[268] Wilber has also reflected on the relationship between the various lines of development. He suggests that the developmental lines often stand in a relation of "necessary but not sufficient" to one another. For example, it seems that "physiological development is necessary but not sufficient for cognitive development, which is necessary but not sufficient for interpersonal (and self) development, which is necessary but not sufficient for moral development" and so on. See *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Kindle location 4706 of 10114.

[269] Wilber choose to present an overview of the stages of consciousness using the colours of the rainbow in their natural order, just as the ancient wisdom traditions did with the chakras: Red to orange to yellow to green to turquoise to blue to indigo to violet. The chakras themselves, for example, start at red, move up to yellow, then green, then blue, then purple, then clear light void. See *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*, 66.
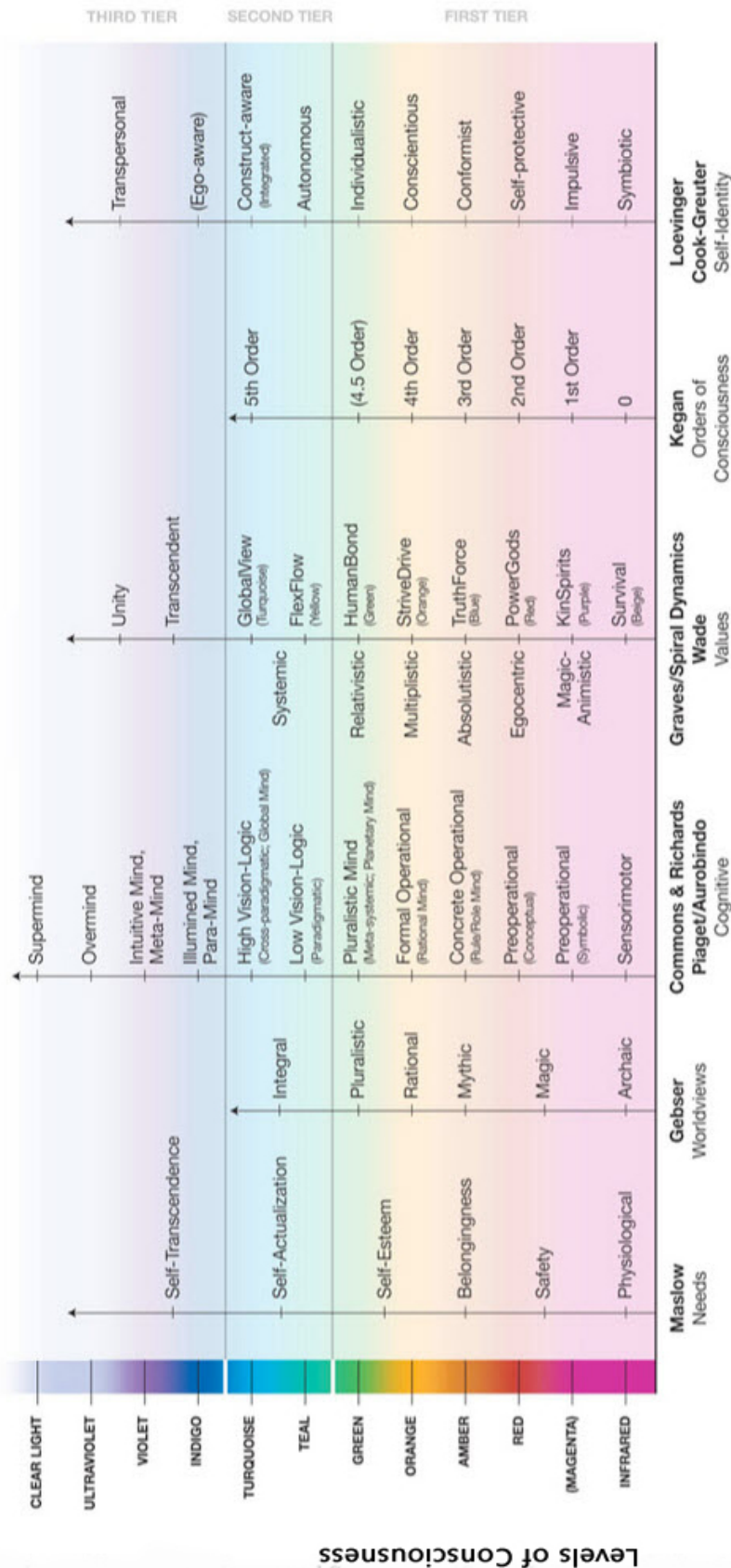
Levels and lines (or waves and streams) of some important lines of development (multiple intelligences)

Levels of Consciousness

Color	Maslow Needs	Gebser Worldviews	Commons & Richards / Piaget/Aurobindo Cognitive	Graves/Spiral Dynamics / Wade Values	Kegan Orders of Consciousness	Loevinger Cook-Greuter Self-Identity
CLEAR LIGHT			Supermind			
ULTRAVIOLET	Self-Transcendence		Overmind	Unity		Transpersonal
VIOLET			Intuitive Mind, Meta-Mind			
INDIGO			Illumined Mind, Para-Mind	Transcendent		(Ego-aware)
TURQUOISE	Self-Actualization	Integral	High Vision-Logic (Cross-paradigmatic; Global Mind)	GlobalView (Turquoise)	5th Order	Construct-aware (Integrated)
TEAL			Low Vision-Logic (Paradigmatic) — Systemic	FlexFlow (Yellow) — Systemic		Autonomous
GREEN	Self-Esteem	Pluralistic	Pluralistic Mind (Meta-systemic; Planetary Mind)	HumanBond (Green) — Relativistic	(4.5 Order)	Individualistic
ORANGE		Rational	Formal Operational (Rational Mind)	StriveDrive (Orange) — Multiplistic	4th Order	Conscientious
AMBER	Belongingness	Mythic	Concrete Operational (Rule/Role Mind)	TruthForce (Blue) — Absolutistic	3rd Order	Conformist
RED	Safety	Magic	Preoperational (Conceptual)	PowerGods (Red) — Egocentric	2nd Order	Self-protective
(MAGENTA)			Preoperational (Symbolic)	KinSpirits (Purple) — Magic-Animistic	1st Order	Impulsive
INFRARED	Physiological	Archaic	Sensorimotor	Survival (Beige)	0	Symbiotic

Figure 3.3 Stages of Consciousness mapped in relation to lines of development

Figure 3.3: Stages of Consciousness Mapped in Relation to Lines of Development

Integrating the work of de Wit and Wilber helps one to understand how meditation promotes the development of human consciousness, leading the meditator

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to realise that there is a multiplicity of nuanced perspectives, and subtle ways of seeing and interpreting any experience.[270] Meditation makes one keenly aware of one's continually changing perspective on one's internal and external landscapes. One begins to appreciate that one's perspective at any stage is characterised (and limited) by one's current stage of development, by the (limited) view available from that perspective;[271] that any stage can be viewed and described from the perspective of each preceding stage and each of those descriptions will be relative to the stage from which they are viewed and will reflect the *relative truth*, ignorance and confusion typical of each stage. Although any attempt to describe any one stage from the perspective of the preceding one is likely to lead to misunderstandings and distortions, nonetheless such descriptions can give helpful hints about a subsequent stage and can awaken *sensitivity* to a deeper perspective.[272] The practitioner begins to understand that what he or she experiences as reality, and names as reality, is, in fact, a *relative reality*; it is relative to their current *mode* of existence, to the perspective that is typical to that stage of that journey. In other words, one learns perceptually that one's sense of being is transfigured through the *experiential understanding* of *relative truths*.[273] Grasping this insight leads toward an egoless state of mind and a new way of relating to the world;[274] from that perspective, it is one's inner fundamental humaneness which inspires responsive action rather than an imposed ethics of duty.[275] This results in awakened, aware, contemplative action which is responsive, not reactive; vibrant, not half-hearted; holistic, not fragmented; and other-directed, not ego driven. Indeed, from the ego's point of view, it may be seen as ruthless because it does not pander to the ego's drive to maintain itself.[276] The

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[270] de Wit, *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 60.

[271] When we consider that any stage on the way can be described from one's own perspective as well as from the perspective of other stages, this personal relativity clarifies why it is impossible to define or describe the entire contemplative way absolutely.

[272] de Wit, *Contemplative Psychology*, 49-50.

[273] Ibid., 35.

[274] *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 173.

[275] Ibid., 268-69.

[276] From the perspective of contemplative psychology, ego is not something tangible and concrete against which one can and must fight but rather a state of mind from which one must try to awaken oneself. It is very different to the use of the term in clinical psychology where it is often understood that a person must have a strong ego in order to function in a healthy way. The contemplative traditions speak instead in terms of having confidence in the fundamental ground of our being, of our existence. In other words they speak of having confidence in our innate humaneness. Thus the meanings of the term ego in both traditions are almost diametrically opposed to each other. In contemplative psychology, the ego must be seen for what it is and transcended (or let go) because it goes against the flourishing of our fundamental humanity. Ibid., 96-98.

hallmark of contemplative action is the intelligent caring that lies in the act.[277] While such contemplative action is the fruit of inner flourishing, it also produces, so to speak, the seeds of that flourishing – in a virtuous cycle.[278]

While within any given stage "this relative reality is experienced as irrefutable, real, objective and absolute" [279] and is *lived* as real, the practitioner becomes more sensitive to the idea that, ultimately, the expectation of a fixed, absolute experience of reality must be abandoned. It is a fundamental aspect of the contemplative traditions that this personal, fundamental and gradual awareness of the relativity of one's reality opens up the possibility of growth.[280] Awakening to this perspective exposes previous understandings as illusion and leads to clarity of seeing.[281] While one can look back on one stage from a later one and observe without discomfort, even delight, the relative truth of one's former stage, it is, on the other hand, difficult and challenging, even threatening, to experience the relativity of one's *present* stage because this is the basis on which one lives life. To do so requires a willingness to be open to existential doubt and to question, and ultimately relinquish, some of one's most fundamental and cherished beliefs about who one is and what is ultimately real. Openness to doubt leads to insight which enables the possibility of movement 'in a direction where the basic ground reality is seen as it is.'[282] Meditators come to realise, perceptually if not conceptually, that it is the transformative power of an insight that indicates its value, not necessarily its consistency with any previous learning.[283] This wisdom lies at the heart of the meditative traditions.

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[277] It is not the ethical quality of an act that marks it as a contemplative act, not one's preoccupation with being right or wrong, or with 'responsibility' and 'duty' but the degree to which the person making it can apply discriminating awareness.

[278] de Wit, *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 242-43.

[279] *Contemplative Psychology*, 52.

[280] Ibid., 52-53.

[281] De Wit posits that, in a typical contemplative twist, the moment when we no longer see our relative reality as absolute, but recognise it for what it is, that very moment is an experience of absolute reality. See *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 71.

[282] *Contemplative Psychology*, 59-60.

[283] Ibid., 118-20.

3.2.4 Meditation and the States of Human Consciousness

The ancient, pre-modern wisdom traditions understood human development in terms of body, mind and spirit. This understanding, which is sometimes referred to as *the perennial philosophy*,[284] considers that reality is composed of various levels of existence - levels of being and of knowing - ranging from matter to *body* to *mind* to *soul* to *spirit*.[285] The traditions suggest that as people grow and develop, their consciousness of who they really are evolves and they often come to perceive an intimate relationship between their deepest, spiritual self and that which transcends human life, the Divine Source.[286] Along that journey, people become aware of ever more subtle *states* of consciousness.[287] All human beings experience three ordinary, basic states of consciousness: waking, dreaming and deep sleep.[288] Many people also have *peak experiences* – temporary states - of one kind or another, triggered perhaps by overwhelming moments such as the birth of a baby, or watching a beautiful sunset in silence. In addition there are *meditative states* which can be induced (for example by meditation) which may lead to *mystical states*, such as those described by mystics

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[284] In the 20th century it was popularized in the English-speaking world by Aldous Huxley in his book *The Perennial Philosophy*. Culliford summarises 'the four fundamental doctrinal principles' of the Perennial Philosophy as follows: 1. The world of matter and of individualized consciousness is the manifestation of a Divine Ground within which all partial realities have their being, and apart from which they would be non-existent; 2. Human beings are capable not only of knowing about the Divine Ground by inference; they can also realize its existence by a direct intuition, superior to discursive reasoning. This immediate knowledge unites the knower with the known; 3. Man possesses a double nature, a phenomenal ego and an eternal Self, which is the inner man, the Spirit, the spark of divinity within the soul. It is possible for a man, if he so desires, to identify himself with the spirit and therefore with the Divine Ground, which is of the same or like nature with the spirit; 4. Man's life on earth has only one end and purpose: to identify himself with the eternal Self and so to come to intuitive knowledge of the Divine Ground. Huxley suggests that this Perennial Philosophy is consistent with great truths espoused by the world's major religions, and describes the Bhagavad-Gita as one of the most systematic scriptural statements of that philosophy. Culliford, *The Psychology of Spirituality: An Introduction*, Kindle location 874 of 3149.
[285] Wilber, *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy*, Kindle location 270 of 6605. Sometimes the five-stage model – beginning with matter, and including soul, is used.
[286] *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Kindle location 1043 of 10,114.
[287] 'A *state* might be described as a form of consciousness supported by the body.' Dr. Jack Finegan at a private talk (AISGA) in October 2014 at the Milltown Institute, Dublin.
[288] The wisdom traditions also refer to a further (higher) state (or states) of consciousness, which are often described as non-dual, because in them the subject-object dualism is seen as illusory. The non-dual state is not in itself an experience but is regarded as the space in which all experience arises. For example, Vedanta, the ancient religious philosophy based on the Vedas, the sacred scriptures of India, adds a further two ordinary natural states of consciousness, in addition to waking, dreaming and deep sleep. These are *turiya* (a state of witnessing consciousness) and *turiyatita* (a state of non-dual consciousness). See Wilber, *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Kindle Location 1178 of 10114.

from many religious traditions.[289] Human beings can also experience a range of *altered states of consciousness* (for example induced by alcohol or drugs, or hypnosis).

Each state is experienced differently. The waking state, for example, is generally seen as the home of one's everyday ego.[290] Some wisdom traditions and religions of the world suggest that the dream state, because it is a world created entirely by the psyche, gives one a form of access to realm of the soul;[291] likewise, they consider that the deep-sleep state, because it is a realm of pure formlessness, can give one access to causal Spirit.[292] The traditions also speak of a further state (or states), which I represent for the purposes of this study as a single non-dual unitive state. Wilber draws parallels between growth of the body, mind and spirit as follows:

> Just as the human body everywhere develops with 206 bones, two kidneys and one heart, and the human mind everywhere grows the capacities for images, symbols, and concepts, likewise, it seems, the human spirit everywhere grows intuitions of the Divine, and these, too, show many similarities in deep, not surface, features.[293]

The ancient wisdom traditions speak of different forms of energy associated with each state.[294] They refer to a basic or *gross* energy (experienced through the body), a *subtle* or refined energy (experienced through the mind), and very subtle or *causal* energy (experienced through the spirit).[295] When one dreams one doesn't experience the body as matter, one experiences a more fluid, subtle energy with flowing images and fleeting emotions; this subtle energy feels light and airy. As one passes from the dream state into the deep-sleep or formless state, even thoughts and images drop away, and there is only a vast emptiness, a formless expanse beyond any

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[289] Bernadette Flanagan notes that "The witness of history is that this type of experience can be highly idiosyncratic in its imagery and form." Bernadette Flanagan, "Christian Spirituality and Religious Mysticism: Adjunct, Parallel or Embedded Concepts?," in *Spirituality across Disciplines: Research and Practice*, ed. Marian de Souza, Jane Bone, and Jacqueline Watson, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 13.

[290] Note that the ego is a structure of the mind, not an object in itself.

[291] For example, Christian Mysticism, Vedanta Hinduism, Vajrayana Buddhism, and Jewish Kabbalah

[292] Dr. Jack Finegan at a private talk (AISGA) in October 2014 at the Milltown Institute, Dublin.

[293] Wilber, *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy*, Kindle location 499 of 6605.

[294] For example, the Vedanta tradition in Hinduism and the Vajrayana tradition in Buddhism. See *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Kindle location 5496 of 10114. Just as the waking experience is felt through our bodies, the language of the wisdom traditions speak of three 'bodies,' which are often called the *gross* (physical) *body*, the *subtle body*, and the *causal body*. It is important to acknowledge that in these traditions this use of the word 'body' is different to our normal understanding; what is meant is more a *mode* of experience (or energetic feeling).

[295] The causal body is so called because it is understood in many wisdom traditions to be the originating source of each individual, to be at the heart of what causes us to be.

individual "I" or ego or self, an expanse of consciousness that seems almost infinite. Because this is beyond the realm of concepts, it cannot be described, but the wisdom traditions attest that it is possible for human beings to enter into this formless state and its causal energy in full awareness and to experience such states of consciousness.[296]

Gerald May writes about states of consciousness from a Christian perspective. He describes human consciousness as "the capacity to perceive and appreciate not only various stimuli, but the ongoing process of being, and the mystery of that process."[297] He notes that

> anyone well experienced in the practice of [meditation] knows that there are moments in which the obvious functions of mind seem to cease altogether … when no thoughts are generated, when there is no noticeable reaction to or even registering of any internal or external stimuli …[298]

May describes this as "consciousness without content. … as if one moves directly into the immediate world just-as-it-is."[299] He cautions, however, that

> there is no way of comprehending or understanding the experience itself. Any attempt to understand must be predicated upon the idea that there is a definable self that can have such an experience, and subsequently make sense of it. The fact of the matter is that an individual, perceiving, experiencing, understanding sense of self *is simply not there* at the time.[300]

In other words, May asserts that the important thing to recognise, even if it cannot be fully understood or described, is "the human capacity to sense consciousness even in the absence of apparent mental activity."[301] May observes also that it seems that "consciousness goes far beyond the individual person, as if it were a vast ocean upon which each person is a wave."[302,303]

Like Wilber, Allan Combs has also investigated the contours of human

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[296] Wilber, *The Integral Vision: A Very Short Introduction to the Revolutionary Integral Approach to Life, God, the Universe, and Everything*. 56.

[297] May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*, 42.

[298] Ibid., 43-44.

[299] Ibid., 44.

[300] Ibid.

[301] Ibid., 45. May notes that "perception occurs, but without anything being perceived, and without anyone perceiving." Ibid., 44.

[302] Ibid., 45. He adds that "rather than saying that 'I have consciousness' it may be far more accurate to say 'Consciousness has me.'"

[303] The philosopher Alan Watts has written that "We do not 'come into' this world; we come out of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean 'waves,' the universe 'peoples.' Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe. This fact is rarely, if ever, experienced by most individuals." See Alan Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo against Knowing Who You Are* (New York: Random House, 1966), 9.

consciousness; he was interested in how human beings struggle, as they grow from childhood to adulthood, to make sense of their lives.[304] Through their independent studies, Wilber and Combs came simultaneously to understand the significance of distinguishing between *states* of consciousness and the *stages* of consciousness and they jointly developed the Wilber-Combs Lattice to reflect their insight. Both Wilber and Combs had struggled to understand if human beings create these states of consciousness, through their own modes of thinking, that is through their cognitive structures, or do they somehow enter pre-existing states of consciousness, states of being inaccessible to the ordinary mind?[305] Their lattice, **Figure 3.4**, depicts how they resolved the question by distinguishing very clearly between states and stages of consciousness. They placed the *structure-stages* of developmental psychology along the y-axis in relation to the four recognised states of consciousness (gross, subtle, causal and non-dual) as *state-stages* of the meditative traditions along the x-axis. The diagram captures and illustrates the richness and range of experiential possibilities in terms of the ways that peak experiences and meditative states might be experienced and interpreted.[306] It indicates how a person at any *stage* of consciousness can have a peak experience of any *state* of consciousness; however, a person will always interpret that state according to the *stage* they are at.[307] The lattice helps to explain how it is that children can access very deep states of consciousness even with limited cognitive development. However, their capacity to give expression to that experience may be limited and will depend on their age and their stage of cognitive and language development as children (along the y-axis). Their verbal expression may

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[304] See Allan Combs, *Consciousness Explained Better: Towards an Integral Understanding of the Multifaceted Nature of Consciousness* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2009), Kindle location 48 of 3283.

[305] Ibid., Kindle location 1615 of 3283.

[306] Ibid., Kindle location 1747 of 3283. Dr Jack Finegan notes that *state-stages* (stages of access to spiritual experience) represent permanent access to states but the states themselves are temporary. State-stages are fluid and open and can occur at any structure-stage of development. They are therefore placed on the horizontal axis of the lattice indicating that they are available at every stage. *Structure-stages* represent the new lens through which the individual views the world; they represent a permanent transformation in consciousness (except in rare cases of serious mental distress leading to regression). Dr Jack Finegan at a private talk (AISGA) in October 2014 at the Milltown Institute, Dublin.

[307] In other words they use the only tools available to the, those of the stage of development they are at. A person at the magic stage will interpret them magically, a person at the mythic stage will interpret them mythically, a person at pluralistic stage will interpret them pluralistically, and so on. See Wilber, *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*, Kindle location 1650 of 6744.

therefore present as irrational but may in fact be trans-rational.[308]   So the same experience may be interpreted very differently by any two people.[309]
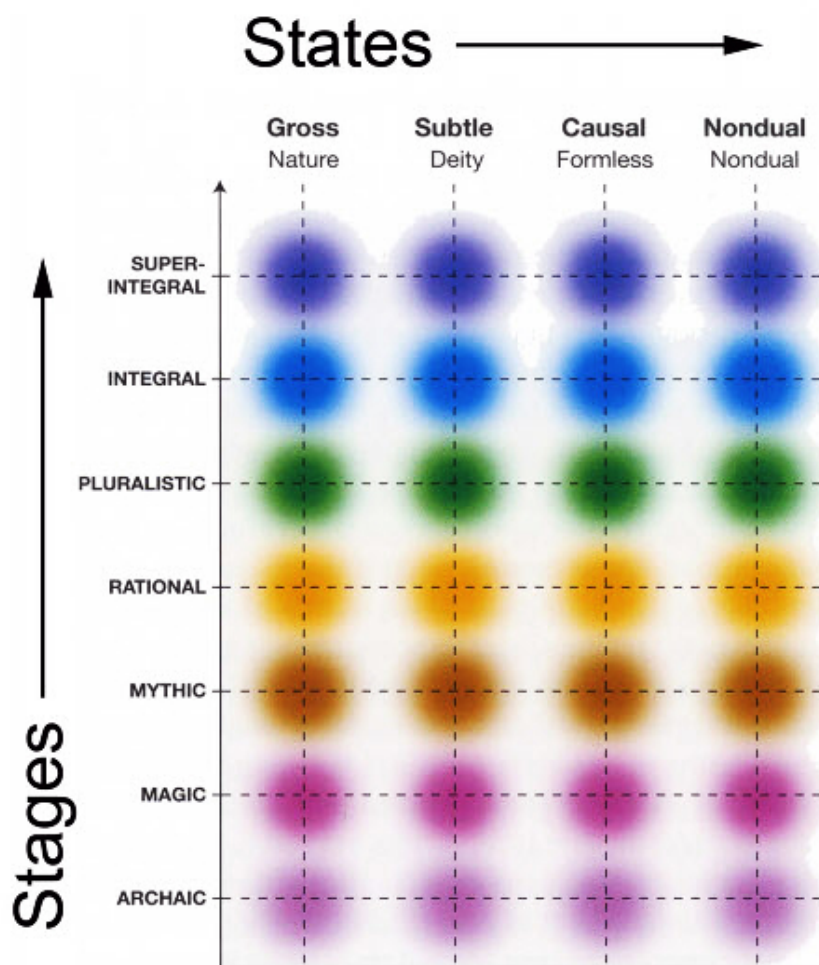
Figure 3.4: Wilber-Combs Lattice

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[308] Wilber describes this as the pre/trans fallacy. Because both states are non-rational, post-rational states (spiritual states) may be misidentified as pre-rational (infantile). See ibid., 51. See also Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*, 34.

[309] Wilber notes, for example, that at the *magic* stage (pre-conventional, ego-centric) Jesus may be experienced as a personal saviour who can intervene miraculously in the world to assist someone. At the next stage, the *mythic* (ethnocentric), the same subtle-state experience might be interpreted as communion with Jesus the Eternal Truth bringer. This stage is fundamental in its beliefs and 'interprets' the Word exactly as written. Because this stage is ethnocentric, it is believed that only those who profess Jesus Christ as their personal saviour can be saved. At the next stage, the *rational* (post-conventional) Jesus Christ becomes a more humanised figure, as a teacher of the universal love of God. This is also the first of the stages that accepts (for many, post Vatican II) that others may find equal salvation through a different path. The pluralistic stage interprets Jesus Christ through the lens of the green stage of development. The integral stage will integrate its experience of Christ-consciousness with other expressions of the Holy Spirit around the world. See Wilber, *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*, Kindle location 1657 of 6744.

The Wilber-Combs Lattice is a useful way of relating the structure-stages of developmental psychology with the state-stages of the spiritual/meditative traditions, relating stages of growth in human consciousness with states of consciousness. It indicates how, throughout their life, human beings move vertically and horizontally and how their self-identity, their temporary stationing of awareness, may be located at different phases of their life journey.[310] Regarding the state of non-dual consciousness, Bourgeault notes that both Eastern and Christian traditions "hint at a permanent, irreversible shift in the seat of selfhood and in the perceptual field that flows out from this new identity."[311]

Life-experience, education, and learning move people vertically through the stages of consciousness until an individual chooses, consciously or unconsciously, to halt at a particular stage of development or their life-circumstances determine that they do so. The contemplative traditions assert that certain spiritual practices, such as meditation, enable people to move horizontally into ever deeper or broader states of consciousness where one's sense of self alters.[312] The work the theologian James Fowler on the stages of faith development and Evelyn Underhill on mysticism and states of consciousness, can also be reflected in the Wilber-Combs lattice and this is explored later in this chapter.

Like the weather, states are temporary; no matter how deeply one experiences any given state, it will pass. Stages of consciousness, on the other hand, are permanent as the structures that characterise each stage emerge through intentional

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[310] The contemplative traditions assert that meditation can move people into ever deeper states of consciousness within which one's sense of self alters.

[311] Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice*, KIndle Location 788 of 4494.

[312] For example, if we have a peak-experience while in the waking (gross) state, our sense of self may broaden to encompass a sense of oneness with everything that arises in that state; the religious traditions would describe this as a form of *nature-mysticism*. As one moves into a state of subtle consciousness and develops a capacity to sustain that state of consciousness, our sense of self shifts again. Instead of being material-oriented, we sense that we inhabit a more a subtle dimension of being, a luminosity where we encounter no material objects but instead images, feelings, emotions, interior archetypes and interior vision. This state, where one identifies with the luminous, is often referred to as *deity mysticism*. If the practice of meditation is continued, one's sense of self can move (horizontally) into the causal un-manifest, where one identifies with the emptiness within which everything arises; Wilber names this *formless mysticism*. From there, with continued practice, one may move into an awakening to the non-dual ever-present Witness, to a realisation of non-dual Suchness, a *formless* sense of 'being at one with everything that arises.' See *States and Stages of Consciousness – Ken Wilber,* accessed online on 22 August 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXyiDI6e26o See also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OrTX1wZ2nw.

practice. They differ also in that states of consciousness are a subjective *first-person* experience while stages are not experienced directly. Stages have an objective third-person character and cannot be discerned through introspection, although progress may be observed retrospectively. Stages represent the actual *milestones of growth along the path of consciousness* (its developmental line, as it were) and can only be discovered by an objective, third-person methodology. Once an individual has acquired a stage, it normally remains an enduring acquisition, enhancing one's capacity to appreciate and enjoy the qualities of that stage.[313] Another significant difference is that, unlike stages, all of the major states of consciousness are *ever-present possibilities*. This means that any individual at virtually any stage of development can have a peak experience[314] of any state of consciousness.[315] States and stages are very different in that respect: while stages cannot be skipped, states can be experienced or tasted without having mastered earlier states. This has implications for our understanding of how children can come to have deep spiritual experiences without having achieved higher stages along the cognitive and other lines of development. However, it is important to note that *one's experience of any state will be interpreted according to the stage of consciousness development one is at*. In other words, although one can, as it were, 'get a taste' of any state at any time, even if it becomes permanently accessible, it will be described differently by different people. Wilbur suggests, however, that one cannot experience the fullness and all the qualities of a state without actual growth along the structural stages of consciousness.[316]

While peak-experiences give a glimpse of one of the transpersonal realms, the experience quickly becomes diluted in the subjective and intersubjective structures of the individual's stage of consciousness. However, the wisdom traditions suggest that as deeper states of consciousness are accessed repeatedly through the

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[313] For example, once a child acquires the capacity for language, it remains a permanent acquisition unless some life-changing event disrupts it.

[314] As Wilber says "peak-experiences are initially 'peek'- experienced. Wilber, *The Integral Vision: A Very Short Introduction to the Revolutionary Integral Approach to Life, God, the Universe, and Everything*. 44.

[315] *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Kindle location 4330 of 10114. For example, in the gross state one can have a peak experience that arises as a sense of 'oneness' with all of nature. Ibid.

[316] Development of consciousness in the transcendent stream "runs through the same general waves as any other skill acquisition, if it is to be a stable adaptation and not merely a peak experience or a temporary state." Ibid., Kindle location 4343 of 10114.

practice of meditation, the various states can become a consciously *accessible* realisation on a permanent basis.[317] In other words, practitioners may achieve state-stages, where each state-stage represents a permanent capacity to *consciously access* that state-stage. Accordingly, every individual at least *has the potential* for subtle, causal, and nondual states to *become enduring structures* in their own makeup, yielding ongoing access to higher levels of consciousness. What was previously available to consciousness only as temporary peak-experiences have become permanently *accessible*; they have become enduring contours of a more enlightened being.[318] As this occurs, one's sense of identity, one's self-aware system, is eventually experienced as encompassing body, mind and spirit.[319] The 'self,' this temporary 'stationing of awareness,'[320] is the balancing act of the psyche.[321] It has to navigate (and juggle) whatever basic levels of consciousness are present, and whatever developmental lines are present, and all the various states of consciousness, competences, and talents.[322] For Wilbur, "this is the pure Self (or consciousness as such) identified with a particular and limited level of its own manifestation."[323] He describes this evolution of self-awareness as "self-realisation through self-transcendence."[324]

Wilber and Combs' model would seem to be consistent with the central dynamic proposed by Alexander *et al.* regarding development through the stages of growth of consciousness is "the identifying of the unbounded Self with a particular level of consciousness (which generates a "bounded self"), followed by the subsequent dis-identifying with that level (and identifying with the next higher

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[317] As distinct from the natural states (which access psychic, subtle, and causal states in the *natural sleep cycle*, but rarely while awake or fully conscious) and unlike spontaneous peak experiences (which are fleeting). *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy*, Kindle location 477 of 6605.

[318] Ibid., Kindle location 3955 of 6605.

[319] From the perspective of a child, the *body* is, during the earlier stages of growth, the whole of the self-sense. As the mind emerges and develops, however, the sense of identity shifts to the mind, and the body becomes merely one aspect, one part, of the total self. Similarly, as the subtle level emerges, the mind and body, which up to that point had together constituted the whole of the self-aware-system, become merely aspects or parts of the new and more encompassing self, which now embodies spirit also. *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Kindle location 4563 of 10114.

[320] It was Charles Alexander who used the expression 'stationing of awareness' to describe this 'bounded' self. See ibid., Kindle Location 4504 of 10114.

[321] Ibid., Kindle location 4377 of 10114.

[322] Ibid., Kindle location 4386 of 10114.

[323] Ibid., Kindle location 4508 of 10114.

[324] Ibid., Kindle location 4580 of 10114.

level), until the pure Self reawakens as Itself."[325] In other words, as the self develops along the line of self-development, it *identifies* with each basic level or wave of consciousness and becomes so thoroughly embedded in those structures that the structures cannot be seen by the self; they cannot be experienced as an object.[326] Robert Kegan concurs, expressing it as follows:

> What we take as subject and object are not necessarily fixed for us. They are not permanent. They can change. In fact, transforming our epistemologies, making what was subject into object so that we can 'have it' rather than 'be had' by it—this is the most powerful way I know to conceptualize the growth of the mind.[327]

Wilber asserts that meditation has the capacity to awaken the self to its embeddedness, so that the structures become visible, enabling the self to move on to the next stage of consciousness and to consciously access deeper states of consciousness. When one's temporary stationing of awareness shifts from the stage and/or state where it was temporarily embedded,[328] it becomes capable of integrating the structures and processes of the prior level.[329] Meditation is effective in transformation, in moving one vertically through the stages, because every time one experiences a non-ordinary state of consciousness that one cannot interpret within one's present structure, however briefly, one is momentarily *awakened* to a sense of something that transcends both one's present everyday stage of consciousness and one's habitual state of consciousness. The experience acts as a micro-dis-identification,[330] where the subject of one state-stage becomes the object of the subject of the next state-stage, and one realises a changed perspective, a different way of seeing, although one may struggle to give expression to it. Nonetheless, as this happens *repeatedly*, because of regular meditation practice, one is slowly but surely dislodged from being embedded in one's current stationing of awareness and

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[325] See ibid., Kindle location 4523 of 10114. Wilber quotes from a paper by Alexander *et al.* : C.N. Alexander et al., "Growth of Higher Stages of Consciousness: Maharishi's Vedic Psychology of Human Development)," in *Higher Stages of Human Development: Perspectives on Adult Growth*, ed. C.N. Alexander and E.J. Langer, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[326] Wilber, *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Kindle location 4595 of 10114.

[327] Robert Kegan, *In over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 34.

[328] While the embedded stage depends on one's level or stage of consciousness along the vertical axis of consciousness development, one's state tends to be typically embedded in the gross-waking state.

[329] Wilber, *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Kindle location 4644 of 10114.

[330] *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*, 140.

one is awakened to new possibilities, to greater perspectives. Assagioli and Goleman make similar claims. Assagioli observes that as people approach an awareness of who their highest self is, they find increasing freedom to be themselves, to make choices that can transform their lives. His theory of psycho-synthesis addresses both the process of personal growth and transpersonal development and emphasises the importance of dis-identification.[331] In Assagioli's view, the 'I' can learn to differentiate itself from thoughts, feelings and obsessions. As the 'I' dis-identifies from all that bound it and gains its freedom, energies from the higher-self are enabled to flow into it and into the ordinary, everyday field of consciousness, giving rise to spiritual awakening, greater authenticity and a sense of wholeness. A key goal in psycho-synthesis is for the 'I' to become a master of the personality, and a servant of the self, echoing Gerald May's emphasis on willingness as opposed to wilfulness. Daniel Goleman indicates how meditation can assist such a process: "the diffusion of the effects of meditation into the meditator's waking, dreaming and sleep states" results in an alchemy of the self, which, over time, makes it easier for the meditator "to maintain prolonged meditative awareness" in the midst of his or her everyday activities.[332] The result is an insight into the fact one has become identified with, confined by the perspective of the temporary stationing of awareness one currently inhabits. One realises that life can be lived more fully from an awakened disposition, an integral orientation. One becomes awakened to the fact that what seemed fixed is no more than a temporary stationing of awareness. This gives rise to the realisation of the discriminating awareness or witness who noticed this. The traditions suggest that, ultimately, this discriminating awareness, this state of awakening, can become constant and unbroken through the waking, dreaming, and deep-sleep state, leading to what Kegan described as 'cosmic consciousness'[333] and Wilber called 'the permanent realisation of the Self as Witness.'[334]

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[331] Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques* 38-40.

[332] Daniel Goleman, *The Meditative Mind: The Varieties of Meditative Experience*, Digital ed. (Florence, Ma.: More Than Sound, 2012), Kindle location 1530 of 2776.

[333] Wilber calls its 'Kosmic consciousness,' with a capital K.

[334] Wilber, *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Kindle location 4656 of 10114. According to Wilber, some of the wisdom traditions assert that states-training, such as meditation, can accelerate the horizontal progress across the states; initially one experiences a dis-identification with the body-ego orientation and identification with the subtle dimension, developing an inner orientation. As one dis-identifies from that state one is drawn to a causal, un-manifest orientation and from there to an awakening of the true-self as ever-present witness and eventually to a realisation of non-dual suchness.

3.2.5 Summary

Section 3.2 has identified the nature of the meditation practice in this study as focused-attention meditation, where the practitioner achieves silence and stillness by focusing on a sacred word and indicated that children can meditate for one minute per year of age. It reviewed literature from the field of contemplative psychology which, unlike conventional psychology, takes a sacred rather than a profane view of the world and human experience. Those two ways of seeing the world lead to two distinct ways of knowing, conceptual and perceptual. Conceptual knowledge is a third-person form of knowledge about something while perceptual knowledge is a form of first-person knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, a relational knowing of reality. Contemplative psychology teaches that the truth of perceptual knowledge depends on the quality of one's awareness in one's perceptual activity. As that awareness increases through the practice of meditation one comes to realise that one's experience of reality is actually 'conceptualised experience;' it is reality as one thinks it to be, dressed up with the concepts one has unconsciously applied to it.

This section also explored the stages of growth of human consciousness as developed by Ken Wilber and showed how the practice of meditation promotes progress through the stages. Meditation alerts the practitioner to their embeddedness in their temporary stationing of awareness and such knowledge frees the person from being bound by it. One comes to realise that what one regards as reality is, in fact, relative to one's current perspective. Each time such micro-dis-identification occurs one is awakened, however briefly, to a sense that there are stages of consciousness beyond one's habitual, everyday experience and one's perspective on the world broadens. One's sense of being is transfigured and one begins to appreciate the possibility of an egoless state of mind and a new way of relating to the world. This realisation occurs perceptually rather than conceptually. One becomes increasingly aware of the reality of the witnessing self, the unbounded self, the true-self. This in turn leads to insight about the human condition, to greater clarity of perception and to a deep nurturing of one's innate humaneness, to a deepening perception of the sacredness of life. This section also distinguished between stages and states of human consciousness and, through the Wilber-Combs lattice, demonstrated that a person at any stage of consciousness development can temporarily experience any state of consciousness. Children therefore can experience very deep spiritual states even though they will describe their experience in language appropriate to their stage of

development. While such accounts may present as irrational, they may well be trans-rational and adults working with children need to be alert to this. The Wilber-Combs lattice can also be related to the two ways of knowing discussed above. The vertical axis relates to conceptual knowledge while the horizontal axis relates to perceptual knowledge, ultimately realised as 'full-access knowing.'[335]

3.3   Meditation in the Christian Tradition

While the aim of the study was broadened to include a multi-denominational school which had practiced a form of guided meditation for many years, this study was initially conceived as an investigation into the impact, if any, of Christian meditation on the spirituality of children. It is necessary, therefore, to give a brief account of the Christian tradition. The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes that "Christian Tradition has retained three major expressions of prayer: vocal, meditative and contemplative."[336] In the Christian tradition the word meditation has generally been used, as it is in the Catechism, to denote discursive reflection on a text and the word contemplation to refer to non-discursive, silent prayer – what the Catechism calls "a gaze of faith" and "silent love."[337] However, when John Main recovered and re-imagined the practice of contemplation, he named it Christian Meditation. So the practice of Christian meditation in the John Main tradition is actually the practice of contemplation, a non-discursive, inactive yet dynamic, silent form of being-as-prayer. The Catechism defines prayer as "the raising of one's mind and heart to God"[338] and for very many lay people, this has meant primarily listening to and reflecting on the word of God in Scripture and the activity of 'saying' one's prayers – all of which is very much a mental activity. While within the Christian tradition such discursive and imaginative forms of prayer are regarded as essential, they came to be seen by many as the *only* way of prayer. By contrast, Christian meditation is a wordless, imageless form of prayer which calls for stillness of body and mind. Prayer

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[335] Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*, 34. Rohr notes that such knowing is not irrational, rather it is pre-rational, rational and trans-rational all at once.
[336] Libreria Eitrice Vaticano, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Burns and Oates, 1994), CCC2699. Also available online at
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p4s1c1a1.htm, accessed 23 January 2013
[337] Ibid., CCC2715 and CCC17.
[338] Ibid., 2590.

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without words is not a recent phenomenon and is firmly rooted in the traditions of the early Church. The two approaches to Christian prayer are generally referred to as the *kataphatic* tradition (prayer through words and images) and the *apophatic* tradition (prayer without images or words). The *apophatic* tradition honours the validity of perceptual knowledge; indeed, it recognises that some forms of truth are accessible and expressible only through silence and symbols. This tradition recognises that, as St. John of the Cross expressed it, "Silence is God's first language" and it finds a balance between conceptual and perceptual knowing. It is comfortable with the understanding that not all knowledge can be given full expression in words. In other words, it understands that remaining humbly open to mystery is vital for the integration of the mind and the heart

St. Teresa of Avila considered that one begins awakening to Spirit through kataphatic forms of prayer, including reflection on scripture, and that, over time, a quality of inner stillness begins to take root in the heart, and one experiences a movement towards wordless and imageless prayer, simply being in God's presence – in which one does nothing but receive.[339] The Benedictine tradition of "*Lectio Divina*" follows a similar movement, in four parts, the final stage of which (*contemplatio*) is described as resting in God; in this state, the faculties are overwhelmed and rendered into stillness.[340] The practice of Christian Meditation, following the John Main approach, shortens the *Lectio* journey, bringing people directly to the final phase of *contemplatio*.[341] And, as noted above, although the practice referred to in this study is widely known as Christian *meditation*, it is in essence *contemplation*.

Christian meditation is often referred to as the prayer of the heart, because it places the focus on opening the heart to the Spirit. Just as the physical heart is the life-blood of the body, the metaphorical heart is seen as the vital centre of our

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[339] Julienne McLean, "St. Teresa of Avila," in *Journey to the Heart: Christian Contemplation through the Centuries - an Illustrated Guide*, ed. Kim Nataraja, (London: Canterbury Press, 2011), 284. See also Gerry Pierse, *The Prayer That Jesus Taught* (Miami: Convivium Press, 2013), 26. Also available online at http://www.wccm.org/content/podcasts-and-audio-files Accessed 9 Feb 2013.

[340] Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, 67.

[341] In the Western tradition, the state of repeating a simple aspiration over and over again is sometimes referred to as 'acquired contemplation' which transitions to 'infused contemplation' as one finds oneself simply sitting in Silence in the Divine Presence. See W. Johnston, *The Still Point: Reflections on Zen and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1970), 29.

spiritual lives[342] – the heart referred to in St. Augustine's well known phrase "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."[343] Flanagan notes that up until the seventeenth century "logos and mythos, mind and heart, were seen - not as conflicting - but rather as complementary ways of making meaning of the world."[344] This understanding had declined with the ascendancy of rationalism in the centuries that followed the Enlightenment but is being recovered slowly in the modern world.

Christian meditation has firm foundations in the teaching of Jesus and has a rich tradition in the Church, East and West.[345] In his teaching Jesus was concerned to help people become aware of the Presence of God at the centre of their lives and he promoted the practice of silent, interior prayer. One finds the essence of contemplative prayer in Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, where he emphasised the turn inwards, the turn from the head to the heart:

> And when you pray, go into your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you. In your prayers do not babble like the gentiles do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard.[346]

In the Christian tradition, prayer is not about oneself, not about winning the public approval of others, but about opening one's heart to the Spirit within and allowing oneself to be nourished by Love, allowing Love to gaze at one as one sits in silence. Jesus also taught by direct example – the Gospels recount many occasions when He "withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed."[347] While it is clear that Jesus placed prayer at the centre of his life, one cannot be certain *how* he

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[342] The Hebrew words for heart, *léb* and *lébáb*, occur about 850 times in the Old Testament, very often referring to the heart as the seat of a person's inner being. The Greek word kardia occurs around 160 times in the New Testament as a true dynamic equivalent. See Stephen D. Renn, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words: Word Studies for Key English Bible Words Based on the Hebrew and Greek Texts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 476-78.

[343] "For thou has (sic) created us for thyself, and our heart knows no rest, until it may repose in Thee." St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (London: Fontana, 1996), 1.

[344] Flanagan, "Christian Spirituality and Religious Mysticism: Adjunct, Parallel or Embedded Concepts?," 21.

[345] "It is older than Christianity itself and was a rich part of the Christian tradition up to medieval times. It is only in our own lifetime that we have woken up to the fact that here in the West for 600 or so years the treasure of pure, silent prayer has been almost completely forgotten and abandoned, even in religious communities." Benignus O'Rourke, *Finding Your Hidden Treasure: The Way of Silent Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), 17.

[346] Matthew 6:5-8.

[347] Luke 5:16.

prayed.[348] But, from his practice of solitude and sayings such as "I and the Father are One," one has a reasonable basis for considering that his personal prayer was more a prayer of silent communion than of words. The core elements of Jesus' teaching on prayer – interiority, silence, calmness, mindfulness and being in the present moment are also the core elements of the practice of Christian meditation.[349] In the fourth century, many Christians moved into the Egyptian Desert with the aim of leading a truly authentic and devotional Christian life.[350] McGinn argues that while there were mystical elements present in the Christian tradition from its origins, the tradition of mysticism was birthed when Origin's writings on mysticism "found embodiment in the new phenomenon of monasticism in the fourth century."[351] Contemplative practice flowered in this period. Evagrius, one of the Desert Fathers, wrote a comprehensive account of their teaching.[352] John Cassian, a disciple of Evagrius, wrote a wide-ranging account of their way of life and prayer. At the heart of this practice was the intention to be always attentive to God, to engage in a process of continual prayer.[353] Realising how difficult it is to remain attentive, because the human mind is so easily distracted, Cassian observed how the repetition of such a prayer helped to draw the mind back to God every time one became aware it had wandered.[354]

In Christian meditation one intends to simply be in the presence of the Divine within;[355] this presence is named as the Holy Spirit, which is conceived as the relationship of Love that flows between the Father and the Son.[356] Meditation then is

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[348] See for example Luke 4:42, Luke 6:12, Mark 1:35, Mark 6:45, Mark 14:33, John.11:41-42, Matt 15:36 and Matt 14:23

[349] Laurence Freeman, "Jesus," in *Journey to the Heart: Christian Contemplation through the Centuries - an Illustrated Guide*, ed. Kim Nataraja, (London: Canterbury Press, 2011), 20.

[350] Kim Nataraja, "The Desert Tradition," ibid., (Canterbury press), 92.

[351] Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xvi.

[352] Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos*, trans. J.E. Bamberger (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1970).

[353] As Simone Weil observed, absolutely unmixed attention is prayer. Simone Weil, "Attention and Will," in *Gravity and Grace*, (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 117.

[354] Andrew Louth, "The Jesus Prayer," in *Journey to the Heart: Christian Contemplation through the Centuries - an Illustrated Guide*, ed. Kim Nataraja, (London: Canterbury Pess, 2011), 337. "Every monk who longs for the continual awareness of God should be in the habit of meditating on [the phrase *'O Lord, Make haste to help me'*] ceaselessly in his heart, after having driven out every kind of thought. See Cassian, *John Cassian: Conferences*, X.14.

[355] Christians believe that Jesus has sent the Spirit into every human heart. See Romans 5:5 "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

[356] Laurence Freeman, *Your Daily Practice* (Singapore: Medio Media, 2008), 10.

about letting go of the ego and trusting in God – about inexpressible communion with God in the Silence.[357] The biblical phrase "Be Still & Know that I am God" summarises the intention of the practice in the Christian tradition.[358] The Silence teaches the meditator how to embrace the sacred depths of his or her being where awareness grows and true *metanoia* is fostered: "by stillness we learn to empty our heart of everything that is not God." [359] The essence of meditation is about focusing all one's loving intention and attention on the prayer word, putting everything else temporarily aside.[360]

Kim Nataraja observes that in meditation "our stillness is not a state of mere passivity but a state of full openness, full wakefulness to the wonder of our own being, full openness to the wonder of God, the author and the sustainer of our being, and a full awareness that we are at one with God."[361] Thomas Merton, speaking of contemplative prayer, said "The deepest level of communication is not talking, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words and it is beyond concept."[362] Peter Tyler notes that the silence of meditation encapsulates "the choreography between what is said and is unsaid."[363] Regarding this silence John Chryssavgis, the Greek Orthodox theologian, wrote:

> Silence is never merely a cessation of words … rather it is the pause
> that holds together all the words both spoken and unspoken. Silence is
> the glue that connects our attitudes and actions. It is fullness not
> emptiness, it is not an absence but the awareness of a presence.[364]

In other words, from the Christian perspective, the intention of silent meditation is to let go of the trivial to acknowledge and access that which is essential

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[357] This Silence is to be entered, not apprehended. See R. Sardello and C. Sanders-Sardello, *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness* (Berkeley, California: Goldenstone Press, 2008), Kindle location 116 of 1867.

[358] Psalm 46:10

[359] John Main, *The Heart of Creation* (London: Canterbury Press, 2007), 100.

[360] http://www.theschoolofmeditation.org/content/letter-8-john-mains-theology-prayer. Accessed 25th April 2013.

[361] John Main, *Word into Silence: A Manual for Christian Meditation* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), 20.

[362] Paul Harris, "John Main and the Practice of Christian Meditation," www.bahaistudies.net/asma/johnmain.pdf Accessed on 25 January 2013

[363] Peter Tyler, *Picturing the Soul: Revisioning Psychotherapy and Spiritual Direction* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014), 38.

[364] John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2008), 45-46.

for the fullness of life. Although the practice receded in the Western Church,[365] it re-surfaced often through the centuries as witnessed, for example, by mystics such as Meister Eckhart (thirteenth century), the anonymous author of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' (fourteenth century), Julian of Norwich (late fourteenth, early fifteenth century) and St. Teresa of Avila (sixteenth century). The theme of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' is that God cannot be reached by the human intellect but only by a silent prayer of love that can pierce the 'cloud of unknowing'; and it urges readers to use a *short word* and to "Fasten it to your heart. Fix your mind on it permanently, so nothing can dislodge it."[366]

The 1960's saw a revival of interest in the contemplative tradition in the West. In 1961, Thomas Merton published "The Wisdom of the Desert," a collection of the famous sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.[367] In the mid-1970's, John Main, in researching the teachings of John Cassian, saw their potential for leading ordinary men and women to an experience of God in the silent depths of their hearts. He re-discovered the Christian tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers and he adapted their method for the modern world, with a view to making it widely available to lay people. He stressed that while traditional forms of prayer involved speaking to, or thinking about God, the intention in meditation (contemplation) was simply to be with God. He preached that the method led "to stillness and silence, going beyond desire and coming to purity of heart."[368] He saw how the discipline of the practice purged the heart of contradictory desires and he began to promote it as a twice-daily practice for everyday life.[369]

As a result of his efforts - and those of Thomas Keating on Centering Prayer - recent decades have seen a resurgence of interest in Christian meditation. Thousands

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[365] While contemplative prayer declined in the West from the 6th Century, it remained a part of the Eastern Orthodox tradition in the form of 'The Jesus Prayer:' "Lord, Jesus Christ, Have mercy on me, a sinner." Mark 10:47.

[366] Patrick J. Gallacher, ed. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Teams Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo, Mich: Western Michigan University Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 37-38, lines 500-04. Quoted in Carmen Acevedo Butcher, *The Cloud of Unknowing with the Book of Privy Council: A New Translation* (London: Shambala, 2011), Kindle Location 219 of 3794.

[367] Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1961).

[368] John Main, *Word Made Flesh* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1993), 59.

[369] Carl McColman explains the need as follows: "Contemplative prayer, like any other practice designed to foster a living relationship, has to be done frequently and regularly." See McColman's website at http://anamchara.com/ See also http://scarbroughpages.com/uploads/Anamchara_the_Website_of_Unknowing.pdf. from where the quote is taken.

of groups of Christian meditators around the world now meet regularly to meditate together in homes, parishes, prisons and colleges and most of those meditators incorporate a twice-daily practice in their own lives. Although the practice of meditation is not yet being promoted vigorously by the institution of the Church, it is becoming increasingly popular, ever-more a living tradition.[370] Rowan Williams, then Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, in the first address by an Archbishop of Canterbury to a synod of Bishops in Rome, spoke about the profound connection between contemplation and the task of evangelisation, describing contemplation as a "deeply revolutionary matter."[371] He observed that

> … contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly.[372]

Within the Christian tradition, contemplative practice is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer but adds a depth of meaning to all prayer. It facilitates the movement from mental to receptive prayer, with a view to building a personal relationship with Christ. It is intended to be a movement beyond mental activity *about* one's relationship with the Divine, to communion *with* Him, through Christ. This section has looked at the place of meditation in the Christian tradition. The next section examines what meditation looks like in practice in that context.

3.3.1   Meditation in Practice in the Christian Tradition

The practice comprises the silent repetition of a prayer-word. This helps the mind to desist from *entertaining* the thoughts that naturally arise. John Main recommended the slow repetition of the Aramaic word, **Maranatha**, which means *Come Lord*. It is a simple, rhythmic word that flows off the tongue in four equal syllables, each comprising a single consonant and vowel. The goal is to recite the word

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[370] Laurence Freeman notes that "every time we sit to meditate we enter into a living tradition." Freeman, "Jesus," 20.
[371] Rowan Williams, "Archbishop's Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome," http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/. Accessed 6 November 2015
[372] Ibid.

continuously. John Main taught that the practice of meditation was as natural to one's soul as breathing is to the body.[373] He summarised the instructions on how to meditate as follows:

> Sit down. Sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase 'Maranatha'. Recite it as four syllables of equal length. Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything – spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word. Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes.[374]

James Finley considers that, in the practice of meditation,

> we freely choose to offer the least resistance to a graced liberation from the tyranny of thought. As we do so we open ourselves to the mystery of knowing God in ways that utterly transcend what thought can grasp or contain.[375]

Meditation does not create the silence - it is already there, within the person. The practice enables one to enter into it. Cassian talks about the mantra as a fixed mark upon which the mind can focus to bring it to stillness. The Cloud of Unknowing talks of the mantra as like a dart with which one beats upon the cloud of unknowing.[376] John Main once described the mantra as like a radar bleep that brings a plane in to land through thick fog. Even when one doesn't know where one is going, if one can stay tuned on that radar signal it will bring one in to land.[377] Elsewhere, he likens the mantra to the needle of a compass because it heads one always in the direction one must follow, away from the false-self into the true-self and into God.[378] He stresses that while the ego may lead one astray, the mantra-as-compass is always faithful in the direction it points one toward. If it is said with generosity, with faithfulness and with love, the mantra will always point in the direction of God, where one's true identity is found.[379]

Although the practice is simple, it is not easy; it is very difficult to do because

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[373] Freeman, "Jesus," 1.

[374] Main, *Word into Silence: A Manual for Christian Meditation*, xvii.

[375] James Finley, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 54.

[376] Laurence Freeman, "The Power of the Mantra," in *Why Are We Here? (Meditatio Talks - 2005d)*, (London: World Community for Christian Meditation, 2005), 8. In the Indian tradition the mantra is sometimes described as like the bow that fires the arrow of the self into the heart of God.

[377] Ibid.

[378] John Main, *The Way of Unknowing: Expanding Spiritual Horizons through Meditation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990), 86.

[379] "Why Is Meditation Difficult?," in *The Way of Unknowing*, (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 87.

the human mind is so easily distracted. And there is no technique that can, as it were, twist God's arm to satisfy one's longing, so one waits in silence, attentive to one's word. Meditation is a way of waiting at the threshold, simply being, allowing oneself to be vulnerable and open to transfiguration.

3.3.2 What is distinctive about Christian Meditation?

Meditation is a feature of all the major world religions.[380] Each tradition affirms the innate human capacity to experience different modes of being and they speak of the benefits and fruits that follow. What then is distinctive about the different approaches to the practice across the traditions? Mindfulness, as a secular practice, which includes meditation, has demonstrated many practical benefits of the practice; I noted, in section 1.1, how these claims have been backed up by modern scientific research. However, one can readily distinguish between secular mindfulness and those traditions which, like Christianity, see the human person as created by and invited to participate in a personal relationship with the Divine; there is the intention in the contemplative practice of theistic faith-based traditions to sit in stillness in the Divine Presence. This intention is exemplified, for example, in the Christian tradition by the verse from scripture "Be Still and Know that I Am God."[381]

The Christian tradition, while it acknowledges the practical physical, cognitive and emotional benefits, holds that the fruits go much deeper and can lead to personal transformation at a very deep level. The intention of the meditator is an important aspect of the practice. I suggest that one can distinguish between three broad forms of intention in meditation: meditation practiced from a secular perspective, meditation practiced from a spiritual but non-theistic religious perspective and meditation practiced from a spiritual and theistic religious perspective. In secular meditation - as, for example in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) - the intention is normally primarily concerned with the well-being of the meditator.[382] In that sense the secular practice of meditation might be

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[380] Cynthia Bourgeault notes that "Wisdom is an ancient tradition, not limited to one particular religious expression but at the headwaters of all the great sacred paths." Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), Kindle location 191 of 1385.

[381] Psalm 46:10.

[382] MBSR was developed in the USA in the 1970s by Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn with a view to integrating the practice of mindfulness, including meditation, into the field of medicine. MBSR is a

described as ego-centric in intention.[383] In faith-based, non-theistic meditation, the intention includes the well-being of the practitioner but also the well-being of all. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist Monk and writer, says that mindfulness is about being in the present moment, looking deeply at reality, so that one can see clearly what is – only then can one respond in true freedom. From the Buddhist perspective, meditation is a bridge that makes clear the connection between one's state of mindfulness and how one behaves in the world, between one's inner peace and peace on earth. As one begins to see the world as it really is, one "can relate to it with compassion, kindness and wisdom."[384] And, finally, in faith-based theistic traditions, such as Hinduism and Christianity, the intention is Other-centred, with a capital O. By this I mean that the practice is centred on a divine being and on discovering one's true-self in relation to the Divine. In the Christian tradition, this Other is named as

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programme that reduces stress by developing mindfulness, meaning it seeks the intentional cultivation of moment-by-moment awareness in a non-judgemental and accepting way. The intervention is free of any cultural, religious and ideological factors, but associated with the Buddhist origins of mindfulness. Participants follow an eight-week programme after which they are asked to continue with the daily exercise by integrating it into their every-day routine. See Andrea Will et al., "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Women Diagnosed with Breast Cancer," *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, no. 2 (2015).

[383] "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is a well-defined and systematic patient-centered educational approach which uses relatively intensive training in mindfulness meditation as the core of a program to teach people how to take better care of themselves and live healthier and more adaptive lives." Kabat-Zinn, "Mindfulness Meditation: What It Is, What It Isn't, and It's Role in Health Care and Medicine " 163. The title of one of Kabat-Zinn's earliest books on MBSR, first published in 1990, is "Full Catastrophe Living: How to Cope with Stress, Pain and Illness Using Mindfulness Meditation," reflecting the initial ego-centric intention of the practice for the practitioner. However, it is important to note it is also a core principle of the content of the MBSR programme as later developed by Kabat-Zinn that the program also aims to cultivate loving kindness towards others, as well as self: "Mindfulness in the interpersonal realm is discussed and practiced. Participants are invited to be generous towards themselves and others through attentive listening and generating feelings of compassion." See Patricia L. Dobkin, Steven Hickman, and Kaveh Monshat, "Holding the Heart of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: Balancing Fidelity and Imagination When Adapting M.B.S.R.," *Mindfilness* 5, no. 1 (2013): 711. In addition, Kabat-Zinn has observed that "he sees the current interest in mindfulness and its applications as signalling a multi-dimensional emergence of great transformative and liberative promise, one which, if cared for and tended, may give rise to a flourishing on this planet akin to a second, and this time global, Renaissance, for the benefit of all sentient beings and our world." J. Kabat-Zinn, "Some Reflections on the Origins of Mbsr, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps," *Contemporary Buddhism (Special Issue on Mindfulness)* 12, no. 1 (2011): 281. In the same article he clarifies that from his personal perspective, MBSR can help in "developing novel and hopefully skilful avenues and vehicles for moving the bell curve of our society toward greater sanity and wellbeing. In this sense, MBSR was conceived of and functions as a public health intervention, a vehicle for both individual and societal transformation." Ibid., 282. Nonetheless, the primary intention of the practice is that it is patient-centred or person-centred i.e. self-centred.

[384] Jack Kornfield, *Meditation for Beginners* (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2004), 12. In particular, within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the purpose of the practice is not merely enlightenment for the practitioner "but for the sake of salvation of all sentient beings." See also Goleman, *The Meditative Mind: The Varieties of Meditative Experience*, 82.

Christ. The Christian tradition teaches that one of the deep fruits of Christian contemplative practice is that it leads to a more authentic, more compassionate, Christ-centred way of being in the world. It is not about wilfulness but about willingness, about love in service of others. Christian meditation is not about doing, not about achieving – but simply about being. Yet it is dynamic, not passive because it results in contemplative action. It is not about mastery, but mystery: mastery speaks the language of power, prestige and possessions while mystery calls for vulnerability, humility and surrender. Christian meditation is not about ego-building but about the harmonious integration of body, mind and spirit; it brings about an integration of

> our conscious and our unconscious selves, the integration of our public or outward social self and our inward self so that we do what we say, we feel what we do. That integration is built upon that understanding that there is an inherent unity, that the body and the mind are inherently one, that our whole being is inherently a unity.[385]

Christian meditation acknowledges that "human beings cannot master their destiny by virtue of willpower alone;"[386] it understands that there are limits to what psychology can teach us and that one must go beyond those limits to seek answers to the deepest questions of life.[387]

In summary, I posit that *in terms of intention*, secular meditation may be seen as egocentric or self-centred, faith-based non-theistic meditation as other-centred and faith-based meditation in theistic traditions as Other-centred. What makes Christian meditation distinctive is that it is Christ-centred and recognises the deep connectivity between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit. Many Christians believe that the practice of meditation as a daily discipline deepens their appreciation of the divine spark deep within, nourishes their inner life and leads to their living life from that deeply meaningful perspective. "The discipline of meditation … places that one demand on us absolutely: that we must leave self behind so completely, leave our thoughts, our analyses, our feelings behind so completely, as to be totally at the disposition of the Other."[388] Intention is mysteriously but deeply impactful.[389] In

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[385] Laurence Freeman, "Wholeness," in *The Ego on Our Spiritual Journey 2*, (London: World Community for Christian Meditation, 2008), 4.

[386] May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*, Preface.

[387] Ibid., 2.

[388] John Main, *In Times of Anxiety* (London: The World Community for Christian Meditation, 2009), 13.

meditation one holds fast to the intention to be in communion with God in the Silence but one lets go of all effort to make it happen. Many Christians believe that, when practiced with the intention to leave oneself open and vulnerable to connection with the Divine, meditation enables that deep connection at a level of consciousness deeper that our ordinary everyday awareness and, over time, the repeated regular practice of meditation results in deep spiritual fruits. I have mentioned that, in the Christian tradition, meditation is a form of apophatic prayer. A core aspect of apophatic prayer is that, somewhat paradoxically, the turn inward, which may seem ego-centric to an outside observer, is in reality not self-centred but Other-centred; this marks a significant distinction between the practice of mindfulness in a secular context and the practice of meditation in a spiritual or religious context. In this way, meditation in the Christian tradition, leads the practitioner to a realisation of the true-self.[390] Jesus preached two basic precepts for abundant living: love of God and love of neighbour, whose true-self is likewise a manifestation of the Divine. Christians understand that all human persons are 'children of God' and have the innate capacity to be open to and live out of that awareness.[391]

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[389] The paradox of intention may help one to understand how effortless intention can be so productive. Most people have personal experience of this paradox. When one is trying desperately to recall what is on the tip of the tongue, one must let go of the effort to remember and rely on the mysterious power of effortless intention to bring to mind what cannot otherwise be recalled. In other words, one must hold on to the intention to bring the memory to mind while at the same time ceasing all effort to recall it! In similar fashion, the intention the practitioner brings to meditation seems to be equally important and effective in realising its intention.

[390] The understanding of the true-Self as one's real essence, while its Christian expression is unique, is also reflected in several Eastern wisdom traditions. For example, Buddhism too stresses the capacity of the individual to see through the illusory, conditioned self to the essence of one's true nature, which leads to an awareness that in its place exists an expansive state of being. Buddhism distinguishes between the 'lesser self' (related to the ego of Western psychology) and the 'greater self,' which is grounded in a deep respect for the dignity of all and the wisdom that perceives the interdependence of life, which understands that human beings 'inter-are' with all of creation. See, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Commentaries on the Tiep Hien Precepts* (Delhi: Full Circle Publishing, 2003).The concept of the true-self is reflected too in the Hindu tradition; for example, the Upanishads speak of the spirit of the one who created the universe as dwelling in the heart of each person and describes this spirit as the one who in silence is loving to all. See John Main, *Moment of Christ: The Path of Meditation* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 76-77. This understanding of the true-self gives rise to the mutual Hindu greeting "Namaste" which means, in essence, "The Divine in me recognises the Divine in you." Eckhart Tolle, who writes about the ongoing transformation of human consciousness, describes the dawning spiritual understanding of the illusion of separateness in terms of a deepening empathic and loving awareness: "Love is a deep empathy with the other's 'Beingness.' You recognize yourself, your essence, in the other. And so you can no longer inflict suffering on the other." See Eckhart Tolle, *Guardians of Being* (Novato, Ca.: New World Library, 2009), 108.

[391] "The life and teaching of Jesus unfold the process of yielding to the silence of adoration and receiving its transfiguring effects of ordinary life, giving rise to what we think of as morals and ethics.

3.3.3 Summary

Christianity has two traditions of prayer, kataphatic (using words and images) and apophatic (without words or images). They are combined in the tradition of *Lectio Divina*, the last stage of which, *contemplatio*, is apophatic. While in common language the word meditation may refer to discursive thinking, in the Christian tradition it refers to contemplation. It is a silent, wordless, imageless form of prayer which uses the slow silent repetition of a sacred word to still the mind and heart. While to an outside observer it may seem to be very passive, it is in fact a dynamic state of alert relaxation, of receptive wakefulness. In Christian meditation the intention is to be, still, in God's presence. Intention is important: in secular forms of meditation (such as MBSR) the intention is primarily ego-centric and in non-theistic faith-based forms such as Buddhist practice the intention is other-centred; but in the Christian tradition it is seen as Other-centred, Christ-centred. Living life from that deep centre transfigures one's consciousness, leads to deep spiritual fruits and changes how one behaves in the world.

3.4   Meditation and Nurture

Psychologists have long been aware that the meditative traditions contain psychological insights and knowledge about humankind and the spiritual development of people.[392]   These traditions assert that the fruit of contemplative practice is an inner flourishing within manifests itself in one's actions and speech and which has the potential to transform one's society and culture. Culliford notes that

> Contemplation soon reveals that there are different kinds of knowledge. What can be observed, measured and tested gives rise to scientific knowledge; but there is also the knowledge of how to be and behave, of how to grow and mature throughout life. This is wisdom or spiritual knowledge.[393]

I have distinguished between the *benefits* and the *fruits* of meditation. By benefits I mean the physical and psychological gains that arise from meditation that

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If only we knew how to listen, the behaviours and attitudes he taught are entailed in the silence, in the beholding itself." Maggie Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding* (Abingdon, UK: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2011), 97.

[392] Han F. de Wit, "On Contemplative Psychology" (paper presented at the The Third Symposium on the Psychology of Religion in Europe, Amsterdam, 1986), 82. De Wit names James, 1902; Jung, 1939; Clark, 1958; Leuba, 1972; Ornstein, 1972; Podvoll, 1982; Wilber, 1984

[393] Culliford, *The Psychology of Spirituality: An Introduction*, Kindle location 457 of 3149.

people can readily notice in themselves.[394] I referred already to the research on adults which has shown the pragmatic benefits of contemplative practices on reducing distress, enhancing general wellbeing and impacting positively on basic brain function and habits of mind.[395] These benefits arise even where the practice is introduced on a purely secular level[396] but the practice is even more powerful when it operates within the context "of a person's deepest religious or philosophical convictions."[397]

While many traditions assert that meditation promotes human flourishing and nurtures the human spirit, Christian meditation has a deeper understanding of that spirit as the true-self. Consciousness of the 'true-self,' of who one really is, leads to an awareness that one's sense of separateness from God is ultimately an illusion.[398] Karl Rahner expressed it in his own unique way suggesting that as one grows and develops, it is in the unfolding of one's personal history that one simply realises what one already is.[399] But the true-self is elusive: "The true self, being simple like God, can be realized only in the mode of simple awareness proper to it."[400] And this is the real fruit of Christian meditation: the realisation of the true-self. In other words, from the Christian perspective, the Divine is not just at the centre of all existence, but lies also at the core of each person. As each one undertakes the contemplative journey into the depths of their own being, they discover not just who they truly are but also who others really are. They discover that Jesus' invitation to love one's neighbour as one loves oneself, does not mean to love one's neighbour as much as one loves oneself, but to love one's neighbour who is ultimately one with oneself in God. They discover the ultimate unity of all reality. In one's true self one discovers the ground of all being, a meeting point with all created things. As one awakens to the true-Self, to the mystery of God, within and without, one cannot help

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[394] See, for example, Johnston, *The Still Point: Reflections on Zen and Christian Mysticism*, 3.
[395] Campion and Rocco, "Minding the Mind: The Effects and Potential of a School-Based Meditation Programme for Mental Health Promotion."
[396] Herbert Benson, *The Relaxation Response* (New York: HarperTorch, 1975), 8.
[397] Herbert Benson, *Beyond the Relaxation Response* (New York: Berkley Books, 1984), 4.
[398] Bernadette Flanagan observes that "It is self, which knows in its inner being a capacity for intimacy rooted in empathy, which experiences God. The human person does not experience God as one more experience alongside the adult experience of intimacy, but rather God is co-experienced in the distinctively adult capacity for relationality." See Flanagan, "Christian Spirituality and Religious Mysticism: Adjunct, Parallel or Embedded Concepts?," 15.
[399] Hinsdale, "'Infinite Openness to the Infinite:' Karl Rahner's Contribution to Modern Catholic Thought on the Child," Kindle location 7297 of 12703.
[400] James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2003), 23.

but live life from that perspective. The true-self is the source of one's relational consciousness. One's clarity of perception is sharpened, leading to a more authentic response to the challenges of everyday life. Jack Finnegan notes that, helped by such life-practices as meditation,

> the psychological self becomes subordinate to the true self, the ego serves the soul, and in the process becomes even more unique, more rounded, more open, more creative, more personal, more mature, more understanding, more compassionate. All of this occurs as we rediscover who and how we were always meant to be: people whose interest is kind, helpful, unselfish, benevolent, caring for the common good.[401]

One becomes, imperceptibly at first, less wilful and more willing – more in tune with what one is called to be in the world.[402] The Christian tradition teaches that contemplation makes it almost inevitable that the way one spends one's time will be called into question and one's whole perspective on life will change.[403] In other words, a key feature of Christian meditation is that it leads to clarity of perception and purity of response and consequently leads to contemplative and compassionate action in the world. Ultimately, one comes to realise that the aim of contemplation is not about staying still, not about seclusion, but about personal transfiguration that changes how one sees the world and leads ultimately to contemplative action, untainted by conditioning; action that is centred on the point of stillness which lies deep within the human heart.

Evelyn Underhill was a prolific British writer who is best known for her book *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of (Man's) Spiritual Consciousness*.[404] Through her study of the mystics and even more through her lived experiences, she also believed that the ultimate fruit of the mystical state of union with God is creative, compassionate action in the world:

> For [mystics,] contemplation and action are not opposites, but two interdependent forms of a life that is one - a life that rushes out to a passionate communion with the true and beautiful, only that it may draw from this direct experience of Reality a new intensity wherewith to handle

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[401] Note on *The True Self* distributed to postgraduate students of the Masters in Applied Christian Spirituality programme at All Hallows College, Dublin (January 2013).

[402] May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*, 1.

[403] See, for example, Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (London: SPCK (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge), 2003), 34. Main, *Word into Silence: A Manual for Christian Meditation*, 63-66. Finley, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God*, 141-75. *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, 127-47. Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness*, 38-39.

[404] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1911).

the world of things; and remake it, or at least some little bit of it, 'nearer to the heart's desire.'[405]

As Tobin Hart notes, meditation "does not take us away from action and engagement with the world, but allows us to be *fully present* in our action, whether eating food or helping a child with homework (my italics)."[406] Maggie Ross observes that after a time

> we come to realise that in this spacious silence of beholding, the whole of creation is present and that we are given the eyes of compassion.[407]

In the words of Anthony de Mello: "The beauty of an action comes not from its having become a habit but from its sensitivity, consciousness, clarity of perception, and accuracy of response."[408]

This view is very different to the wilful modernist Western world-view which places the 'I' at the centre, in a bias towards the rights and needs of the individual. Cynthia Bourgeault observes that, informed by Decartes' reflection 'I think, therefore I am,' and reinforced by Freudian psychology, "We experience ourselves first and foremost as egoic beings, as individual selves. We move out into the world, making our life choices, accomplishing our goals, fulfilling our destiny."[409] But the Christian understanding of the human person recognises that this egoic "I" - which modern society takes to be the whole of oneself - is not truly who one is. Meditation makes one realise that

> we suffer from a serious case of mistaken identity. This lesser self is not who I am at all; at very most, it is the snakeskin. My real "I" lives far more subtly within it, captured here and now in the quality of my aliveness.[410]

John Main notes that

> The ultimate frontier we are all called upon to cross is the frontier of our own identity, the frontier, in other words, of our own limitation, our own isolation. To be one with all, to be one with the All. To practice in the depths of our own being what Jesus continually summons us to: the person who would find his life must lose it.[411]

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[405] *Practical Mysticism* (New York: Digireads.com, 2010), 72. Originally published by E.P. Dutton & Company (1915).
[406] Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, 154.
[407] Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding*, 42.
[408] de Mello, *Awareness*, 131.
[409] Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart*, Kindle location 666 of 1385.
[410] Ibid., Kindle location 687 of 1385.
[411] John Main, "Healthiness of Spirit," in *Fully Alive*, (London: World Community for Christian Meditation, 2011), 9.

Julian of Norwich speaks of the deeper unity the human heart yearns for in her own unique poetic wording: "The love of God creates in us such a *oneing* that when it is truly seen, no person can separate themselves from another person." [412] Rohr suggests that children already enjoy this unity at a *pre*-rational level, and mystics later enjoy it consciously at a *trans*-rational and universal level. [413]

The Christian tradition holds that until one takes the searchlight of consciousness off the ego, and enters interior silence, one cannot glimpse the light of one's true-Self nor become aware of one's connectedness with Ultimate Reality. [414] But when one discovers the true-self deep within, one finds that one is no longer imprisoned by the reactive impulsive ego; instead one is able to respond as any given situation calls for – one learns to see through the eyes of the Good Samaritan. [415] One no longer reacts, instead, one responds because one is no longer dominated by self-interest and self-promotion but serves a higher, deeper Reality. The true self is true because it sees beyond the illusions of the egoic-self. It leads to changed vision, changed understanding, changed behaviours. Nonetheless, there is no loss of one's unique identity in this way of seeing and being. Instead, as one learns to detach from one's conditioning, from one's egoic desires, the true-self is freed and begins to arise and unfold. In the words of the philosopher Wittgenstein, you "find a deeper truth that is really in you – and, it's not yours, it's God's." [416]

The personal faith of the practitioner makes their practice of meditation distinctive; the Christian brings to meditation their faith that Jesus lives, through the resurrection, in every person who follows His way; in other words, in all who freely live out Christian values in their lives. The intention in Christian meditation is to 'Be Still and Know that I am God,' to join in the prayer of Jesus:

> The theology [of Christian meditation] is that the prayer is the prayer of Jesus. We have to stand back and allow his prayer, as it were, full power within us. As soon as you realize that the Way is the prayer of Jesus, that

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[412] Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 65 - quoted in Richard Rohr, Daily Meditation, 13 January 2015.
[413] Richard Rohr, "Universe Means 'to Turn around One Thing'," http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--Universe-Means-to--Turn-around-One-Thing-.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=xMGfCzDGbo4. Accessed 05 January 2015
[414] Kim Nataraja, "Meditation in the Christian Tradition," online article accessed on 25 March 2015 at http://www.theschoolofmeditation.org/content/letter-31-meditation-christian-tradition.
[415] For the story of the Good Samaritan, see Luke 10:25-37.
[416] Peter Tyler, The Astonishment of Prayer: Wittgenstein Reads Thomas Merton, in In Soul Pursuit (Blog), 2 September 2014, http://insoulpursuit.blogspot.ie/2014/09/the-astonishment-of-prayer-wittgenstein.html. Accessed 5 November 2014.

that is the Way, then your only challenge is to stand back sufficiently enough to allow his prayer to become super-eminent. [417]

Laurence Freeman reminds us that letting go of the false-self

> doesn't mean crushing our individuality or becoming something that we are not. But to be an adult child, to be our true self, is to be unboundedly open to the unique person that God has created us to be, and that conditions have formed us to be, with our wounds and handicaps. [418]

Maggie Ross observes that "the Christian who knows his or her business is the Christian who has the freedom to return again and again into that silent unchanging presence … To stand in God while the world turns."[419] Richard Rohr expresses the same idea, observing that as one is transfigured, one no longer looks out *at* reality, but looks out *from* reality:

> In other words, God is not "out there"; you are in God and God is in you. You are in the middle of Reality! You're a part of it. It's a mystery of participation. After his conversion experience, Paul is obsessed with the idea that "I'm participating in something that's bigger than me." In fact, he uses the phrase "in Christ" around one hundred sixty times to describe this organic unity and participation in Christ. Paul has the best one-liner of all to describe himself after conversion: "I live no longer, not I; but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20) … You will know that your life is not about you; you are about life … After transformation, it's not about doing it right; it's about doing it with pure intention. It's not about being correct; it's about being connected. After conversion, you don't experience self-consciousness so much as what the mystics call pure consciousness. [420]

Having identified what is distinctive about Christian meditation, it is important to reiterate that the practice of meditation is not restricted to those who believe in Christ. Many theistic and non-theistic religious traditions practice meditation from an other-centred perspective and assert that it leads to personal transformation, even enlightenment. As Martin Laird observes:

> Silence is living, dynamic, and liberating. The practice of silence nourishes vigilance, self-knowledge, letting go, and the compassionate embrace of all whom we would otherwise be quick to condemn. Gradually we realize that whatever it is in us that sees the mind games we play is itself free of all such mind games and is utterly silent, pure, vast, and free. When we realize

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[417] John Main, *The Hunger for Depth and Meaning: Learning to Meditate with John Main* (Singapore: Medio Media, 2007), Kindle location 610 of 2309.

[418] Laurence Freeman, "Our True Self: A Child of God," in *The Ego on the Spiritual Journey (1)*, (London: World Community for Christian Meditation, 2008), 10.

[419] Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding*, 49.

[420] Richard Rohr, Daily Meditation, 1 April 2015. See http://www.frenshamchurches.org.uk/richardrohronstpaul.htm

that we are the awareness and not the drama unfolding in our awareness, our lives are freer, simpler, more compassionate.[421]

While Christians will express the fruits of contemplative practice as growth in the knowledge and love of Christ that transfigures how they see the world and how they respond to all they encounter in life, Laurence Freeman observes that, in the coming era,

> Christianity will meet the other great world religions, and it will be as epoch-making an encounter as the days when the early Judaeo-Christians met the Greeks. It will be another great stage in the universalisation of the gospel when we are able to express the Christian experience and meaning in terms and symbols other than those we have been familiar with: a contemporary encounter with other religions in which we often meet people who have transcended their ego, examples of great holiness, people who are living and pursuing a contemplative life.[422]

Evelyn Underhill's research convinced her that at the heart of the mystical understanding was a knowledge that the human spirit was essentially divine and was capable of immediate communion with God.[423] She believed that, whether we are conscious of it or not, God is at work within us: "God is acting on your soul all the time, whether you have spiritual sensations or not."[424]

> Broadly speaking I understand [mysticism] to be the innate tendency of the human spirit towards the complete harmony with the transcendental order, whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood. This tendency, in great mystics, gradually captures the whole field of consciousness, it dominates their life and, in the experience called 'mystic union,' attains its end … I believe this process to represent the true line of development of the highest form of human consciousness.[425]

Underhill explored the process of personal spiritual growth by examining the writings of mystics from the Christian tradition, which tended to divide the spiritual life into three broad stages.[426] Her ground-breaking work on mysticism is regarded as a classical exploration of the individual's journey to God.[427] She characterised the spiritual path as unfolding through five broad *states* of consciousness which she called *awakening, purgation* (or *purification*)*, illumination, dark night*, and *unification*. In the *awakening* state, the individual becomes aware of a consciousness

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[421] Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: The Practice of Contemplation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006), 116.

[422] Freeman, "Christ in Contemplative Experience."

[423] Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, 24.

[424] *The Mount of Purification* (London: Longmans, Geeen & Company, 1949), 184.

[425] *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, xv.

[426] These were referred to as the purgative, illuminative and unitive stages. See, for example, Peter Tyler, "The Triple Way," in *The New S.C.M. Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake, (London: SCM, 2005).

[427] Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*.

of that which transcends the person; awareness of a Divine Reality begins to arise, accompanied by a growing sense of spiritual identity in relationship with that Reality. Underhill's second state is described as a psychological *purgation* or *purification*: this is where the individual seeks to find a bridge between themselves and the Divine by transcending the ego or the small 'self,' allowing for the emergence of the spiritual-self; the state of purgation requires focused discipline and practice from the practitioner. In the third state, defined by her as *illumination*, the practitioner, having purged herself or himself of ego-centric attachments, becomes ever more keenly aware of the transcendent nature of Reality, apprehending deeply that all of creation is infused with the love of God.[428] This state of *illumination* may include in itself many of the 'visions and adventures of the soul'[429] described by St. Teresa and other mystical writers from the Christian tradition, where the individual may lose all consciousness of the phenomenal world, "being caught up to a brief and immediate enjoyment of the Divine Vision."[430] The next state is named in the language of John of the Cross as the *Dark Night of the Soul*: while the state of *illumination* was characterised by a deep sense of the presence of the Divine, this state is characterised by a sense of Divine Absence as the individual is drawn to let go of his or her attachment to the transcendent pleasures of the previous state. "The Self now surrenders itself, its individuality, and its will, completely. It desires nothing, asks nothing, is utterly passive, and is thus prepared for" the next state which is named *Union*:[431]

> In this state the Absolute Life is not merely perceived and enjoyed by the Self, as in illumination: but is one with it. This is the end towards which all the previous oscillations of consciousness have tended. It is a state of equilibrium, of purely spiritual life; characterized by peaceful joy, by enhanced powers, by intense certitude."[432]

This describes a state of nondual union with God. As noted already, this is not a passive state but yields practical fruit in contemplative action in the world.[433]

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[428] This apprehension is a form of perceptual knowing as distinct from comprehension which is related to conceptual knowing; both forms of knowing were described in the previous chapter.

[429] Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, 169.

[430] Ibid., 169-70.

[431] Ibid., 170.

[432] Ibid.

[433] Underhill quotes St. Teresa as saying "You may think, my daughters, that the soul in this state [of union] should be so absorbed that she can occupy herself with nothing. You deceive yourselves. She turns with greater ease and ardour than before to all that which belongs to the service of God, and when these occupations leave her free again, she remains in the enjoyment of that companionship." Ibid., 172.

Underhill stresses that in Christian Mysticism, "the highest forms of Divine Union impel the self to some sort of active, rather than of passive life," which marks a "true distinction between Christian and non-Christian mysticism."[434]

While Underhill mapped the internal state-stages of spiritual growth, Fowler explored the structural-stages of human faith from a developmental perspective, just as Piaget had done for the stages of cognitive development and Kohlberg for the stages of moral development.[435] Ken Wilber suggests that the work of Underhill and Fowler may be represented on the Wilber-Combs Lattice. Fowler's stages may be placed along the vertical axis and Underhill's states across the horizontal axis as shown in **Figure 3.5** in Wilber's modified version of the Wilber-Combs lattice – running from 'Intuitive-Projective' to 'Universalising.'[436] And Underhill's state-stages, those that follow 'Awakening,' (i.e. Purgation, Illumination, Dark Night of the Soul and Union) may be seen as corresponding to the gross, subtle, causal and non-dual states described by the Eastern traditions.

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[434] Ibid.

[435] He named the stages as Intuitive-Projective (preverbal), Mythical- Literal, Synthetic-Conventional, Individual- Reflective, Conjunctive and Universalizing.

[436] Wilber, *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*, 95-97. See also Jan Brouwer, "The Wilber-Combs Lattice Revisited," http://www.integralworld.net/brouwer2.html. Accessed 9 November 2015

THE WILBER-COMBS LATTICE
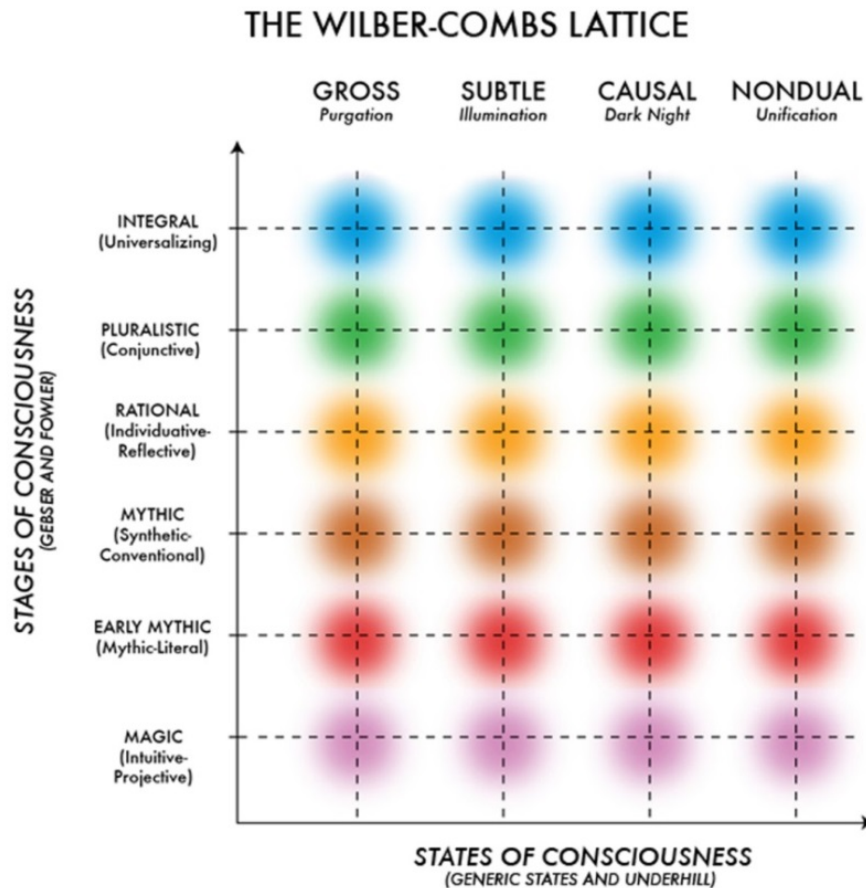
Figure 3.5: Wilber-Combs Lattice Incorporating Fowler and Underhill

Christian meditation leads to the growing awareness of and identification with the true-self. This transfiguration becomes manifest in one's disposition towards oneself, others and all of creation. For John Main:

> The great test as to whether your meditation is working, or whether you are making progress is: are you growing in love; are you growing in patience; are you growing in understanding and compassion? That is the effect of our meditation.[437]

Section 3.4 has indicated how the traditions assert that meditation nurtures the inner life of the human person and that such flourishing manifests itself in how one related with others and the world. Many Christian writers also assert that it can lead to a growing awareness of the true-self, a realisation that one's sense of separateness from God is, in reality, an illusion. As one grows in that perceptual knowledge one becomes less wilful and more willing and one is led towards

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[437] Main, *The Hunger for Depth and Meaning: Learning to Meditate with John Main*, Kindle location 1521 of 2309.

compassionate action in the world - action which is responsive, not reactive, because it is centred on a point of stillness in the human heart. This is not experienced as a loss of individuality but as an ever-deepening consciousness of who one truly is. That journey of discovery has been characterised as unfolding through four states of consciousness – purification, illumination, dark night of the soul and unification, a state of non-dual union with God. These states are compatible with the Wilber-Combs Lattice.

3.5   Meditation and Children

In chapter 1, I commented on the paucity of literature on the child's experience of meditation, and especially on its potential impact on their spirituality. Perhaps that is not especially surprising given the prevailing attitude towards children's spirituality up until the 1980's, which I noted in chapter 2. After Vatican II's reaffirmation that all people were called to holiness the term 'spirituality' gained currency throughout the second half of the twentieth century, gradually being adopted by the other Abrahamic traditions and across other non-Christian traditions, and even by non-religious seekers.[438] The development of spirituality as an academic discipline was furthered with the formation of the *Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality* in 1991 and the launch of its bulletin, the *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* (now *Spiritus*) in the same year which published essays on the methodologies of and resources for this new field of study and reviews of the interesting new books in the field. The *International Association for Children's Spirituality* was formed in 2006, six years after the first international conference on children's spirituality in 2000. These developments have led to the development of spirituality studies worldwide. It is remarkable, at the same time, that so little has been researched and reported on children's spirituality and the practice of meditation.

There have been studies on the benefits of meditation but they have focused on the physical and psychological benefits, in particular the cognitive and emotional benefits of the practice; and most of that research has been conducted on adults. However, there is a small body of literature that has examined the practice of meditation with children in schools. As noted in chapter one, Jonathan Campion has

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[438] Sandra M. Schneiders, "Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Press, 2005), 24.

explored the research on meditation and schools, examining its potential to promote mental health in students.[439] He conducted qualitative research, through a combination of semi-structured one-to-one and group interviews with students aged from five to twelve years old and teachers in four schools in Australia where the practice of Christian meditation had been introduced into the schools by the Diocese of Townsville.[440] He discovered that the students found the practice relaxing (57%) and calming (61%) and they reported improved interaction with others following meditation.[441] While he notes that "some [students] experienced a 'lack of thought' during meditation" and others "described religious experiences and a sense of appreciation" his study however makes no reference to the spiritual fruits of meditation. Writing from the perspective of mental health, Thompson and Gauntlett-Gilbert conclude that "mindfulness approaches offer a potentially powerful set of interventions for clinicians working in a wide range of child and adolescent areas."[442] Research indicates too that meditation can change the function and structure of the brain. Boccia *et al*. indicate that meditation leads to

> activation in brain areas involved in processing self-relevant information, self-regulation, focused problem-solving, adaptive behaviour, and interoception. Results also show that meditation practice induces functional and structural brain modifications in expert meditators, especially in areas involved in self-referential processes such as self-awareness and self-regulation.[443]

A Harvard study in 2011 suggests that participation in MBSR is associated with changes in grey matter concentration in brain regions involved in learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking.[444] Sarah Hennelly examined the immediate and continued effects of the .b mindfulness programme on adolescents' social and emotional well-being and

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[439] Campion, "A Review of the Research on Meditation," 29-37. See also Campion and Rocco, "Minding the Mind: The Effects and Potential of a School-Based Meditation Programme for Mental Health Promotion."

[440] 54 students, 19 teachers and seven parents were interviewed. See "Minding the Mind: The Effects and Potential of a School-Based Meditation Programme for Mental Health Promotion," 47.

[441] Campion, "A Review of the Research on Meditation," 34-35.

[442] Miles Thompson and Jeremy Gauntlett-Gilbert, "Mindfulness with Children and Adolescents: Effective Clinical Application," *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 13(2008): 405.

[443] M. Boccia, L. Piccardi and P. Guariglia, "The Meditative Mind: A Comprehensive Meta-Analysis of Mri Studies." Biomed Res Int," *BioMed Research International* 2015(2015). Greater structural development was seen in areas of the brain associated with self-regulation, self-control, focused problem-solving, adaptive behavioural responses under changing conditions, highly integrated tasks such as visuospatial imagery, episodic memory retrieval, and self-processing operations.

[444] B. K. Hölzel et al., "Mindfulness Practices Leads to Increases in Regional Brain Grey Matter Density," *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* 191(2011): 36.

academic functioning and concluded the .b practice was "viable and effective in mixed-gender secondary schools across different year groups, and has the potential to benefit adolescents in ways which reflect their diverse pre-existing strengths and challenges."[445] Katherine Weare has also explored the benefits of mindfulness for children and young people and concluded that it impacted positively on the emotional wellbeing, mental health and ability to learn of the students.[446] Shapiro *et al.* reviewed the empirical evidence supporting "the introduction of contemplative practices into childhood education."[447] They noted that contemplative practices for children are becoming increasingly widespread, and that preliminary evidence supported the suggestion that introducing contemplative practices into childhood education "may cultivate healthy patterns of behaviour and brain development that are beneficial to children immediately and throughout their lifetime."[448] Indeed, they concluded that childhood might be a particularly opportune period to learn contemplative practices because of the plasticity of relevant brain regions and the potential for a cumulative gain over time. However, they do not examine the spiritual benefits that may accrue to children.

As mentioned in Chapter one, de Souza *et al.* conducted a small research project in an Australian primary school which set out to examine the role of meditation in enhancing the relational lives of children - in particular their relationship with God. The researchers used a number of approaches. They observed children in meditation practice and immediately afterwards they displayed photographs of Anglo/European and Asian backgrounds children meditating in order "to trigger thoughts and expressions from the children about what meditation may have meant for them."[449] Having given the children an opportunity to respond verbally to the images they were then given the opportunity to make a drawing of anything they were thinking about. The drawings were then analysed and interpreted by the researchers. The authors considered that symbols used in the children's drawings were indications of their everyday spirituality because they reflected

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[445] Hennelly, "The Immediate and Sustained Effects of The .B Mindfulness Programme on Adolescents' Social and Emotional Well-Being and Academic Functioning.."

[446] Weare, "Evidence for the Impact of Mindfulness on Children and Young People," 23.

[447] Shauna L. Shapiro et al., "Contemplation in the Classroom: A New Direction for Improving Childhood Education," *Educational Psychology Review* 27(2015). They reference over 100 studies of which twelve refer specifically to children.

[448] Ibid., 26.

[449] de Souza, Hyde, and Kehoe, "An Investigation into the Effects of Meditation with Children in a Catholic Primary School," 203.

connectedness to themselves and to their world; the children were happy and calm throughout the exercises and the researchers considered the fact that the children had meditated before the exercise and did so regularly as a whole-school activity was influential in that respect, although no reason is given for that conclusion. [450] They suggest cautiously that "there appeared to be an affirmation that their meditation practice had a beneficial effect on the relational dimension of their lives." They considered that the drawings provided "evidence that some children had a sense of God in their lives" but do not necessarily credit that sense to their meditation practice.[451] In essence, the study concluded very tentatively that the practice "appears to enhance children's sense of and relationship with God" and went on to suggest that "meditation should be introduced as an important part of the broader religious education programme in Catholic primary schools."[452]

Their conversations with the principals and teachers mirrored the findings of other studies on the positive psychological and social benefits of meditation. The authors also noted the importance the commitment of the leadership management team within the school made to the success of the practice. The same authors published another paper on the same topic.[453] They studied the role of Christian meditation in children's prayer life, constructing narrative of children's movement or stillness during meditation based on timed sampling observation on six children, and analysing that narrative with the aid of Berryman's modes of being[454] (quiet, silence) and vectors of movement (stillness as sound, stillness as movement). The authors note that the ability of the children "to be disciplined in their meditation behaviour opens at least the possibility that God might be present to them" and suggest that when the data from this paper and the previous one from the same research project are considered together, one can conclude that "the association of meditation with 'God-time' was evident … and meditation was one of the means by which these children were able to enhance their relationship with God … [and] … The quiet and stillness of their observed meditation behaviour was indicative of this, and serves as

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[450] Ibid., 208.

[451] Ibid.

[452] Ibid., 209.

[453] Brendan Hyde, Marian de Souza, and Tania Kehoe, "The Sound of Silence: Stillness and Quiet - a Case Study of the Role of Christian Meditation in Children's Prayer Life," *Journal of Religious Education* 62, no. 1 (2014).

[454] Jerome W. Berryman, "Silence Is Stranger Than It Used to Be," in *The Search for a Theology of Childhood - Essays by Jerome W. Berryman from 1978-2009*, ed. Brendan Hyde, (Ballarat, Victoria: Modotti Press, 2013).

evidence that signals these children were able to enhance their relationship with God and others through this practice."[455]

Ernie Christie, who, with Catherine Day, has written a guide for teaching Christian meditation to children, refers to a range of sources which confirm the health benefits of meditation and he suggests that the process occurs as one experiences God's love for humanity and find one's true centre.[456] He asserts that "the paradox of being still and silent is that children often become increasingly other-centred."[457] This view is supported by reference to comments of teachers and parents but, there is no reference to how the child experiences the practice or to research on its spiritual fruits. The Christian tradition suggests that meditation moves the centre of gravity of one's consciousness slowly from the head to the heart and leads to a more compassionate way of seeing the world. Christie offers several anecdotal references in support of this but does not quote academic research in support of the spiritual fruits of the practice. While other studies, such as a 2013 quantitative Australian study demonstrated that "relating with God provided greatest explanation of variance" in Spiritual Well Being, meditation practice was not part of the research.[458] While theistic, faith-based meditation is clearly intended as means of relating with God, little has been written about the *child's* experience of meditation, in particular about the child's experience of mystery through the practice and its *fruits in their lives* as perceived by them.

The introduction of the practice of meditation into schools is very often promoted for its practical utility, for its psychological benefits. Ecclestone expresses concern at the "growing view that children and young people are emotionally vulnerable and need silence as a therapeutic remedy."[459] She worries that such an approach misses the spiritual value of the practice. This study was prompted by a similar concern. I have witnessed the introduction of mindfulness practice into Irish primary schools primarily because of its proven beneficial effects for the well-being

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[455] Hyde, de Souza, and Kehoe, "The Sound of Silence: Stillness and Quiet - a Case Study of the Role of Christian Meditation in Children's Prayer Life," 49.

[456] Christie, *Coming Home: A Guide to Teaching Christian Meditation to Children*, 34.

[457] Ibid., 36.

[458] John Fisher, "Assessing Spiritual Well-Being: Relating with God Explains Greatest Variance in Spiritual Well-Being among Australian Youth," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 18, no. 4 (2013).

[459] Kathryn Ecclestone, "Silence in Schools (Book Review)," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality,* 18, no. 3 (2013): 301.

of children but without addressing the potential rich, deep spiritual fruits of the practice. This study is designed to explore that potential.

Erricker has written on meditation and spiritual development.[460] However, the title of the book in which it is published is *Meditation in Schools: A Practical Guide to Calmer Classrooms*. In his very brief article, he explores the distinction between conceptual knowledge and spiritual awareness and reflects on Krishnamurti's question as to whether the accumulation of knowledge militates against the capacity for developing a keen spiritual awareness. He writes

> If we really want to take the spiritual seriously in education it is a matter of doing it, not talking about it or learning what others have said about it. This involves a radical change to what we call pedagogy. There is no learning about and learning from; there is no teaching, only inquiry; there is no knowledge, only reflection on practice. There is no instruction, only doing; no answers, only awareness. … Out of this grow the seeds of spiritual awareness or, to put it differently, their recognition that their life does not have to be just the result of a particular social and educational conditioning.[461]

However, his writing, while deeply thoughtful and wise, is not based on academic research. Writing almost a decade earlier, Madeline Simon had argued that children were born contemplatives: "They have not reached the stage of logical thought and are able, in their simplicity, to catch and hold God by love."[462] Jeannie Battigan gives many examples where children gave very positive feedback on their experience of meditation.[463] Helen Lees, author of *Silence in Schools,* spoke with head-teachers and teachers in a variety of schools in the UK, about silence as distinct from meditation or mindfulness. She concludes that silence has the power to release schools from pre-structured, cognitive, rational orientations of thinking, bring democratic experiences into schools and undo the externalisation of the self - helping to return people to themselves and providing spaces for escape from being locked into a code of expectations, assumptions and demands.[464] An earlier study by this researcher found that Christian meditation was well within the reach of the ordinary 9-11 year-old child; his study suggests that that the practice of Christian meditation develops the child's awareness of the transcendent in their lives and leaves them

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[460] Erricker and Erricker, *Meditation in Schools: A Practical Guide to Calmer Classrooms*.

[461] Clive Erricker, "Meditation and Spiritual Development," in *Meditation in Schools: A Practical Guide Calmer Classrooms*, ed. Clive Erricker and Jane Erricker, (London: Continuum, 2001), 60.

[462] Simon, *Born Contemplative: Introducing Children to Christian Meditation*, 2.

[463] Battigan, *A Child's Way: How to Teach and Practice Christian Meditation with Children.*, 58-59.

[464] Lees, *Silence in Schools*, 106.

open to and vulnerable to transformation through the encounter.[465] And Laurence Freeman, Director of the World Community for Christian Meditation notes that meditation manifests in children as the fruits of the spirit viz. love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, fidelity and self-control and a growing awareness of the essential goodness of all persons, of the divine spark deep within, of the true-self.[466] From all of this research, this researcher's earlier study[467] is the only one that specifically explored the child's experience of meditation and its spiritual impact on their lives. This current study deepens and broadens that exploration.

3.6   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sketched the background to the practice of meditation across the wisdom traditions and I have explored how meditation has been described by them as a doorway to a deep wisdom way of knowing, a means of accessing perceptual knowledge which is complementary to conceptual knowledge. As a result, meditation leads to growth in self-knowledge and self-awareness and one's innate spirituality is nurtured.[468] I explored the link between meditation and the stages and states of human consciousness and used the Wilber-Combs Lattice to demonstrate that children are capable of rich and deep spiritual experiences despite their limited development along the cognitive and other lines of development.

This chapter has also traced the roots of Christian meditation and demonstrated how it was deeply embedded in Christian practice, particularly in the time of the Desert Mothers and Fathers and it outlined how the practice was recovered by the Benedictine monk John Main. It described the practice, as promoted by John Main, in all its simplicity and depth. I also identified what is distinctive about Christian meditation in terms of its intention. Ultimately, the tradition claims that the practice of Christian meditation transfigures the person who practices it, so that they develop a new way of seeing and acting in the world. Although a practice of

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[465] Keating, "To Explore the Contours of the Child's Experience of Christian Meditation."
[466] Laurence Freeman, *Meditation with Children* (Miami: Continuum Press, 2013), 29. These are the qualities listed by St. Paul in Galatians 5:22.
[467] Keating, "To Explore the Contours of the Child's Experience of Christian Meditation."
[468] Peter Tyler describes the Christian mystical tradition as a way of knowing (or unknowing) that is a heart-knowledge as much as a head-knowledge. See Tyler, *Picturing the Soul: Revisioning Psychotherapy and Spiritual Direction*, 2.

silence and stillness, it is dynamic, not passive, and leads to deeply contemplative action in the world.

While much has been written about the perceived benefits and fruits of meditation, research has been confined to the psychological benefits and very little research has been carried out on the presumed spiritual fruits of the practice. This study is designed to help fill that gap. The design of this research is informed by the literature reviewed in this and the previous chapter. In light of the nature of children's spirituality and the nature of the practice of meditation, this study seeks to discover how children perceive and describe the practice of meditation and, in particular, to discern what impact the practice has, if any, on children's spirituality. The next chapter outlines the methodology for this study before going on, in the following chapter, to analyse the data generated by the interviews with the children. These are discussed in the penultimate chapter in the light of the literature reviewed here.

Chapter 4

Design of the Research

The job of the artist is to always deepen the mystery.[469]

4.1   Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research design. It identifies the chosen research paradigm with its related ontological and epistemological assumptions and justifies the use a hermeneutic, phenomenological, mystagogical methodology. It then explores best practice in researching with children, including ethical issues, before outlining the specifics of the research design for the study.

The purpose of this study is to explore the child's experience of meditation in the context of a whole-school practice in Irish primary schools and its impact, if any, on children's spirituality. Accordingly, a methodology was required which acknowledged the reality of spiritual experience and which would enable me to access and enter into the mystery of the spiritual experience of the children. As quantitative methods do not study individual human consciousness, which lies at the heart of this inquiry, it seemed from the outset that a qualitative methodology was most likely called for in this case. However, Wertz *et al.*, amongst others, encourage those considering qualitative research "to develop philosophical acumen, to reflect on the philosophical assumptions of their chosen methodologies, and to openly acknowledge philosophical influences guiding research as they understand it."[470] Accordingly, the opening section of this chapter explores the philosophical foundations underpinning this study and explores and justifies the research design.

4.2   Research Paradigm

Creswell observes that

> Whether we are aware of it or not, we always bring certain beliefs and
> philosophical assumptions to our research … The difficulty lies first in

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[469] Widely attributed to the artist, Francis Bacon.
[470] F.J. Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research and Intuitive Inquiry* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011), 83.

becoming aware of these assumptions and beliefs and second in deciding whether we will actively incorporate them into our qualitative studies.[471]

These beliefs and assumptions are incorporated in the research paradigm or worldview that underpins any study. Many researchers, including Guba and Lincoln,[472] Creswell[473] and Mertens[474] stress the importance of being clear from the outset about the *paradigm* within which research is conceived and carried out.[475] A paradigm is "a set of beliefs that guides action … taken in connection with a disciplined inquiry."[476] All paradigms have core characteristics in terms of *ontology* (philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality), *epistemology* (assumptions about what it means to know, the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the would-be-known) and *methodology* (how can one investigate specific research questions and produce knowledge about that topic being studied).[477] In essence, paradigms provide researchers with a structure within their chosen discipline through which meaning and significance are determined and each paradigm has ethical implications for methodological choices.

There are numerous ways in which the broad range of research paradigms have been conceived and how they may be typified and previewed. They are sometimes presented under three broad categories: positivist, constructivist, and transformative. The first two, positivism and constructivism (sometimes referred to as interpretivism) stand at opposite ends of a continuum; they have very different ontological and epistemological assumptions. The transformative paradigm is not suited to the research question of this study as it generally intends to raise awareness in the research participants of the possibility of confronting social oppression enabling them to advance an agenda for change, to transform or improve their

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[471] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2013), Kindle location 603 of 9141.

[472] Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research " in *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. N.K Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994).

[473] See John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications 2009). Also *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*.

[474] Donna M. Mertens, *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity with Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2010).

[475] As Silverman succinctly expresses it: "research is worthless unless it recognises its theoretical assumptions." David Silverman, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2013), Kindle location 225 of 3198.

[476] Egon C. Guba, *The Paradigm Dialog* (Newbury Park, Ca.: Sage, 1990), 17.

[477] Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2011), 5.

lives.[478] This chapter continues with a brief consideration of the two remaining paradigms which have been historically the dominant and contrasting research paradigms. Any brief account will inevitably be simplistic, but it should, by pointing to their differences and weaknesses, especially at the extremes of each paradigm, help the reader to understand the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin the research strategy and explain why an intermediate paradigm, critical realism, has been chosen to underpin this study.

4.2.1   The Positivist (or Objectivist) Paradigm

The ontological assumption of the positivist paradigm is realism and its epistemology is objective, positivist; it assumes that there is a reality independent of the researcher which can be discovered and measured objectively. The positivist world-view is deterministic; it is modelled on the natural sciences which seek to identify the causes – or natural laws - that probably determine effects or outcomes. It assumes that by-in-large the social world can be studied in the same way as the natural sciences, that there are value-free methods in the social sciences and that the research can result in explanations of a causal nature. In the human sciences it focuses on observable, measurable facts regarding social phenomena which are deemed to have causes which may be discovered through observation, measurement and experiment. Unobservable phenomena such as meanings and intentions are ignored. This approach leads to the formulation of hypotheses which can then be tested through further observation, measurement and experiment. The data is seen as hard and reliable and there is a firewall between the background and values of the researcher and the subject, process and conduct of the research. Ethical guidelines are considered to be essential in order to protect participants from abuse and from any potential harmful consequences of the research e.g. in biomedical or behavioural research. In essence, the positivist paradigm is quantitative and deductive.

4.2.2   The Constructivist (or Interpretive) Paradigm

The constructivist world-view sees the social world as very different to the natural world. Knowledge, according to constructivism, does not exist in a state awaiting

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[478] Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 9.

discovery but is constructed by humans through proactive and purposive interaction with the world. In other words, its ontology is relative and its epistemology is subjective and interpretivist. Constructivism considers that natural science methodologies are often unsuited to the study of society and human behaviour because human beings, unlike inanimate objects, can and do interpret the environment and themselves. This paradigm assumes that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work; they develop subjective meanings as they interpret their experiences. It represents a change of focus, from explaining phenomena (typical in the natural sciences) to an emphasis on understanding. Such an approach is often deemed more suitable for investigating the human sciences. The aim of the researcher in light of this paradigm is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied, often through interviews or focus groups, in contrast to the firewall between the researcher and the research participants in the positivist paradigm. Interview questions are kept broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation in conversation with the researcher.[479] The constructivist approach focuses on individual consciousness, on the creation of meaning, on the 'how' and the 'why' of experience and not just on the 'who', 'where' and 'when.' It acknowledges that facts and values cannot be separated and that understanding is inevitably prejudiced because it is situated in terms of the individual and the event.[480] Van Manen notes that "The object of human science research is essentially a linguistic project: to make some aspect of our lived world, of our lived experience, reflectively understandable and intelligible."[481] In the constructivist paradigm the data is seen as soft but rich and deep and the background and values of the researcher are explicitly acknowledged in the conduct of the research. In essence it is qualitative and inductive and its outcomes are not generalisable.

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[479] Ibid., 8.

[480] See G. Cousin, "Case Study Research," *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 29, no. 3 (2005). Also J. Elliott and D. Lukes, "Epistemology as Ethics in Research and Policy: The Use of Case Studies," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 41, no. S1 (2008).

[481] Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 125-26.

4.2.3 Contrasting Paradigms

In a nutshell, positivists and constructivists collect and interpret different types of data and make different claims to truth. At their respective extremes, these paradigms are polar opposites. To the positivist, that which cannot be observed, directly or indirectly through instruments, ultimately cannot exist. By contrast, the constructivist focuses on individual and group subjectivity. The aim is to generate a rich understanding and description of particular people's experiences of the social world. Researchers recognise that all participants involved, including the researcher, bring their own unique interpretations of the world or construction of the situation to the research.[482] In the constructivist approach it is accepted that the research inevitably includes and expresses the orientation, methods, values, traditions, and personal qualities of the researcher. Therefore, part of the rigour of qualitative research involves self-disclosure and reflexivity on the part of the investigator;[483] he or she articulates their philosophical and cultural assumptions while striving to remain fully open to the attitudes and values of the research participants.[484] The concept of objectivity in the positivist paradigm is replaced by confirmability in the constructivist paradigm: the methods of data collection are clearly outlined and the process of interpreting the data is made explicit in writing up the research.[485]

Clark notes that positivism is "viewed as failing to acknowledge the inherent social nature of knowledge development, the influence of underlying unobservable factors/powers, and the meaning-centred nature of humans."[486] However, constructivism tends to over-privilege these human perspectives. These paradigms give rise to competing claims to knowledge that are not easily resolved.

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[482] Note that 'constructivism' should not be confused with the very different paradigm of 'constructionism' which holds that all knowledge is socially constructed and that social phenomena can only be understood by describing the processes by which they are culturally constituted as the things they are - the focus in constructionism is on the 'disclosure' of how social phenomena are socially constructed.

[483] Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research and Intuitive Inquiry*, 84.

[484] N. Mackenzie and S. Knipe, "Research Dilemmas: Paradigms, Methods and Methodology," *Issues in Educational Research* 16, no. 2. Retrieved 9 February 2014 from http://www.iier.org.au/iier16/mackenzie.html. See also M. Hammersley, Methodical Paradigms in Educational Research: An Outline of Methodological Approaches, in Teaching and Learning Research Programme (Blog), http://www.tlrp.org/capacity/rm/wt/hammersley/hammersley4.html. 14 February 2014. Retreived 14 February 2014 from http://www.tlrp.org/capacity/rm/wt/hammersley/hammersley4.html.

[485] Mertens, *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity with Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods* 19.

[486] Alexander M. Clark, "Critical Realism," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lias M. Given, (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2008).

Critical realists argue that at the extremes of these paradigms, both naïve realism (positivism) and radical constructivism are guilty of what Roy Bhasker called *the epistemic fallacy*;[487] in different ways they reduce the ontological and the epistemological domains of knowledge into one so that statements about reality are translated into ones about human knowledge of reality.[488] The positivists claim that that which cannot be experienced cannot be and the radical constructionists take the limitations regarding knowledge of reality to be limitations on reality itself. In brief, the epistemic fallacy is about the conflation of ontology and epistemology, about the reduction of being to our knowledge of being. Critical realists, on the other hand, agree that the realm of things which exist cannot be reduced to those things one has direct knowledge about. The paradigm of critical realism, which is explored next, overcomes the epistemic fallacy by asserting the primacy of ontology: that the world would exist whether or not humans did and that the world was round even when people believed it was flat.[489]

4.2.4 Critical Realism

In recent decades, Critical Realism has emerged as an alternative paradigm and is closely associated with the work of Roy Bhaskar, who published *A Realist Theory of Science* in 1975. Bhaskar's early work sought to discover what reality must be like for science to be possible; he critiqued positivism as an epistemology that viewed the world as being overly uniform and "reduced to the ways in which we know it."[490] He argued that positivism could not sustain either the necessity or the universality of scientific laws. Critical realism argues that the same general process of science is applicable in both the natural and human/social sciences but accepts that the particular characteristics of the social world place inevitable limits on that process.[491] While critical realism is a relatively new paradigm, positioned between the two poles of positivism and constructionism, it is now fully international and has been applied

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[487] Roy Bhasker, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Routledge, 1975), 5.
[488] Nick Hedlund-de Witt, "Critical Realism: A Synoptic Overview and Resource Guide for Integral Scholars," in *Critical Realism and Integral Theory Symposium* (JFK University, Ca.: MetaIntegral Foundation, 2013), 7.
[489] John Mingers, "Philosophical Foundations: Critical Realism," in *Realising Systems Thinking: Knowledge and Action in Management Science*, (New York: Springer, 2006), 21.
[490] Alexander M. Clark, Sue L. Lissel, and Caroline Davis, "Complex Critical Realism: Tenets and Application in Nursing Research," *Advances in Nursing Science* 31, no. 4 (2008): 67-68.
[491] Mingers, "Philosophical Foundations: Critical Realism," 20.

in many disciplines, mostly in the social and health sciences, evaluation, and economics.[492]

Like positivists, critical realists propose an ontology that assumes that reality (with its unobservable structures) exists whether or not it is observed; in other words, reality is independent of our perception of it. But reality can cause events which can be observed. A positivist epistemology, traditional to the natural sciences, assumes that this reality can be readily accessed under experimental (*closed, controlled*) conditions by observing those events. By contrast, critical realism "views reality as complex and recognizes the role of both agency and structural factors in influencing human behaviour."[493] Closed, controlled conditions rarely apply in social studies research which take place in an *open, uncontrolled* environment. Critical realism then takes the middle ground: "it does not reduce the world to unknowable chaos or a positivistic universal order, nor does it place objective truth value on the perspectives of human beings or remove the influence and importance of human perspectives."[494] The epistemology of critical realism therefore is relativist; it accepts that knowledge is relative to the perspective of the knower and is socially constructed to an extent, but not entirely so. Ontologically, as in positivism, it accepts that reality can be known but critical realism accepts the fallibility of such knowledge; it acknowledges that reality is complex and cannot be fully grasped and it leaves open the possibility that theory can be amended or replaced by another one that offers a more complete explanation.[495]

To illuminate the complex nature of reality, Bhaskar conceived the existence of three realms or overlapping layers of reality: the *real*, the *actual*, and the *empirical*.[496] The *real* domain refers to underlying relations, structures, and tendencies that have the power to cause changes in the actual realm; these agencies or causal influences are independent of human activity (*intransitive*) and often

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[492] Geoff Easton, "Critical Realism in Case Study Research," *Industrial Marketing Management* 39(2010). See also Clark, "Critical Realism," 167.

[493] "Critical Realism," 167.

[494] Clark, Lissel, and Davis, "Complex Critical Realism: Tenets and Application in Nursing Research," 68.

[495] Easton, "Critical Realism in Case Study Research," 120.

[496] For example, gravity is postulated to be *real* in the natural sciences and human nature in the social sciences. Both are *underlying mechanisms or structures* that cannot be observed directly but have power to cause change in the actual domain. While we can't directly observe gravity, we can observe and experience events caused by gravity, but events caused by gravity may *actually* occur without being observed or experienced by human beings.

remain latent until, under the right circumstances, factors in the real domain combine to generate causal changes in the actual domain. Events in the actual domain are generated from complex interactions of factors in the real domain. The *actual* domain refers to the occurrence of events and outcomes in the world; it consists of all objects and events, all that happens in the world, whether human beings have experience of it or not.[497] The real domain cannot be observed but the actual can, albeit fallibly. We can never have direct knowledge of the real, but we can speculate about it.[498] The *empirical* domain is the domain of experience, consisting of the sum of individual and collective experiences of the world, past and present; such experience is dependent on the five human senses, through which the world is experienced holistically.[499] The researcher resides in the empirical domain. The ontology of critical realism "advocates the existence of an objective reality formed of both events and underlying causes, and although these dimensions of reality have objective existence, they are not knowable with certainty."[500] In other words,

> At the level of the actual and the empirical, aspects of the real can be known through human inquiry, and rich knowledge of the nuances, contours, and textures of objects' contextual manifestations can be obtained, despite the fallibility and inevitable partiality of human knowledge production.[501]

Critical realism accepts that what causes something has nothing to do with the frequency of its occurring. Instead "explanation depends … on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions."[502] In other words, to explain why phenomena occur, researchers therefore need to go beyond the surface of observable factors in the actual domain to explore what is happening in the real domain. While positivism generally involves deductive reasoning, moving from the general to the particular, and constructionism involves inductive reasoning, moving from the particular to the general, critical realism uses a different method of inference, known as abduction or

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[497] For example, an apple falls from a tree or a bolt of lightning strikes a building.

[498] For example, naively by speculating that thunder is caused by Gods rolling barrels across the heavens or more scientifically in terms of an interaction between positively and negatively charged electric fields. The real generative mechanism does not depend on our theory about it.

[499] The apple is seen to fall from the tree, the lightning-bolt is observed.

[500] Clark, "Critical Realism," 167.

[501] Hedlund-de Witt, "Critical Realism: A Synoptic Overview and Resource Guide for Integral Scholars," 5.

[502] A. Sayer, *Realism and Social Science* (London: Sage, 2000), 14.

retroduction. It involves making observations and postulating (or identifying) mechanisms that could have generated the given phenomenon.

In terms of the ontology of the human sciences, critical realism acknowledges that the complexity of the social world can only be understood by understanding the structures that generate events. Human behaviour is influenced by both agency and structural factors; the agency of the human person is always constrained by wider structural factors that are viewed as surrounding the individual.[503] While the culture of a society is clearly dependent on the existence of human beings who created it, critical realism argues that culture also exists as a structure independent of individuals, with power to facilitate and constrain human activity, whether or not this is recognised by individuals.[504] In contrast, the laws of the natural world are not affected by their own operation and natural phenomena are independent of our conceptions of them. In addition, the rules of culture and society, unlike the rules of the natural sciences, are contextual, not universal – they change from place to place and over time. They only hold in particular cultures or sub-cultures for finite periods of time. Epistemologically, in the social world the possibilities of measurement are very limited because "intrinsically the phenomena are meaningful, and meanings cannot properly be measured and compared, only understood and described."[505] While these differences place constraints on the practice of social science, the same general principles of critical realism apply to both the natural and the social sciences: "the existence of an intransitive (*real*) domain of generative mechanisms; the recognition of the epistemic (but not judgmental) relativity of knowledge; and a retroductive methodology that explains events by hypothesising underlying causal mechanisms."[506]

Critical realism is underpinned by three core principles of which the first two are ontological realism and epistemic relativism. Its third core principle is known as judgemental rationality; it postulates that, despite the fact every knower approaches knowledge from the perspective of a world-view and that one's knowledge of reality is never absolutely secure, it is possible nonetheless to make informed judgement

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[503] For example, gender- and/or race-based discrimination may exist in an organization whether or not it is recognized by management or workers.

[504] Clark, Lissel, and Davis, "Complex Critical Realism: Tenets and Application in Nursing Research," 69.

[505] Mingers, "Philosophical Foundations: Critical Realism," 25-26.

[506] Ibid., 26.

between competing truth claims, to assess some knowledge claims to be more truthful than others.[507] In other words, "through the exercise of reason and cultivation of wisdom it is possible to pursue truth" and live more authentic, truthful lives.[508] By privileging ontology,

> allowing reality itself to guide and structure our ways of knowing, it becomes possible to make informed, though necessarily contingent, judgements about the nature of reality in a manner that makes possible the advancement of learning and human flourishing.[509]

These three core principles ontological realism, epistemic relativity and judgemental rationality might be referred to as the three R's of critical realism.

4.2.5 Critical Realism and Spirituality

Bhaskar developed a 'spiritual turn' towards the end of the twentieth century stressing the importance of the transcendent for authentic human experience and he developed critical realism into a 'philosophy of meta-reality' in which he sought to counter modernity's systematic elimination of any notion of transcendence and to articulate a concept of spirituality which transcended dualism and which could appeal to both the secularly minded and the religious.[510] While this turn to spirituality has been criticised within the critical realist movement as compromising the status of Critical Realism as a serious philosophical movement, others have embraced it. In *'Transcendence and God,'* Archer, Collier and Porpora attempt "to create and legitimise a conceptual space … for specifically nuanced notions of God in contemporary social discourse' and they draw attention to "the curiously uncontested discursive privilege" accorded to atheism as a 'working hypothesis' by

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[507] Bernard Lonergan, for example, developed the general empirical method, a four-step process through which one *attends* carefully to clarify experience, *applies intelligence* as one seeks to test one's understanding of experience, *applies reason* as one makes judgements about one's understanding and makes *responsible* decisions in light of the previous steps. Through this mode of discovery one can achieve authentic subjectivity in knowing and choosing which equates with objectivity. See Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: An Introduction to Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 22.
[508] Andrew Wright, *Religious Education and Critical Realism: Knowledge, Reality and Religious Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 46.
[509] Ibid., 31.
[510] Jamie Morgan and Mervyn Hartwig, "Introduction," in *Critical Realism and Spirituality*, ed. Mervyn Hartwig and Jamie Morgan, (London: Routledge, 2012), 2. See also Alistair E. McGrath, "Transcendence and God," ibid., 160.

most social theorists in the academy.[511] McGrath suggests that this turn and subsequent research by critical realists means that "the notion of the transcendent remains meaningful within contemporary culture, and points to important areas of exploration that ought to be open to critical realist interpretation,"[512] although "critical realism has yet to be taken to be taken seriously by most Christian theologians."[513]

4.3   Choice of Research Paradigm and a Qualitative Methodology for this Study

The three core principles of critical realism provide a solid foundation for this study. Ontological realism accords with the concept of spirituality outlined in Chapter 2, as a search for the true-self. This assumes the reality of an objective, transcendent dimension whether or not particular children have consciousness of it in their lived experience. The concept of a layered reality, with real, actual and empirical levels, is also congruent with the concept of spirituality outlined; while spirituality cannot be directly observed, research methods may be devised (in the empirical domain) which seek to enable children to give expression to its impact, if any, on their lived experience (the actual domain). Yet, while a realist ontology is desirable, the nature of this study also calls for an interpretive, relativist epistemology and calls for a qualitative approach allowing for direct engagement between the researcher and the research participants. Flick *et al.* suggest that qualitative research claims to describe "life-worlds 'from the inside out', from the point of view of the people who participate" and in so doing it attempts to draw attention to processes, meaning patterns and structural features which may not be consciously known by research participants. [514]

Creswell suggests that qualitative research is most suitable where a problem or a question needs to be *explored*; for example to study a particular group or population, or to identify variables that cannot be easily measured or to hear voices which tend to be silenced in society. By its nature qualitative research enables us to explore a problem rather than to use predetermined information from the literature or

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[511] "Transcendence and God," 157.

[512] Ibid., 161.

[513] Ibid., 164.

[514] U. Flick, E. von Kardoff, and I. Steinke, *A Companion to Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2004), 3.

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rely on results from other research studies. In other words, by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what one expects to find or what one has read in the literature, one can achieve a complex, detailed understanding of the issue.[515] Qualitative research can enable the researcher to gain access to both the known and unknown details of social reality and to bring them to light whereas a quantitative approach begins with a set of predetermined factors which are to be examined and their inter-relationship explored. As Quinn Patton has written

> The purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions is to enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of question categories.[516]

A core value of any form of research is to get to know the other and to fairly represent the authentic findings of the data analysis. All researchers bring values to a study but qualitative researchers must make their values known in a study and ensure they do not unduly influence the outcome of the research. They openly acknowledge how their interpretation of the data flows, in part, from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences.[517] However, throughout the qualitative research process, the researchers keep a focus on learning the meaning that the *research participants* hold about the question being studied, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature, although these too, when openly stated, can bring additional insight to the process. The participant meanings will likely suggest diverse views and multiple perspectives on the question – hence, themes emerging in a qualitative study will reflect the multiple perspectives of the participants in the study.[518] To reduce experience to statistics overlooks the uniqueness and richness of the experience of the research participant. Commenting on why the human sciences called for a different method to that suited to the natural sciences, Dilthey noted that we explain nature but human life we must understand.[519] Silverman notes that by making mundane situations remarkable, qualitative research

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[515] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, Kindle location 1146 of 9141.

[516] Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage, 2002), 19.

[517] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, Kindle location 773 of 9141.

[518] Ibid., Kindle location 1127 of 9141.

[519] Quoted in van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 4.

can bring into focus taken-for-granted forms of behaviour and open the way to new possibilities and understandings.[520] For her research into the spirituality of children Nye sought a qualitative method that would enable "any features of children's spirituality to emerge in their own right." She favoured a method which would collect "rather messy, but authentic 'human' data – stories, conversations, observations … [a method which created] a space for the spirit to come out and play."[521] She adds that it is often deep within spiritual life, in the depths of spiritual experience, and the exploration of spiritually significant aspects of life, "that the perception of what is real can take a form that feels incontrovertible, certain, authoritative and true."[522] In addition, Nye comments that qualitative methodologies have the advantage that they do not limit 'reality' to the thought of influential [male] doctors of the Western church but "women's experiences, the perspectives held in the developing world, and even children's experiences can claim as much right to be examined as truth-disclosing."[523]

Janet Ruffing too addresses the benefits of qualitative methodologies for the study of spirituality. Such methodologies offer

> ethnographic, phenomenological, and heuristic forms of research that enable the researcher to go beyond his or her own limited perspective yet draw on the researcher's empathic understanding and insight as they emerge in the process of the study. Although the results of such studies do not yield statistically reliable data, they do produce new insights about a broad range of human experiences which may be infused with the sacred, and are thus an appropriate method of research for scholars in Christian spirituality.[524]

Clark comments that the strengths of critical realism for qualitative research

> lie in its desire to render complexity intelligible, its explanatory focus, its reconciliation of agency and structural factors, and its ability to recognize the existence of wider knowledge while respecting the importance of social meaning to humans. Critical realism is particularly well suited to exploring research questions that relate to understanding complexity.[525]

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[520] Silverman, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Qualitative Research*, Kindle location 102 of 3918.

[521] Rebecca Nye, "Christian Perspectives on Children's Spirituality: Social Science Contributions? ," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliff, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2004), 106.

[522] Ibid., 107.

[523] Ibid.

[524] Janet K. Ruffing, "Personality Sciences," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 321.

[525] Clark, "Critical Realism," 168.

For these reasons, I have chosen to undertake this research within the framework of a critical realist paradigm and a qualitative methodology.[526]

4.4   Design of the Research

Morse and Richards refer to the concept of *methodological congruence* as a key principle of qualitative research.[527] This occurs where the purposes, questions, and methods of research seem to fit together seamlessly so that the outcome is optimised and the research report reads as a cohesive whole rather than as fragmented, isolated parts. This section explores the research design for this study.

4.4.1   Researching Spiritual Experience

Research in the area of spirituality brings its own challenges. It is inevitable that questions of subjectivity and self-implication arise. A methodology is required which enables one to study the question with authenticity and which allows one somehow to enter the mystery of the experience. In this section I will explore the writings of a number of leading scholars in the field.

Academic disciplines are distinguished from one another not just by what they study (often known as the *material object*) but also by the perspective from which it is studied (known as the *formal object*). For example the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology and spirituality all study the human being, which is in essence the material object of those disciplines. However, they each have different formal objects – anthropology studies the human being in terms of their cultural participation while psychology studies the human being from the perspective of the psychic structures and the functioning of the person in the world. Writing about the study of Christian spirituality, Schneiders and Perrin separately observe that the formal object – its distinguishing characteristic - is its specific focus on Christian faith *made manifest in the concrete experience* of the research participants.

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[526] Ibid.

[527] J. M. Morse and L. Richards, *Readme First for a User's Guide to Qualitative Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002), 33.

In other words, spirituality studies not simply Christian faith but the *lived experience* of that faith.[528]

Experience of any kind, including spiritual experience, is extremely difficult to define. Experience is always experience *of* something by an individual and is, by definition, subjective and, while it can be described, the experience itself is not always communicable.[529] Researchers must settle, then, for a description of the experience which must be conveyed to others in some recognisable form – often ending up as a 'text.' It follows that research into spiritual experience calls for the interpretation of such texts. Otherwise one faces the danger, as Eliot described, that "we had the experience but missed the meaning."[530] Because experience is incommunicable, in the study of spirituality the comparable experience of the researcher plays an important role. In other words, the researcher must have access to their own spiritual life in order to be able to comprehend the spiritual life of others.[531] Thus the study of spirituality is self-implicating and any methodology must enable "a certain kind of 'objectivity' to allow all the relevant data to be heard, weighed, and incorporated in any study.[532] Whatever the experience being investigated, in each case it is the experience of a particular person that is the object of the study, not the generality of the experience for all subjects. Schneiders notes that

> studies in spirituality do not aim to develop a second-order theoretical language about the spiritual life which can be verified in all authentic Christian spirituality, but to investigate the spiritual life as it is and has been concretely lived … Consequently, unlike theology, whose analyses and conclusions intend applicability to all instances in the class in question (for example, an adequate theology of grace should be applicable to all the baptised), spirituality studies unique experiences of the living of Christian faith which, in their very uniqueness, can encourage, challenge, warn, illuminate, confirm, expand, subvert, or otherwise interact with both general theological theory, on the one hand, and other specific experiences of faith, on the other.[533]

I have noted that the study of spirituality is challenging because, by its very nature, it is both subjective and self-implicating. In all aspects of one's life one sees

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[528] Schneiders, "Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality," 17. See also Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 11.
[529] As Ricouer expresses it: "My experience cannot directly become your experience." P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 15-16.
[530] Extract from T.S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," in *Four Quartets,* (Harcourt, Brace, 1943).
[531] Schneiders, "Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality," 29.
[532] Ibid.
[533] Ibid., 18.

subjectively. "We see the world, not as it is, but as *we* are – or, as we are conditioned to see it."[534] In other words, one's conditioning by life's experiences as well as one's subjective desires and attachments get in the way of one's seeing objectively. In addition, the questions posed in the study of spirituality can be deeply personal and can have significant implications for one's own life. The academic study of spirituality is self-implicating because researchers tend to "care personally and not just academically about the answers"[535] to the questions posed in their research; in other words, the scholar's own spiritual journey is intertwined with his or her own scholarship.[536] In the words of Mary Frohlich, the self-implicating character of such research arises because "what we study, how we study and what we learn, is rooted in our own spiritual living."[537] Despite these challenges, I concur with Frohlich that "lived spirituality" is and must remain the key point of engagement for any study of spirituality. Accordingly, critical reflection on lived experience plays a key role in ensuring one does so with authenticity.[538] Researchers need to be attentive to and reflexive about their own pre-judgements and biases. Schneiders observes that one of the major challenges for the discipline of spirituality is to discover how to "integrate a holistic approach to research with full accountability to the standards of criticism, personal commitment to what one is studying with appropriate methodological perspective, and practical involvement with theoretical integrity."[539]

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[534] Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 28.

[535] Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," 18. She notes that "We are not really neutral or detached about the questions our research generates. Vital personal interest in the answers to one's questions can lead to skewing one's research, consciously or unconsciously, by a slanted formulation of the question, methodological manipulation, or a selective interpretation of results".

[536] Mary Frohlich, "Under the Sign of Jonah: Studying Spirituality in a Time of Ecosystemic Crisis," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 9, no. 1 (2009): 42. Schneiders concurs. She states that the "question today among scholars in the field is not *whether* the personal religious experience of students plays a role in their work but *how* it can be appropriately integrated". Schneiders, "Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality," 29. For her, the study of spirituality always impacts one's own lived spirituality: "As students readily testify, research in the area of spirituality is self-implicating, often at a very deep level and the transformation experienced through the study reverberates in the ongoing research." "Spirituality in the Academy," *Theological Studies* 50(1989): 695

[537] Frohlich, "Spiritual Discipline, Discipline of Spirituality: Revisiting Questions of Definition and Method," 68. Likewise, from the perspective of methodology, "when we select, claim understanding of or evaluate something as 'having to do with spirituality,' we do so based on our own living of spirituality."

[538] Ibid., 70.

[539] She reflects that "vital personal interest in the answers to one's questions can lead to skewering one's research, consciously or unconsciously, by a slanted formulation of the question, methodical

If one is to engage in authentic research into spirituality with objectivity, the methods one chooses must give "methodologically valid access to subjective data without denaturing the experience or getting mired in the purely private or idiosyncratic."[540] Frohlich suggests a way; she considers that "while there may not be a single 'method'…. it is possible to name a 'methodological principle' specific to spirituality as a discipline."[541] She builds on Bernard Lonergan's concept of 'interiority' as she develops her methodological principle.[542] Lonergan expanded the notion of data in the natural sciences *to include the data of human consciousness*. He proposed a 'generalised empirical methodology' that applied to *both* the natural sciences *and* those academic disciplines that explore how human beings generate meaning and value in life.[543] In other words, he argued that the data of experience, one's own thinking, intuiting and judging are legitimate primary evidences of scientific investigation. He proposed that the thinking and choosing human being has an in-built dynamic structure of decision-making which operates on four 'levels'[544] of consciousness: experience, insight, judgment and decision-making. He asserted that at *each* level one operates out of *inherent norms* or normative criteria that enables one to move towards *authentic subjectivity*. The essence of his argument is that authentic subjectivity is the correlative of objectivity, and can be achieved by being faithful to these inherent norms at each level of consciousness. Frohlich comments that "by noticing what one is actually doing while insights, judgements, decisions and actions emerge in one's experience, one can arrive at insights into the general structures of human subjectivity."[545] She clarifies Lonergan's concept of

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manipulation, or a selective interpretation of results." See Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," ibid., ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows, (The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 18-19. She reflects that "vital personal interest in the answers to one's questions can lead to skewering one's research, consciously or unconsciously, by a slanted formulation of the question, methodical manipulation, or a selective interpretation of results." Mary Frohlich, "Spiritual Discipline, Discipline of Spirituality: Revisiting Questions of Definition and Method," ibid., ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows, (John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 74.

[540] Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," ibid., ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows, (The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 18.

[541] Frohlich, "Critical Interiority," 77.

[542] "Spiritual Discipline, Discipline of Spirituality: Revisiting Questions of Definition and Method," 70.

[543] See Lonergan, *Insight: An Introduction to Human Understanding*. Also Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

[544] His use of the word 'levels' in this context is metaphorical.

[545] Frohlich, "Spiritual Discipline, Discipline of Spirituality: Revisiting Questions of Definition and Method," 70.

interiority and names it "critical interiority."[546] The ground of interiority is self-awareness of the operations of one's consciousness; in other words one knows what one is doing when one is doing it. Frohlich contends that central to the study of spirituality is that it focuses on how the object of the study is linked to the process of deep inner transformation.[547] O'Sullivan suggests that what Frohlich calls "critical interiority" might better be named as *authentic subjectivity.*"[548] He suggests that this methodological self-awareness

> discloses that reality is a reality of meaning (reached in judgment) and value (reached in decision) and that we connect with it methodologically, not by bypassing our subjectivity, as though reality was already out there now only waiting to be looked at, but by participating *authentically* in our subjectivity.[549]

As well as enabling each person, individually, to understand and appropriate his or her own spirituality, this dynamism can be applied to the academic study of spirituality. As researchers employ suitable methodologies[550] for their research, they must remain open to the possibility of inauthenticity in themselves and in what they may have received from their religious tradition and their culture about the subject. Through such a praxis of authentic subjectivity one can engage in the study of spirituality with authenticity and objectivity.[551] As a phenomenon, spirituality is not directly observable. Nonetheless, researchers need to develop methodologies which will enable them to study it. The praxis of authentic subjectivity can be applied to whichever methods a scholar or student considers appropriate to their research topic. While it has the capacity to enable any research process to be replicated by others, it

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[546] "Critical Interiority," 77.

[547] Ibid., 79.

[548] See Michael O'Sullivan, "Spiritual Capital and the Turn to Spirituality," in *Spiritual Capital: Spirituality in Practice in Christian Perspective*, ed. Michael O'Sullivan and Bernadette Flanagan, (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 44-47. And "The Human Spirit and the Option for the Economically Poor," in *The Lamplighters: Exploring Spirituality in New Contexts*, ed. Bernadette Flanagan and David Kelly, (Dublin: Veritas, 2004), 222-23. See also "Reflexive and Transformative Subjectivity: Authentic Spirituality and a Journey with Incest," in *Sources of Transformation*, ed. Edward Howells and Peter Tyler, (London: Continuum, 2010), 173-82.

[549] "The Spirituality of Authentic Interiority and the Option for the Economically Poor," *Vinayasadhana* 5, no. 1 (2014): 64.

[550] For a further discussion on methodologies see the works of Sandra Schneiders, Mary Frohlich and Philip Sheldrake referenced in the Bibliography. The key concern articulated here is that whichever methodologies are employed, they need to be subjected to the praxis of authentic interiority.

[551] O'Sullivan reminds us that "because authentic subjectivity is based on what is common to all human beings, it provides us with a method that can study, critique and evaluate many divergent spirtualties … in a way that can be replicated and verified by others." O' Sullivan, Michael, *The Academic Study of Spirituality as a Resource for Social Transformation: A Reflection Paper,* 4 (incorrectly marked as page 3 in the paper), (Paper presented to students of the Masters in Applied Christian Spirituality at All Hallows College, Dublin for the academic year 2012-13).

also allows that others may apply different methods to the same topic and to apply them in light of the same praxis of authentic subjectivity and perhaps verify or challenge the original conclusions.

4.4.2 Phenomenology

Phenomenology, which developed initially in the field of philosophy,[552] has been employed as a qualitative methodology across the humanities and social sciences over the past century or more.[553] Phenomenology is the study of *lived* experience, how a phenomenon appears to the consciousness of a person. It is interested in the activities of consciousness and the objects that present themselves to consciousness;[554] it emphasises "the fundamental significance of conscious subjectivity in our appraisal of everything."[555] Because it aims to explore the essence of aspects of human lived experience, it is deemed to be a good fit with the research question in this study. The basic principle of phenomenology, as elucidated by Husserl, is to go back to the thing itself as it presents itself.[556]

While the aim in phenomenology is the scientific study of the appearance of things in consciousness, its emphasis is on the world as lived by a person, not the world or reality as something separate from the person. The 'life world' is understood as what one experiences *pre-reflectively*, before one resorts to categorization or conceptualization, and quite often includes what is taken for granted or those things that are common sense.[557] Phenomenological inquiry asks "What is this experience like?" as it attempts to unfold meanings as they are lived in everyday existence. A core purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences of a phenomenon to a description of their universal essence; as van

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[552] Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research and Intuitive Inquiry*, 52. It was developed by Edmund Husserl around the beginning of the twentieth century as a philosophical method for investigating consciousness. It arose from radical doubt about the scientific starting points of the nineteenth century, including rationalism, causality-thinking, deductive reasoning, and so forth. See Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 536.

[553] Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research and Intuitive Inquiry*, 4.

[554] Amedeo Giorgi, "The Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method," *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 43, no. 1 (2012): 9.

[555] Patrick Masterson, *Approaching God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 8.

[556] Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 536.

[557] Susan M. Laverty, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2, no. 3 (2003): 4.

Manen describes it (after Plato), the intention is "to grasp the very nature of something, of which any particular instance is only an imperfect example or imitation."[558] In the course of one's everyday life one pays limited attention to one's experiences. Phenomenology, as a practice, brings experience to the fore, analyses it, looks at it from various sides, and tries to make its basic structure explicit. The understanding is, that by applying phenomenological techniques, one can see through an experience down to its essential structure. Gaining insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process of reflectively appropriating, clarifying and making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience.[559]

Experience, however, does not readily yield its truth.[560] Perception does not always accurately describe what is present in consciousness.[561] In lived experience there is always an element of unreflective, often unconscious, interpretation. For example, at twilight one might 'see' a 'person' walking towards one in the distance, only to realise a moment later it was the silhouette of a tree.[562] What is indisputable is that "we are continually engaged in reading reality. At the core of this process is that we interpret something *as* something. … a facade *as* a house, a house *as* a source of income and so forth."[563] To get at the truth of what one 'sees,' one must make oneself aware of the things we take for granted, the things one doesn't examine because one thinks of them as being self-evident or because they have become embedded in one's conditioning or prejudices.[564] The challenge is to look, look again and keep looking and reflecting to obtain complete descriptions. Shifts occur when one looks from a different angle, a different frame of reference, a different mood. No perception of a thing is conclusive and deeper layers of meaning may always unfold when you keep searching.[565] Of course, the meaning or essence of a phenomenon is

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[558] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 177.

[559] Ibid., 77.

[560] Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 539.

[561] Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, 54.

[562] Or we 'see' a house when, in reality, what we have observed is merely a façade, one side of the building – indeed, in common usage, the word façade is, more often than not, understood as 'putting on a show or a pose'! Or we may 'see' a threatening thunderstorm when our actual experience was to notice dark clouds on the horizon. How we see something also depends on our social standing; when looking at a house, a homeless person 'sees' something very different than an estate agent or an architect.

[563] Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 540.

[564] Moustakas describes it thus: "Perception of the reality of an object is dependent on a subject." Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, 27.

[565] Ibid., 69-74. To finally arrive at essences of a phenomenon one must unify the *noema* (external perception) and the *noesis* (internal perception).

never simple or one-dimensional; it is always complex and multi-dimensional and multi-layered.[566]

Intentional experiences are acts of consciousness. When one perceives something, one's intentional experience is really a combination of the outward appearance of the thing one perceives with one's pre-understanding of the thing as contained in one's consciousness through memory, image and meaning.[567] In other words, intentional experiences integrate a 'real' content and an 'ideal' content, in and through which one engages one's thoughts, perceptions, feelings, memory and judgement in order to grasp its essences. While Husserl acknowledges the value of inter-subjectivity, where persons test out their understanding of one another and their knowledge of the world, he stresses that "the beginning point in establishing the truth of things must be individual perception, seeing things as a solitary self."[568] As Moustakas observes "The data of experience, my own thinking, intuiting, reflecting and judging are regarded as primary evidences of scientific investigation.[569]

Waaijman observes that "we are continually engaged in interpreting: we understand the stream of our experience *as* 'I'; we refer to things around us *as* 'world'; we interpret the other *as* 'alter ego.' Hence we not only interpret texts but also ourselves, our situation, our past, the other."[570] This ordinary, pre-reflective everyday way of seeing is sometimes described as prescientific. Prescientific experience visualises something and interprets it as something so quickly that one fails to consider what things have been unconsciously added, excluded or interpreted. So one must learn to stand back from the experience and explore it attentively, which helps to reveal "the thing itself."

Ultimately, phenomenology focuses on *descriptions* of experiences rather than explanations or analyses. "Descriptions keep a phenomenon alive, illuminate its presence, accentuate its underlying meanings, enable the phenomenon to linger, retain its spirit, as near to its actual nature as possible." [571] Van Manen notes that a

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[566] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 78.
[567] Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, 55.
[568] Ibid., 57.
[569] Ibid., 59.
[570] Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 540.
[571] Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, 59. Typically, having analysed the data, the researcher develops a composite textural description of the phenomenon (what participants experienced – it describes the essence of the experience as described by the research participants) and a composite structural description (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context). Moustakas recommends as a final step the integration of the composite

good phenomenological description of an experience is "a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive."[572] Elsewhere he notes that "Phenomenology always addresses any phenomenon as a *possible human experience*; hence phenomenological descriptions have a universal, intersubjective character."[573] A good phenomenological description can, like a well-written novel, transcend the particular circumstances they describe and open one up to the essence of the experience being described; it "acquires a certain transparency, so to speak; it permits us to 'see' the deeper significance, or meaning structures, of the lived experience it describes."[574] To do this, a phenomenological human science text must be oriented, strong, rich and deep.[575] Phenomenological description succeeds when it lets one see that which shines through, that which tends to hide itself.[576] Evocative poetry performs the same function; it can capture something vital that is beyond the capacity of prose to express. Poetic and phenomenological writing also share the quality that meaning is often better expressed through *how* one writes rather than *what* one writes. As I noted at the outset of this chapter, in the words of the artist Frances Bacon, "The job of the artist is to always deepen the mystery."

The principles and processes of phenomenology are congruent with the principles of critical realism.[577] Critical realism does not require researchers to use a particular method as long as the chosen method acknowledges the complexity of the world as an open system; the choice of methodology should be led "by the nature of research question and the conceptualisation of the phenomena under study."[578] Phenomenologists recognise that the knowledge it yields is contingent, proportional, emergent, and subject to alternative interpretations.[579] For the phenomenologist, the *lived* experience, from the view of those who live it, is central and he or she

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textural and structural descriptions, providing a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience. See ibid., 144-53.

[572] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 39.

[573] Ibid., 58.

[574] Ibid., 122.

[575] Ibid., 151.

[576] Ibid., 130.

[577] Clark, "Critical Realism," 169. See also C. Willig, "Beyond Appearances: A Critical Realist Approach to Social Constructionism," in *Social Constructionist Psychology: A Critical Analysis of Theory and Practice.*, ed. D. J. Nightingale and J. Cromby, (London: Open University Press, 1999).

[578] Sayer, *Realism and Social Science*.

[579] Linda Finlay, "Debating Phenomenological Research Methods," *Phenomenology & Practice* 3, no. 1 (2009): 17.

acknowledges that people can be in the same setting and experience this differently. Masterson notes that "phenomenological investigation, of what gives and manifests itself precisely as given and co-relative to consciousness, is very well adapted to undertake an exploration of religion conceived … as an essentially first-person self-involving relationship with God."[580] This applies equally to the study of spirituality. God, who is experienced

> not as a direct object of consciousness but as the phenomenologically accessible, … absent goal who possibilises our self-transcending conscious religious and ethical experience, … transcends our direct awareness, but does not surpass all our phenomenological horizons of anticipatory experience.[581]

For these reasons, phenomenology has been chosen as the methodology for this study. Five variations of this methodology were explored in depth before determining that van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach was most suited to this study.[582]

4.4.2.1   Hermeneutic Phenomenology (van Manen)

Each of the phenomenological approaches considered sought to articulate the *experience* of the participants, not reflections on what they thought they experienced. Giorgi's method had much to commend it for clarity, but its focus is on the *psychological* meaning in experience whereas I wish to focus on *mystagogical* meaning. Of the remaining methods, I am drawn to the hermeneutic approach because they treat the *epoché* differently. In the hermeneutic methodologies, while it is important to be aware of one's presuppositions and biases, they are not excluded from the process but are consciously acknowledged as contributing to it. Like Heidegger, van Manen and Smith *et al.* do not embrace Husserl's view of bracketing; van Manen comments that ''If we simply try to forget or ignore what we already 'know', we might find that the presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflections. It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases,

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[580] Masterson, *Approaching God*, 10.

[581] Ibid., 12.

[582] The five models investigated were: Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Research (Amadeo Giorgi), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin), Intuitive Inquiry (Rosemary Anderson), Phenomenological Research according to Moustakas and van Manen's approach to Phenomenological Research.

assumptions, presuppositions, and theories.''[583] Heidegger and Gadamer considered that one never approaches a text without fore-understanding, without pre-formed ideas about it. In hermeneutic phenomenology, because one cannot set aside what one is not aware of, the researcher names and acknowledges their own presuppositions and remains open to their being revised by being exposed to the text ever more deeply through the multiple stages of interpretation and the open discussion on how the interpretations arise from the data.[584] Hence, the researcher commits to the hermeneutic circle, acknowledging that one can only discover the meaning of the whole by attending to its parts, yet the meaning of each part is informed by its place in the whole. The whole is more than the sum of the parts and informs one's understanding of the parts. It is through this interaction between the researcher and the text that the text is ultimately interpreted.

For van Manen, human science research must be *phenomenological* (because it describes lived experience with a view to mining its meaning) and *hermeneutic* (because it seeks to interpret the expressions and objectifications of lived experience to determine the meaning embodied in them).[585] Phenomenology, he says, "aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences."[586] He defends the addition of an *interpretive layer* to the method, pointing out that Gadamer distinguished two senses of the word 'interpretation;'[587] for Gadamer, interpretation is not *a reading in* of some meaning but "is *revealing of* what the thing itself already points to ... We attempt to interpret that which at the same time conceals itself."[588] For van Manen the aim is to produce a good phenomenological description that resonates with one's sense of lived life; one that is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience, which is validated by lived experience and validates lived experience.[589]

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[583] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 47.

[584] Laverty, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations," 23.

[585] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 38.

[586] Ibid., 9. It is important to note however that meaning questions can never be closed down; they will always be part of "the subject matter of the conversational relations of lived life, and they will need to be appropriated, in a personal way, by anyone who hopes to benefit from such insight." See ibid., 23.

[587] Its original meaning, according to Gadamer, was a pointing to something, as distinct from pointing out the meaning of something.

[588] Quoted in van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 26.

[589] Ibid., 27.

Van Manen observes that hermeneutic phenomenology aims to be supposition-less.[590] It seeks

> to ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would rule-govern the research process … [while there is] a certain *methodos* – [it] cannot be determined by fixed signposts. [The pathways of phenomenological reflection] need to be discovered or invented as a response to the question at hand.[591]

Instead of presenting a fixed method, he offers a 'methodological structure' for research which comprises a dynamic interplay between six 'activities' in a manner which is not necessarily sequential or linear.[592] The first involves the formulation of a research question by "Turning to the nature of lived experience". The second, "Investigating experience as we live it" is concerned with the methods employed to investigate the lived experience in question and he recommends in-depth interviews as an appropriate way of examining people's unique experiences. The third activity involves "Reflecting on the essential themes which characterise the phenomenon" and the fourth consists of "Describing the phenomenon in the art of writing and rewriting." For van Manen, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach "cannot be separated from the textual practice of writing."[593] The fifth activity stresses the extraordinarily demanding nature of his methodology and requires that researchers "Maintain a strong and oriented relation to the fundamental question" at the heart of the research throughout the research process. And the final activity involves "Balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole." While these activities must be approached in some orderly fashion, the last activity reminds researchers that they must honour the hermeneutic circle - in other words that there should be regular movement between the activities.[594] The third and fourth activities lie at the heart of the process and they are carried out in light of and informed by the fifth and sixth activities.[595] An unfolding and enfolding occurs as the data is read and re-read, considered and re-considered, scrutinised and re-scrutinised.

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[590] Gadamer considers that the essence of the question is the opening up, and the keeping open, of possibilities. Quoted in ibid., 43.

[591] Ibid., 29.

[592] Van Manen notes that "there is no definitive set of research procedures …that one can blindly follow." See ibid., 34.

[593] Ibid., ix.

[594] "In the actual research process one may work at various aspects intermittently or simultaneously." Ibid., 34.

[595] Ibid., 30-34.

4.5   Methodology for this Study

This study will follow the methodological structure recommended by van Manen, adapted in one important way. The question at the heart of this research is mystagogical: does the practice of meditation impact on the spirituality of children, and, if so, what it the nature of its impact on children? I have approached this question "not as a problem in need of a solution but as a mystery in need of evocative comprehension;" as an attempt "to re-achieve a direct contact with the world of living with children by awakening the soul to its primordial realty."[596] Van Manen asserts that one can know mystery in the same way one cannot deny the reality of one's feelings, intuition, conscience, will or mood: the mystery is revealed *through* them (not *as* them). Therefore, this study calls for a mystagogical perspective also. As Waaijman expresses it, a mystagogical methodology "is focused, on the one hand, on the concreteness of experience, but is directed, on the other, toward contemplation, the in-working of the divine upon the human."[597] The mystagogical element sees the researcher as accompanying the interviewee in exploring their understanding of the presence of the Divine, the ultimate reality in their lives.[598] This will have implications both for the style of interviewing and the analysis of the transcripts. When relevant sentence clusters are being examined and intuitions of meaning arise in the researcher's mind, the task will be approached with a mystagogical sensitivity. Phenomenological descriptions will be expressed in ordinary language that points toward mystagogically-heightened revelations.   In other words, this study will utilise a hermeneutic, phenomenological, mystagogical methodology.

This has implications for the researcher who must strive to conduct interviews and all aspects of the study with awareness, attention and deep listening and not fall for "the illusion that possession of a map will give us a handle on the mystery."[599] In writing about the hermeneutic interview van Manen notes the

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[596] Ibid., 50.

[597] Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 535.

[598] Through spiritual accompaniment, what people already do for themselves (being for themselves and reflecting on that experience) is brought to a higher level of understanding. The spiritual accompanist helps the person who is accompanied to explore how the spirit is present in their life; it is a "process in which experience is processed and held against the light of truth with an eye to the spiritual way." Ibid., 921.

[599] James Neafsey, "Towards Union with God: Development and Transitions in Prayer," in *Sacred Is the Call: Formation and Transformation in Spiritual Direction Programs*, ed. Suzanne Buckley, (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2005), 71.

importance of ensuring that the researcher keeps himself or herself and the interviewee oriented toward the substance of the thing which is the focus of the research and the interview.[600] Waaijman notes that the researcher, as the spiritual accompanist, must himself or herself have a vital relationship with the Divine reality.[601] An accompanist must become increasingly contemplative and "be in touch with the Spirit and … and practice methods of spiritual conversation."[602] The spiritual accompanist, grounded in his or her relation to God, focuses on the person being accompanied in his or her relation to God.[603] For this reason, as part of my preparation for this study, I undertook a two-year training programme in contemplative spiritual accompaniment. The training has helped me to understand better how to facilitate a conversation with another person about their spiritual journey and to keep the conversation centred on the heart of the matter. The wisdom and practical skills gained have proved to be enormously beneficial in conducting the interviews with children in an empathic, contemplative way. Researchers using mystagogic methods are also called upon to engage in spiritual practices which promote a deeper understanding of the divine-human relational process.[604] As an experienced meditator, I was mindful of my responsibility to be prayerful, self-aware and reflexive throughout all stages of the research; in particular, to be fully attentive to the children and to be faithful to their accounts of their experience of meditation.

4.5.1 Implementing van Manen's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Van Manen asserts that, although gathering and analysing data are often viewed as two separate activities, they are not really separable and should be seen part of the same process.[605] Indeed, interviews can serve as occasions on which to reflect with the research participant on the topic as well as gathering lived-experience material. His general advice on interviewing recommends that the researcher stays close to the phenomenon being researched – so asking the research participant to think about a specific experience or instance may be very helpful, especially if a particularly vivid

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[600] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 98.
[601] Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 883.
[602] Ibid.
[603] Ibid., 911.
[604] I have engaged in the twice-daily practice of Christian meditation for the past twelve years.
[605] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 63.

example comes to mind for them; and to build on their response to explore the whole experience as fully as possible. It helps to get the interviewee to describe the experience from the inside – how it felt, what moods or emotions were evoked. Encouraging the respondent to speak in everyday language and to avoid generalisations, interpretations or causal explanations also helps. Underscoring (repeating) an interviewee's response can help them to deepen their description and asking for examples will bring them back from the tendency to generalise.[606] For van Manen, the art of the researcher in a hermeneutic interview "is to keep the question (of the meaning of the phenomenon) open, to keep himself or herself and the interviewee oriented to the substance of the thing being questioned."[607]

He suggests that setting up a *series* of interviews with research participants to enable them to reflect on elements of their initial interview(s) in order to aim for as much interpretive insight as possible; the intention being to reflect on the preliminary themes identified by the researcher after the first interview by asking in later interviews "Is this what the experience is really like?"[608] Such a hermeneutic interview has a conversational structure: it is oriented to sense-making and interpreting experiential meanings. The themes become the starting point for further sharing about the nature of the lived experience of the research participant with respect to the phenomenon being investigated. Each research participant has the opportunity to share with the researcher how the phenomenological statement does or does not resonate with their experience.[609] Van Manen recommends that researchers review the phenomenological literature on the topic being researched to get a grasp of how the tradition has engaged with the topic in the past but suggests that there may be benefit in attempting to address the phenomenological meaning of the phenomenon on one's own before undertaking such a review; it may be difficult to suspend one's prior understanding otherwise.   He also notes the benefits of

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[606] Ibid., 64-68.
[607] Ibid., 98.
[608] Ibid., 99.
[609] van Manen's approach here is very different to the recommendation made by Colaizzi and others which has been critiqued by Giorgi. Colaizzi offered his subjects the opportunity to correct the work of the researcher while van Manen merely seeks to get a further description of the phenomenon using the overall set of themes as a conversational starting point. While that conversation may clarify the researcher's understanding, it is the researcher, as phenomenologist, who continues to determine the meaning of the experience.

maintaining a research journal to record insights as the study progresses; reflecting back on entries can help to discern patterns in the work in progress.[610]

Regarding the analyses of data, van Manen does not lay down prescriptive guidelines. He suggests that "making something of a text or a lived experience by interpretation is … a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure."[611] For him, thematic analysis is not a mechanical application of some frequency count or coding but a deeper process of recovering themes "that are embodied and dramatised in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work."[612] He stresses that lived experience cannot be captured in conceptual abstractions. Instead he offers an approach to mining texts for meaning – carefully reading each text and trying "to unearth something 'telling,' something 'meaningful,' something 'thematic' in the various experiential accounts."[613] Reflecting on what lies at the heart of 'theme' he suggests that although formulating a theme is at best a simplification, nonetheless a theme is the experience of focus, of meaning. Themes are intransitive, they describe an aspect of the *structure* of lived experience; they are a means to getting at the notion contained in the essence of a phenomenon, they describe the content of the notion but always reduce it to something less than it actually is.[614] Themes are not objects or generalisations – they are more like "knots in the webs of our experiences. … They are fasteners, foci, or threads around which the phenomenological description is facilitated."[615] He stresses very strongly that no single statement can possibly capture the mystery of a deeply meaningful experience; no thematic phrase can do justice to the life of a phenomenon - it can only serve "to point at, to allude to, or to hint at, an aspect of the phenomenon."[616]

Van Manen offers three approaches toward uncovering or isolating thematic aspects of a phenomenon in a text, which he describes as mining the text for meaning: (1) The wholistic (*sic*) or sententious approach where one asks *What sententious (most meaningful) phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole?* This is really a judgement call and may be

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[610] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 73-76.
[611] Ibid., 79.
[612] Ibid., 78-79.
[613] Ibid., 86.
[614] Ibid., 86-90.
[615] Ibid., 90-91.
[616] Ibid., 92.

interpreted differently by different readers of a text. (2) The selective or highlighting approach where one asks *What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon?* and (3) The detailed or line-by-line approach where one asks of each sentence or cluster of sentences *What does this sentence/cluster reveal about the phenomenon?* Each sentence or sentence cluster (similar to meaning units as discussed in earlier sections above) is examined to see what it reveals about the nature of the phenomenon. Whichever method is chosen, once the researcher has identified a phrase or sentence to work on, he or she writes a succinct singular statement which captures the main meaning behind it.[617] If the researcher has chosen to analyse each sentence cluster, then for each transcript, the researcher reads each sentence cluster carefully to discern what it reveals about the phenomenon being researched and writes a brief sentence which captures its essential meaning. As they are being written, the researcher may notice that certain experiential themes commonly recur within the full set of transcripts across all of the research participants. Van Manen notes that "Thematic reflection has hermeneutic or interpretive power when it allows us to proceed with phenomenological descriptions."[618] The researcher's task is to "hold on to these themes by lifting appropriate phrases or by capturing in singular statements the main thrust of the meaning of the themes."[619]

In determining the themes around which a phenomenological statement is to be woven, one also needs to distinguish between incidental and essential themes.[620] The resulting phenomenological themes become the working material for phenomenological writing, offering exemplary images of the phenomenon, hinting at meaningfulness. Phenomenological writing aims to bring the experience being

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[617] For example, in researching the meaning of parenthood, van Manen suggests the phrase used by a research participant "I have been wondering if I expect too much from my son" might be summarised by the observation that "To parent is to distinguish what is good and what is not good for a child." Or "We have parental expectations as well as doubts about them."

[618] Van Manen suggests that when we are interested in the phenomenology of reading a novel, we may soon notice some possible themes: (1) When we open a book we experience this wondrous sensation that this thing-like "object," this book can draw us into the otherworldly space of the text … (3) Reading a novel means that we begin to care for the people who make up the novel …[and so forth] … These kinds of themes are only fasteners, foci, or "knots" around which the "web" of a phenomenological description of the experience of "reading a novel" can be constructed. Accessed on 18 March 2014 from http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/methods-procedures/reflective-methods/thematic-reflection/

[619] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 93.

[620] To discern whether a theme is essential, the researcher must determine if it is part of what makes a phenomenon what it is and without which it could not be what it is. Ibid., 106.

studied into view in a way that resonates with one's pre-reflective sensibilities, evoking something unique about the lived-experience.

4.5.2 Phenomenological Writing according to van Manen

A key element of hermeneutic phenomenology is the writing of phenomenological descriptions capturing the essence of the themes emerging from the data, each one representing the essence of an aspect of the phenomenon.[621] Discerning essential themes and composing phenomenological descriptions is not a mechanical procedure but is, rather, an insightful creative, hermeneutic process of disclosure.[622] Heidegger refers to historical occasions when human understanding takes a deeply insightful turn and he named this process 'inception.' Van Manen suggests that the word might also be used to describe those occasions when one gains a sudden flash of insight into a phenomenon as an *appropriative* event, "that fragile moment of a heuristic event: of the coming upon, being struck by, or suddenly grasping an original idea, experiencing a fundamental insight, realising the depthful (*sic*) meaning of something."[623] In such a moment, primordial knowledge is appropriated as one gains an original insight into what it means to be.[624] Van Manen cautions that "Inceptual thinking is not the same as conceptual thinking: inceptual thinking involves ingrasping, *coming upon* an inceptual thought (my italics)."[625] He elaborates:

> An inceptual thought tends to come to us indirectly, as if through the backdoor. Perhaps we were musing or thinking about something else when the sudden insight strikes us. No planning, systematic method, or carefully constructed program will get us to the place where inceptual thought dwells. But even though inception cannot be forced, nevertheless, there exist relations of significance between inception and the pathos of thinking and reflecting. Phenomenologists know that the more intensely the researcher is preoccupied and troubled by that irresistible query that drives

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[621] Ibid., 94-96. A phenomenological description is very different to a conceptual analysis. To take a fairly trivial example, a phenomenological description of eating ice cream would not include a list of ingredients, or data about fat, sugar and calorific content, or the likely impact on one's waistline or physical well-being. Instead, it might describe a person's lived experience of eating ice-cream and might include reference to the coldness, flavour, texture, colour, and so on, and what it felt like to eat the ice-cream; it might refer to childhood and other memories brought to consciousness by the experience. In other words, a phenomenological description is not concerned with *what* appears, but rather, with a thing's *way* of appearing and it's meaning for the person who is living the experience.

[622] Ibid., 79. See also http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/methods-procedures/reflective-methods/thematic-reflection/ Accessed 18 March 2014.

[623] *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing* (Walnut Creek, CA.: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2014), Kindle location 5879 of 11092.

[624] Ibid., Kindle location 5848 of 11092.

[625] Ibid., Kindle location 5879 of 11092.

the inquiry, the more likely that an original thought will suddenly strike - though often at the least expected moment. It is as if our deepest frustrations and desperate doubts prepare that very fertile small plot where an inceptual thought may sprout and take root. Inception does not happen in an area where we are not residing; it only will happen there where our attentive searching and pregnant desires for the inquiry of our compulsive interest dwell. … We cannot find an inceptual thought; rather, it finds us. The original thought or idea is not something we find by wilful action or deliberate efforts.[626]

How, then, does one prepare 'that fertile, small plot where an inceptual thought may sprout and take root?' How is one to reside in the data? Van Manen suggests that the process of 'in-grasping' is aided by practicing a thoughtful attentiveness and this is best performed through writing textural descriptions that resonate and make intelligible the kinds of meanings that one seems to recognize in life as one lives it. He describes this process as a separate aspect of phenomenological reduction, which he calls 'the vocative reduction,' that comes into play in the experience of reflective writing.[627] He considers that, ultimately, phenomenological reflection on lived experience is neither inductive nor deductive, but is reductive.[628] In phenomenological inquiry, there is an implicit reliance on maintaining a phenomenological attitude which calls for "heuristic attentiveness, creative insight, interpretive sensibility, linguistic sensitivity, and scholarly preparedness and tact."[629] For researchers struggling to complete a study, van Manen's observation that if phenomenological analysis is to lead to the generation of insights a certain 'emergent emergency' is required, may be comforting. He likens a period of struggle in the transition from data analysis to phenomenological description to "the pregnancy and affective gestation period and condition necessary for an inceptive happening to happen." It is only under such conditions that it can happen that one is suddenly and unexpectedly struck or visited by an inceptive insight.[630] In other words, a sense of struggle is both inevitable and productive,

> even if the struggle at the time seems in vain or hopeless. Thus, being unable to 'see' significances in one's material and being unable to write may actually be a critical state of mind. The frustration and condition of

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[626] Ibid., Kindle location 5903 of 11092.
[627] Ibid., Kindle location 5517 of 11092.
[628] Ibid., Kindle location 5536 of 11092.
[629] Ibid., Kindle location 5675 of 11092.
[630] Ibid., Kindle location 5926 of 11092.

such a sense of emergency may be necessary mental and physical requisites for inventive insight.[631]

Van Manen points out that phenomenology is not introspective but retrospective because "a person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through the experience."[632] He identifies five fundamental existential themes which have surfaced in phenomenological human science literature and which, most likely, pervade the lifeworld of all human beings irrespective of their historical, cultural or social situatedness. He suggests that they can be very fruitful for posing questions, reflection and writing in the phenomenological research process. They are one's experience of: *lived space* (spaciality), *lived body* (corporeality), *lived time* (temporality), and *lived human relation* (relationality).[633] The fifth, *lived things and technology* (materiality), was added much later than the others.[634] He notes that because these themes are pre-verbal, they are hard to describe and he adds:

> To *do* hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal.[635] (Italics original)

The literature suggests that such an analysis can reveal a great richness of meaning in the data, by helping to organise "fluid and differing accounts of lived experience without imposing categories upon the data itself."[636] Although these five existentials can be differentiated, they cannot be separated – each aspect calls out the

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[631] Ibid., Kindle location 5928 of 11092. He argues also that "we need to be tolerant of a certain level of genuine frustration and real struggle, while actively trying to gain phenomenological insights. Or, better, we need to expect becoming frustrated - in the hope that insights may come when least expected. Ibid., Kindle location 8501 of 11092.

[632] *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 10.

[633] Ibid., 101-06.

[634] *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle location 7487 of 11093. "The notions of lived relation, body, space, time, and things, are existentials in the sense that they belong to everyone's life world— they are universal themes of life. For example, Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception (1962; 2012) has major sections on body, spatiality, things or world, others or relations, and temporality. These fundamental existentials occur repeatedly in the phenomenological literature. We all experience our world and our reality through these existentials. We could even distinguish additional existentials such as death (dying), language, and mood. Existentials are helpful universal "themes" to explore meaning aspects of our lifeworld and of the particular phenomena that we may be studying. For example, with respect to the experience of secrecy we may ask, "how can the existentials of relation, body, space, time, and thing guide us in exploring the meaning structures of the experience of secrecy?"

[635] *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 18.

[636] Stephanie Rich et al., "Navigating the Terrain of Lived Experience: The Value of Lifeworld Existentials for Reflective Analysis," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 12(2013): 502-03.

others.[637] While I have reflected on the data of this study in light of these lifeworld existentials, I do not present the insights under those headings; instead the insights arising from the reflection are incorporated into the phenomenological description of the child's experience of the practice and the associated themes, which are presented in the next chapter.

Van Manen stresses that "through the reflective process of writing, the researcher not only engages in analysis but also aims also to express the non-cognitive, ineffable, and pathic aspects of meaning that belong to the phenomenon," adding that this "is probably the most challenging dimension of the phenomenological inquiry process," and the most neglected in the literature.[638] So, on the one hand, phenomenological writing is a rational process which tries, in a systematic way, to explore the meaning structures of the phenomenon being studied, while, on the other hand, it is non-rational insofar as it seeks to give expression to the pre-reflective layers of experience as they are lived. In writing up a phenomenological study, the researcher aims to create a sense of resonance in the reader, so that he or she recognizes the plausibility of the experience being studied, even if he or she has never personally experienced this for themselves. The researcher, therefore, should aim for "a poetising form of writing."[639] A phenomenological report aims, like poetry, to be a *primal telling* which speaks its truth with authenticity; using language, that "sings the world."[640] Echoing the advice of Nye and Berryman on the pre-verbal nature of much of human experience, van Manen asserts that "We must engage language in a primal incantation or poetising which hearkens back to the silence from which the words emanate … so that in the words, or, perhaps better, in spite of the words, we find memories that paradoxically we never thought or felt before."[641]

Van Manen avers that to do justice to the fullness and the ambiguity of the experience of the lifeworld requires researchers to write and re-write, to re-think, to re-flect, to re-cognise; constructing successive layers of meaning requires a constant

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[637] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 105.

[638] *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle location 5955 of 11093.

[639] Ibid., KIndle location 5977 of 11093.

[640] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 187. Quoted in van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 13.

[641] *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle location 5985 of 11093.

going back and forth between the parts and the whole.[642] He stresses too that the final text of a research study must reflect the style of the researcher, must give voice to the thoughtfulness of the researcher as the producer, the author of the text; it must also reflect his or her deep interest in the research question from a pedagogic perspective.[643] "Phenomenological research has, as its ultimate aim, the fulfilment of human nature: to become more fully who we are."[644] In particular, research on children should always connect one meaningfully with the lifeworld of children. "Knowledge without love, respect, and admiration for the being of a child cannot come to a full understanding of the child."[645]

Regarding the writing up of a research study, Van Manen reminds us that nothing sound can come out of it unless it is animated by the desire of the researcher to orient it in a strong, original and thoughtful manner.[646] Wertz too stresses that phenomenological research is quite personal because it requires "the full sensitivity, knowledge and powers of comprehension of the researcher."[647] A research report will therefore reflect the creativity and style of the researcher in the manner of its presentation. As Wertz expresses it: "knowledge of highly implicit meaning requires creative language …[and] … some important aspects of human experience are best expressed in evocative prose, which therefore qualifies as genuine, scientific discourse."[648] In other words, Wertz regards accurate poetic description of human experience as objective. Van Manen urges researchers to keep in mind that poetry, literature, music, painting, and other art forms can provide a wealth of experiences that can be used to increase insights in the reflection process as the phenomenological researcher tries to interpret and grasp the essential meaning of the experience being studied.

He stresses too that in phenomenological human science research "writing does not merely enter the process as a final step or stage."[649] Nonetheless, having carried out the analysis – in which writing plays an important role - the outcomes of

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[642] *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 131.
[643] Ibid., 132, 38.
[644] Ibid., 12.
[645] Ibid., 140.
[646] Ibid., 172.
[647] Frederick J. Wertz, "A Phenomenological Psychological Approach to Trauma and Resilience," in *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research and Intuitive Inquiry*, ed. F.J. Wertz, et al., (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011), 130.
[648] Ibid., 135.
[649] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 111.

the research must be written up. Van Manen stresses that "To present research by way of reflective text is not to present findings, but to do a reading (as a poet would) of a text that shows what it teaches. One must meet with it, go through it, encounter it, suffer it, consume it and, as well, be consumed by it."[650] He recommends that in preparing the research report the researcher should search for "a sense of organisational form and organic wholeness of the text consistent with the methodical emphasis of the research approach."[651] Ultimately, in phenomenological writing "one does not write primarily for being understood; one writes for having understood being."[652]

4.6   Researching Children

Noble-Carr writes that "The way we think about childhood inherently shapes the research in which we engage."[653] For the greater part of the history of research on children, it was seen as something done to the child because the child was deemed (by adults) not to have the competence to participate of their own accord. Developmental theories traditionally placed children on a trajectory toward adulthood, thereby accentuating adult concerns rather than children's felt experience.[654] Clarke notes that "research sometimes ventriloquizes children rather than directly consulting [them], using adults as proxy to report on child experience," but she argues that "to fully understand the young, their trajectory, or their sociocultural engagement, children need to be first-hand sources in studies."[655] Clarke is not alone in promoting an approach to child-centred research which "asks how children as active human beings, as agents, experience existence in the social present."[656] Noble-Carr asserts that

> It is now widely accepted that children should be actively involved in any research project that seeks to understand and respond appropriately to children's unique perspectives and experiences. The challenge that lies

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[650] Ibid., 153.

[651] Ibid., 168.

[652] "Writing Qualitatively, or the Demands of Writing," *Qualitative Health Research* 16, no. 5 (2006): 721.

[653] Debbie Noble-Carr, Engaging Children in Research on Sensitive Issues (Dickson, Australian Capital Territory: Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, 2006), http://www.acu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/16973/Engaging_Children_LitReview.pdf. 3.

[654] Cindy Dell Clark, *In a Younger Voice: Doing Child-Centered Qualitative Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10; ibid.

[655] Ibid., 6.

[656] Ibid., 16.

ahead for those researchers committed to hearing children's voices, is how to do this in a way that is both effective and ethical.[657]

Westcott and Littleton suggest that the child is often construed as a passive participant so the focus is on what can be 'got' from the child rather than understanding the child and creating meaning with the child.[658] They also suggest that conceptual issues in interviewing are often hidden; that researchers are rarely explicit about their assumptions regarding their model of child, how they perceive the context of the interview, how they conceptualise their own role and how they uncover meaning from the data gathered during the interview.[659]

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child formalised the concept of children as valued persons within society with the right to have their views heard. Article 12 states that the child who is capable of forming his or her own views should be given the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.[660] Clark observes that, in countries that ratified the convention, it led to new ways of engaging with children.[661] Thus, in child-centred research, the goal is to find suitable methods that will empower young voices to speak and to ensure that they are heard, unencumbered by adult conditioning and bias. This perspective favours a qualitative approach to research with children as it

> leaves room to uncover unknown strands and chards of meaning that children disclose when space and means are made for them to communicate … [while] ... quantitative instruments have a disciplined structure that leaves less space for children's unanticipated, volunteered felt meanings.[662]

Clark observes that "In contrast to the analytic standardisation of orthodox developmental psychology, child-centred inquiry … is interpretive and holistic" and

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[657] Noble-Carr, *Engaging Children in Research on Sensitive Issues* 1.

[658] Helen L Westcott and Karen S. Littleton, "Exploring Meaning in Interviews with Children," in *Researching Children's Experience: Approaches and Methods*, ed. Sheila and Diane Hogan Greene, (London: Sage, 2005), 143.

[659] Ibid., 141.

[660] United Nations, "U.N. Convention of the Rights of the Child."

[661] Clark, *In a Younger Voice: Doing Child-Centered Qualitative Research*, 17. She writes: "To gain access to children's concerns in inquiry, an appropriate research approach became essential, one devoid of adultist slant and charged with connecting to the voices of the young. Methodological innovation and renovations proliferated to fulfil the challenge. ……. A focal concern in carrying out research was to foster children's airing of their own views. No one option was a dictated standard method. Approaches that invited kids to narrate, show and tell, photograph, illustrate, or to be playfully engaged were the sorts that generally gained ground."

[662] Ibid., 12.

this conclusion is reflected in the research design which is outlined below. Such child-centred research, however, calls for great reflexivity on the part of the researcher to ensure that their own views do not dominate but that those of the child are allowed and enabled to emerge. Factors such as the setting where an interview takes place need to be carefully considered. For example, if held in a school setting, the child may be inclined to adopt a submissive role, deferring in a variety of ways to the adult researcher. They might regard the adult as the person who knows the answers and they may adopt the strategy of trying to please. Likewise the use of paper and pencil might be seen as schoolwork to a child rather than as a collaborative exercise. Such matters will need to be addressed openly by the researcher both with the children and in academic papers describing their work. Clark suggests that a researcher must "own up to her subjectivity, and the particularities of her field relationships and exchanges" and should bear in mind "that acts of exchanging meaning and knowledge are fluid and conditional."[663]

Noble-Carr also stresses the importance of reflexivity on the part of the researcher, calling researchers to 'step back' from their own adult perspective, views and usual modes of practice to constantly question their role, assumptions, choice of methods and application of these methods throughout the whole research process.[664] In particular, researchers need to be alert to the possibility of arrogance on their part and to avoid the assumption they know what their subjects are thinking.[665] Brendan Hyde describes examples where children saw an aura around a person but where their views were dismissed as nonsense by their parents.[666] In other words, arrogance arises when adults, finding differences between their own world views and those of children, privilege the adult version as 'correct' and explain away children's versions as developmentally incomplete.[667] Clark recommends the audio-recording of interviews as a precaution.[668] She also suggests that the researcher must engage in a child-friendly way, using language appropriate to their age and understanding.

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[663] Ibid., 19.

[664] Noble-Carr, *Engaging Children in Research on Sensitive Issues* 13.

[665] Arrogance can occur when the researcher's version of a child's life is assumed to be the child's life or the child's version of that same life is dismissed as invalid or subjective or where the researcher presumes to explain away as 'inaccuracies' when a child experiences life in a way that makes little sense according to adult assumptions about reality.

[666] Hyde, *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness*, 14.

[667] Clark, *In a Younger Voice: Doing Child-Centered Qualitative Research*, 66.

[668] Ibid., 68. She observes that she "could peruse the interview later, and judge if I had shown that I accepted the child, put my own frame of reference aside, and bracketed my adult assumptions."

However, while it is true that, during an interview, adult ways of communicating should set aside, she notes that:

> I have found that my adult, analytical cognition stays intact as a back-of-mind influence on my thought process, guiding me about the content I should probe in more depth. As a researcher, I am able to stay on a child's wavelength, yet also to fully tap into how the child's comments bear on the goals of the project.[669]

The literature on qualitative research with children considers carefully the benefits and drawbacks of one-on-one interviews with children compared with the alternative options of diads, triads and focus groups. One-on-one interviews require time and sustained energy both in collecting and interpreting data which can be abundant and subtle. In addition, some have raised the possibility that a mature interviewer may give rise to a more pressuring influence in individual interviews as compared to focus groups, since the adult interviewer is the child's only interlocutor. On the other hand, in the hands of a skilled interviewer of children, the individual depth interview can give real depth and genuine quality that may be missed in other settings. "Individual interviews are a way to engage with each child, no matter how reticent they might be amidst young peers. It is possible to carve out a space of trust and mutuality, without dilution or interference from other children"[670] and where the child's own voice is more likely to be heard without fear of interference or judgement from their peers. Clark notes that some researchers advise working in friendship pairs (diads) for younger children (under 8 years old) but cautions about the consequent danger of a dominant voice to whom the other may be inclined to defer, thereby distorting the richness of the potential feedback. The same problem can arise in larger focus-group interviews. She observes that pairs of friends generally come with a 'group' dynamic of their own, often with a well-entrenched, friendly but established social hierarchy. "In interviewing pairs of friends, I have found that, a dominant friend can prevail almost completely over a subordinate friend … After all, friendship goes on after the focus group is over, and this can have a filtering and inhibiting effect."[671] She suggests that the individual interview "allows more time and concentration to follow the arc of a single individual's views than does a group interview. This confers an advantage in studying individual

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[669] Ibid., 71.
[670] Ibid., 69.
[671] Ibid., 108.

representational processes."[672] The literature suggests also that while the individual interviews may gather a broader range of opinion, the focus group may elaborate the subject matter more broadly.[673]

Clark notes also the need for variety in the course of an interview and for the use of visual and tactile props in addition to verbal conversation.[674] She recommends the use of photo-elicitation - for example, to enable children to describe their experience of a surgical intervention. And she offers a visual method, which she calls *Metaphor Sort*. In this method, children are given a stack of photographs unrelated to the subject of the interview and are invited to sort the pictures to identify and explain which images are, in their view, the best metaphors for the experience or subject being explored. This can enable the child to describe aspects of an experience which otherwise defy easy description, "to name the nameless."[675] The use of metaphor has the potential to create a process in which the child and the interviewer are mutually engaged in signification, since both are there to uncover the child's imputed connection of meaning. Clark found this method "to be a highly child-centred approach, one that enabled children to express abstract inchoate ideas through concrete, familiar objects and scenes."[676] Pearmain also recommends the use of images in researching children's spirituality. She observes that "spirituality is about deeply stirring and moving experiences. … It is more than we usually know of ourselves" and goes on to suggest that imagery and metaphor can be very important ways of communicating this domain of experience because it allows both parties to enter the realm of mystery.[677] The resulting field of meaning "is shared between the researcher and participant as a relational and embodied experience, as something known because it is felt."[678] Noble-Carr also recommends the use of creative and innovative techniques, such as visual and task-based activities, to prompt discussion within the interview and suggests that researchers might develop a 'tool-kit' of different activities to be used within individual interviews and focus group

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[672] Ibid., 71.

[673] Caroline Heary and Eilis Hennessy, "Focus Groups Versus Individual Interviews with Children: A Comparison of Data," *The Irish Journal of Psychology* 27, no. 1-2 (2006): 58-68 at 58.

[674] Clark, *In a Younger Voice: Doing Child-Centered Qualitative Research*, 139.

[675] Ibid., 168.

[676] Ibid., 173.

[677] Rosalind Pearmain, "Evocative Cues and Presence: Relational Consciousness within Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 12, no. 1 (2007): 79.

[678] Ibid., 80.

sessions.[679] "Growing Up in Ireland: The National Longitudinal Study of Children" also proved to be a useful source of information regarding the use and application of qualitative methods with children.[680]

4.6.1   Ethics in Research with Children

Elizabeth Nixon has written on the ethics of conducting oral interviews with children. She notes that the ethical issues "centre around balancing children's rights to participation and rights to protection from harm and exploitation."[681] She stresses the importance of understanding the different – not inferior – competencies of children and of the disparities in power status between children and adults. The question of consent also arises. Traditionally adults were asked to give consent for their children to participate in studies and children were often not consulted. But a child-centred approach requires that the child should have the opportunity to decide if he or she wishes to participate, as well as seeking additional parental consent where that is deemed desirable.[682] This means that ways of presenting information about the research need to be child-friendly, appropriate to the age group involved, and presented to the children in a manner that suits their normal means of communication. Nixon highlights three key issues to be addressed ethically: how children are to be enabled to give informed consent, how the power dynamics may be redressed and how the children's well-being and safety can be protected. Regarding informed consent, Nixon, like Clark, suggests that the manner in which information is conveyed to the children is central; it must be accessible, otherwise the effort to secure consent is meaningless. Consent is also an on-going process and children should retain the right to withdraw. Regarding power dynamics, Nixon suggests it is important to stress that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions and that

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[679] Noble-Carr, *Engaging Children in Research on Sensitive Issues* 23.

[680] Sheila Greene and Elaine Harris, *Qualitative Research Methodology: Review of the Literature and Its Application to the Qualitative Component of Growing up in Ireland* (Dublin: Department of Children & Youth Affairs, 2011). Available as an Adobe pdf file on www.growingup.ie

[681] Elizabeth Nixon, "Ethics of Oral Interviews with Children," in *Ethics for Graduate Researchers: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach*, ed. Cathriona Russell, Linda Hogan, and Maureen Junker-Kenny, (London: Elsevier, 2013), 183.

[682] Otherwise the personhood of the child is not fully acknowledged. Christensen & Prout note that "Instead of assuming adult hegemony and child subordination in matters of informed consent, a more parallel, level approach would seek the child's full consent, to be balanced in tandem with adult consent." Quoted in Clark, *In a Younger Voice: Doing Child-Centered Qualitative Research*, 32. See also Noble-Carr, *Engaging Children in Research on Sensitive Issues* 7.

what is being sought are the child's own views. The interview format should "give space for participants to generate their own narratives and develop their ideas"[683] – hence a variety of activities is to be preferred rather than a simple question and answer interview. The variety can also have the effect that the focus moves to the props used in the activities rather than on each other, helping to mitigate any power imbalance. In terms of protecting the children from harm it is important "to be alert and attentive to participant's emotional responses" and to carefully "gauge the appropriateness of pursuing particular lines of enquiry."[684] Nixon concludes that "Appropriate participation is possible and worthwhile, through a reflexive, sensitive and flexible engagement" between the researcher, the children and their adult gatekeepers.[685] Hill concurs with Nixon and notes that ethical considerations remain relevant throughout the research process.[686] All of these factors were taken into account in the research design as indicated below. In addition, a protocol was put in place for dealing with potential disclosure and/or distress that might arise during the interviews; this proved to be prudent as one instance of disclosure arose which was reported to the child's teacher, with their agreement, in accordance with the protocol.[687]

An additional but very important concern for this researcher was to identify, prior to finalising the design of the study, any potential adverse effects of meditation and to ensure that children were protected against them. Lustyk *et al.* undertook a review of relevant studies in 2009 which addressed research safety and participant screening in respect of studies on mindfulness meditation with a view to addressing areas of difficulty and developing guidelines for researchers.[688] They identified possible adverse effects under three headings, mental, physical and spiritual;

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[683] Nixon, "Ethics of Oral Interviews with Children," 193.

[684] Ibid., 195.

[685] Ibid., 196.

[686] Hill, "Ethical Considerations in Researching Children's Experiences," 61-86.

[687] The consent form for parents contained the sentence "I understand that where a child discloses that they or others are at risk of significant harm, the researcher will report the matter to the child's teacher or the Designated Liaison Person at the school. This will be done after discussion with the child, ensuring that they are aware that the disclosure must be made to comply with Child Protection Guidelines." And the Consent Form for senior children included the wording "If I agree to take part in the research study, I know that anything I tell the researcher will not be linked with my name so that nobody will be able to know what I tell the researcher unless it is necessary to protect me or another person from harm. In that case the researcher will discuss the matter with me before telling the school about the risk of harm."

[688] M. Kathleen B. Lustyk et al., "Mindfulness Meditation Research: Issues of Participant Screening, Safety Procedures, and Researcher Training," *Advances in Mind-Body Medicine* 24, no. 1 (2009).

however, the concerns related only to long-term intensive meditation, e.g. week-long Vipasanna retreats. Regarding mental considerations, they advised caution if dealing with persons who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder or psychosis and noted that depersonalisation issues sometimes arose, but, once again, only in the case of longer-term meditation practice. Regarding physical considerations, the authors mention epilepsy and arthritis as factors to be considered in order to avoid distress, although no study suggests that meditation be avoided. Regarding spiritual health, the authors counsel the value of listening to and engaging with those who may have religious concern about the practice, explaining how it may relate to their own religious, faith or spiritual tradition, if any. Martin Laird observes that "very occasionally you hear of meditation bringing up certain underlying difficulties that are already present but not acknowledged. This is part of the healing nature of a serious contemplative discipline," adding that "The desert tradition, really did not speak of any harmful effects."[689] Referring to studies on mindfulness with children and adolescents, Weare advises that "The consensus is that interventions are generally acceptable and well-liked by the participants, and there have been no reports that any of them caused harm (so called 'adverse effects')."[690]

4.6.2 Researching *Spirituality* with Children

In chapter two I noted that children have a natural capacity for spirituality, that childhood is a very fertile ground for spirituality, that childhood experiences help to form one's approach to spirituality in adulthood and that children experience spirituality as profoundly relational: they have a great capacity for what Hay and Nye called "relational consciousness;" they are attracted towards being in relation "to others, to God, to creation or to a deep inner Self."[691] They experience the transcendent, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously although, like most adults, they find language inadequate to describe the experience.

Walter Wangerin asks "Who can say when, in a child, the dance with God begins?"[692] He answers his own question as follows:

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[689] Martin Laird, Associate Professor of Theology at Villanova University, Pa., in private correspondence with this researcher.

[690] Weare, "Evidence for the Impact of Mindfulness on Children and Young People."

[691] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle Location 290 of 2696.

[692] Wangerin, *The Orphean Passages: The Drama of Faith*, 20.

No one. Not even the child can later look back and remember the beginning of it, because it is as natural an experience … as the child's relationship with the sun or with his (*sic*) bedroom. And the beginning, specifically, cannot be remembered because in the beginning there are no words for it." [693]

Rebecca Nye suggests that children may have an advantage over adults when it comes to spirituality because a great deal of quite ordinary childhood experience has the potential to be spiritually arousing. She quotes Chris Jamber as suggesting that "Children are 'thin places' where the mystical clue to the presence of the divine can break through."[694] Children have a more holistic way of seeing things; they don't analyse as much, so their perception has a more mystical quality. Children are especially open and curious and they have a natural capacity for wonder. Because of this children are comfortable with the feeling of being granted new understanding; they regularly experience the sudden dawning of an idea where the 'penny drops' as it were, what one might call 'aha moments'! And children easily accept that their words are not adequate to describe their thoughts and feelings; they know that the real worth and importance of something is often beyond their ability to put into words.[695] I have already referred to Edward Robinson's finding that a surprising number of adults chose a childhood memory as their most important spiritual experience; yet, even though, as children, most of these adults had not been able to put these moments into words, these impressions still seemed potent many years later.[696]

Elsewhere, Hay and Nye suggest that despite "the fragmentariness and insubstantiality of most currently available language, other than religious, which can adequately express relational consciousness at any depth …it is a striking testimony to the vigour of the spiritual life of the children that they are able to fill the vacuum" using the variety of strategies and processes outlined in their framework of relational consciousness.[697] Berryman notes that "children are better than adults at tracking relationships without language, because they are not yet as dependent on language as

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[693] Ibid.
[694] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle Location 1747 of 2696.
[695] Ibid., Kindle Locations 339-60 of 2696.
[696] Quoted in ibid., Kindle Location 425 of 2696.
[697] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 1582 of 2836.

adults. This 'relational consciousness' is a profound part of their spirituality."[698] He goes on to point out that in interviews with children the verbal often points to the nonverbal; the researcher will often intuit that there is more meaning in what is being said than the words used can express. Van Manen too recommends that researchers pay particular attention to idiomatic language use because it is born out of lived experience; he suggests that such verbal manifestations can possess interpretive significance for phenomenological description.[699]

Conversations with children about their spiritual thoughts and feelings are not simply a matter of asking the right questions. It is about being fully present with and attentive to the child, alert to discerning if the child's comments are genuine and heartfelt or whether they may be trying to please the interviewer by providing the 'right' answers. Nye stresses also the importance of attending to the feelings of the child more than the content, being-responsive to their non-verbal language throughout the interview and being particularly attentive when a child draws on material or topics that appear to be especially salient to them.[700] She counsels that in her own early research with children she discovered that remaining too tightly focused on the research question was preventing her in getting to know each individual child and in developing her understanding of childhood spirituality.[701] Just as Karl Rahner suggests that one is called to see childhood as an 'abiding reality,' as something one grows into rather than out of, Nye advises that one needs to learn to value the child-like in oneself, "not simply in some shallow, nostalgic sense, but with a deep respect for childhood's defining paradox of being and becoming."[702] Researchers of children's spirituality need to connect with their own spiritual experiences of childhood. Nye comments that "People who feel they work closely with children's spirituality report that this has a profound effect on their own spiritual life too."[703] Nye offers practical advice to adult researchers exploring spirituality with children:

> Research studies that have deliberately focused on children's spirituality
> give us important clues on what to notice. From these we can also …..
> pick up ideas about how to encourage spiritual exploration through

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[698] Jerome W. Berryman, "Children and Mature Spirituality," in *Children's Spirituality*, ed. Donald Ratcliff, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2004), 29.

[699] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 62.

[700] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle Locations 720 and 837 of 2696.

[701] "Christian Perspectives on Children's Spirituality: Social Science Contributions? ," 91-92.

[702] *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle Location 1890 of 2696.

[703] Ibid., Kindle Location 633 of 2696.

conversation – how to hear what's really being said, and how to provide opportunities for children to say more.[704]

She reminds us that it can be difficult for adults to hear the *feelings* that can represent the child's spiritual experience because adults tend to be distracted by the *content* of what the children say or do.[705] Nye found that, for many children, Christian religious language was inadequate for expressing their spirituality and she learned that children spoke in more personal, meaningful terms when they were allowed to speak from the heart.[706] She was convinced that "children recognised their thoughts, feelings and experiences as profound, significant and inspiring as immediate experience, but assumed they were alone in thinking like this and anticipated being able to grow out of it."[707] Many of their spiritual thoughts, feelings and experiences "had explicitly led them to recognise God, not because they had been *told* that, but because they had discovered, felt or experienced first-hand God's relation to them."[708]

Daniel Goleman's research has revealed that emotional intelligence can be just as important as the intellect; indeed emotion and reason work best together when one finds an intelligent balance between them. Not alone does the thinking brain play an executive role in managing one's emotions (except when one's emotions overwhelm one) but "feelings are typically *indispensable* for rational decisions;" in other words, "the emotional brain is as involved in thinking as is the rational brain."[709] Nye advises adult researchers 'to focus on feeling' rather than content and to understand that the adult capacity with language may indeed impede the adult's capacity for attending to the numinous, for noticing that which inspires deep spiritual awareness in the child. She compares the child's difficulty in attempting to 'translate' their non-verbal spiritual knowing into words to the challenge adults face when they first attempt to say even the simplest things in a new language. When one speaks, one likes to be heard and understood – especially when one speaks about something that is deeply and personally meaningful to one. A good researcher will focus on the

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[704] Ibid., Kindle Location 706-09 of 2696.

[705] For example, an adult may focus unduly on the child's literal expression when a child is struggling to give an account of an inner insight and finding it impossible to put into words and miss completely the depth and richness of the child's experience.

[706] Nye, "Christian Perspectives on Children's Spirituality: Social Science Contributions? ," 95.

[707] Ibid., 94.

[708] Ibid.

[709] Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Press, 1995), 28.

feelings being articulated, however hesitantly, and the intention behind what is said, not on the language itself. Scottie May concurs observing that, while even in spiritual experience the brain tends to function as a holistic unit, nevertheless "the emotional component of spiritual experience needs to be clearly distinguished from language about spiritual experience, as these two aspects of religious and spiritual life are relatively dichotomised in the brain … [so that] … feelings and related spiritual experiences … may be disconnected from words."[710] He makes an important distinction between *connatural knowing* and *speculative knowing*:

> Connatural knowing is an encounter with what is known. Initially children learn language and sounds in this manner. Speculative knowing is detached, rational, theoretical, propositional – the more traditional 'schooling' approach. In his view 'consistent early experiences *with* God will allow the desire to know about him to grow.'[711]
> Han de Wit's concepts of '*conceptual knowing*,' corresponds to May's

'speculative knowing' and his '*perceptual knowing*' relates to May's 'connatural knowing.'

As well as highlighting the importance of focusing on feelings, Nye also encourages researchers to be on the lookout for signs of individuality – to be alert to times when children seem to be speaking from the heart, in their unique 'spiritual voice' as it were; at such times they are most likely to be drawing on aspects of their spiritual experience that are especially significant for them.[712] In addition, it is very important not to rush a child – to allow ample time for silence in each conversation and to understand that "silence can be a way of saying something so important that it can't be put into words."[713]

Van Manen refers to the concept of epistemological silence – the kind of silence one experiences when one is confronted with the unspeakable.[714] He refers to Michael Polanyi's concept of 'tacit knowledge:' that one can sometimes know more

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[710] May and Ratcliff, "Childrens' Spiritual Experiences and the Brain," 154.

[711] Ibid., 155. He goes on to say "Christopher Renz, who studied attitudes toward confirmation among Catholic youths whose preparation for confirmation was based on speculative knowing, found that their confirmation lessons often bored them and children often dropped out of church after the rite was achieved. He recommended purposefully introducing elements of *connatural* knowing into religious education so that children might "encounter God" in addition to being taught about God." In Chapter 4, I explore further the question of two ways of knowing.

[712] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 847 of 2696.

[713] Ibid., Kindle location 1122 of 2696.

[714] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 113.

than one can tell.[715] This kind of silent knowing often arises when one encounters the ineffable in life and is impossible to capture in words; it is, inevitably, all the more challenging for children to do so. The contemplative traditions teach that through the practice of meditation, one may experience in the silence the fulfilment "of being in the presence of truth," and they describe such silence as one that "fulfils and yet craves fulfilment."[716] To access this reality may call for creative strategies on the part of the researcher in conversations with children and in interpreting their words during the analysis. I noted above van Manen's suggestion that brief phenomenological descriptions, representing emerging themes, may, be used as the starting point of a further conversation with research participants. Doing so may lead to deeper descriptions of the lived experience of the phenomenon by the research participants and can help a researcher to refine the themes emerging from the analysis of the data. This can be especially valuable in cases where participants know more than they can tell. Likewise, when reporting the outcomes of phenomenological research, the addition of an anecdote to a phenomenological description can make comprehensible an element of the experience of the phenomenon that otherwise eludes depiction; it can help to create a helpful tension "between the pre-reflective and the reflective pulls of language."[717] Van Manen suggests that anecdotes, stories, and fragments of text can function as 'phenomenological examples' or 'exemplary paradigms … [so that] "we are brought in touch' with something and thus 'see' something in a manner that is revealing of its experiential sense … They bring things into nearness by contributing to the vividness and presence of an experience." [718] His suggestion was used to good effect in this study through the development of the 'Selection Box' method which is described later in this chapter. It is important however, to take note of Waaijman's observation that

> in phenomenology examples do not function as illustrations of a theory. They present the object of the research and work as eye openers. Examples are meant to bring the reader into contact with 'the matter itself', that is, with the structure of the field of study. Hence one must not skip over the examples, but neither may they be understood as normative. Every example exemplifies the matter itself and opens one's eyes to the structure of the object.[719]

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[715] Ibid.
[716] Bollnow, quoted in van Manen. See ibid., 114.
[717] Ibid., 121.
[718] *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle location 6181-219 of 11093.
[719] Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 598.

Boyatzis and Newman consider "it is a major challenge to study children's sense of the transcendent and their inherent connectedness to the 'something more.'"[720] They endorse the position that the study of children's spirituality requires "a multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm" that entails the collection of different kinds of data and multiple levels of analysis. Nye refers to the very helpful practice, used in Godly Play, of facilitating spiritual conversation through the art of 'wondering'[721] and suggests that researchers 'say less [and] hear more.'[722] That advice mirrored the guidance this researcher received as part of his training in the art of spiritual guidance which he summarised as a precept: 'Less is more, underscore.' Boyatzis and Newman also suggest that repeating or paraphrasing children's responses in interviews gives the child the opportunity to reflect on his or her own ideas, which often gives rise to new ideas which are deeper than the initial ones. They note too that multiple responses to the same or similar questions allow the interviewer to gauge the consistency of the child's thinking on an issue.[723] In light of the fact that children's spiritual experiences may often not be amenable to linguistic expression, it can help to ask children a question and invite them 'to close their eyes and reflect on the topic before answering.'[724] Nye encourages researchers to become 'like a child' in the relationship with each child and to understand that relationship is not something one studies and at some point 'gets' but is instead a never-ending journey of discovery.[725]

Section 4.6 has outlined how the literature stresses the importance of a child-centred approach to children's research, seeing children as active rather than passive participants and seeking to privilege the children's account of their experience as against an adult interpretation of it. The literature also stresses the importance of attending to non-verbal cues as much as to verbal expression and recommends the inclusion of non-verbal elements in the interview process. Regarding ethics, the literature stresses the importance of informed consent and child protection. The

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[720] Chris J. Boyatzis and Babette T. Newman, "How Shall We Study Children's Spirituality?," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliff, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2004), 166.

[721] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 961 of 2696.

[722] Ibid., Kindle location 983 of 2696.

[723] Boyatzis and Newman, "How Shall We Study Children's Spirituality?," 170.

[724] Ibid., 171.

[725] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 1858 of 2696.

section also explored best practice is researching spirituality with children, emphasising the importance of being fully present to each child, paying close attention to their attempts to give expression to feelings and emotions, because children sometimes know more than they can easily express. This calls for creative strategies on the part of researchers, including approaches that generate a wondering attitude on the part of the child. All of these factors have been taken into account and incorporated into the design of the research.

4.7   Design for this Research

This study sees itself not as one of research *on* children but of research *with* children.[726] Matters of spirituality very often have a deeply personal dimension which may be revealed more easily when a child is individually interviewed;[727] hence, this study is based on one-on-one interviews with children. Hay and Nye, echoing Martin Buber, note that "whilst the dialogue is between two people who are separate and independent, they are simultaneously and inevitably interdependent. It is from this stance of mutual respect that the difficult process of entering the gap in understanding takes place."[728] The goal of the interview is a kind of inter-subjectivity, during which meanings are conveyed through interaction, resulting in a "mutually-shaped reality" between researcher and child.[729]

4.7.1   Research Participants (Purposive Sampling)

At the time the research methodology was being designed, the meditation-with-children project was running in eighty primary schools which catered for about 18,000 children between them. It was considered desirable not to limit the study to a single school to ensure that the particular culture of any one school might not unduly influence the findings. Accordingly, it was decided to engage with 40-50 children across three schools in diverse settings. The intention was not to draw comparisons between the schools but to ensure that children from different backgrounds and

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726 Nixon, "Ethics of Oral Interviews with Children," 187.See also Catherine Shaw et al., *Guidelines for Research with Children and Young People,* (London: NCB Research Centre, 2011), 4

727 Clark, *In a Younger Voice: Doing Child-Centered Qualitative Research*, 73.

728 Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle Location 937 of 2836.

729 Clark, *In a Younger Voice: Doing Child-Centered Qualitative Research*, 76.

social contexts were included. Accordingly three schools were chosen purposively. As I noted in chapter 1, it was originally intended to limit the research to Christian schools which had adopted the whole school practice in the context of the project which was being promoted by Christian Meditation Ireland (CMI). However, I became aware of a multi-denominational school which practiced a form of *guided* meditation where every child meditated in class every day. The school had been doing so for eight years, while the schools in the CMI project had adopted the practice much more recently. Accordingly, it was decided to broaden the scope of the study and to include the multi-denominational school in the research. It was included, not with a view to making a comparison of outcomes between the two practices but to enable some reflection on the extent, if any, to which both meditation practices impacted on their spirituality; to discern to what extent, if any, did the meditation practices heighten the children's awareness of an energy or a life-force that transcends them and what was it like for them to experience that mysterious silence.

If the findings were to be meaningful, it was important to choose schools for the study that had implemented the practice across the whole-school and continued to do so consistently. A brief survey was carried out to identify schools which met those criteria. The survey identified schools where the principal was actively supporting the practice and/or where a coordinator had been appointed to do so and where the practice had become embedded in the life of the school. Several schools meeting these criteria and which were within an hour's travel from the researcher, were contacted and the possibility of participating in the study was discussed with them. A number of factors were considered in choosing two schools for the study, among them the availability of a suitable room in which to conduct the interviews with the children in a manner that complied with best practice in terms of child protection, the willingness of the teachers in the school to accommodate the study and to be interviewed themselves as part of it, and their willingness to allow the researcher to spend some time with the classes in order to invite children to participate in the research. Of the chosen schools, one was a senior Catholic primary school from a Western suburb of Dublin, catering for about 400 children, boys and girls, between 9 and 12 years of age; the second was a Catholic primary school, also co-educational, situated in a provincial town in the South East of the country with about 300 children

aged from 4 to 12 years. And, as mentioned, the third school was a multi-denominational school in Dublin which catered for 300 children aged 4 to 12 years; the vast majority of parents of children in the school were of foreign nationality, although a majority of the children in the study were born in Ireland. For many of these latter children, English was not their first language but those interviewed proved sufficiently competent to participate fruitfully in the project. On the advice of the school principal, a simplified consent form was designed for this school where parents and children signed on the same side of a single sheet. The documentation used in the recruitment and consent process across the schools is reproduced in **Appendix B**, page 322.

Some years ago, I had carried out a smaller survey on thirteen children in two schools which had been confined to children between 10 and 11 years of age. That study recommended a further study involving a broader age-range. The intention was that this study would interview each participating child twice, over two-half-hour interviews several weeks apart. As a consequence, it was necessary to limit the number of children to between forty and fifty.[730] A decision was made to target eighteen children in each school, six each from 1st class (aged about seven years old), 3rd class (aged about nine years old) and 5th class (aged about eleven years old).[731] The interviews were preceded by a meeting with the targeted classes at which I introduced myself and gently explored, in a child-friendly manner, the nature and purpose of the project. I had prepared a child-friendly information leaflet which I

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[730] I have noted that the vast majority of Irish primary schools fall under the trusteeship of the Christian Churches, and the vast majority of these are Catholic. In Ireland, preparation for the sacraments of Holy Communion, which children make in 2nd Class, and Confirmation, which children make 6th Class, during in their final year of primary school, takes place to a significant extent within the context of the denominational primary school and much school time is devoted to intensive preparation for them. It was considered best to avoid such periods of intensive immersion in the sacramental process; in any case, it would be more difficult to negotiate taking time from those class groups for this study. For these reasons it was decided to limit participation to children from 1st class, 3rd class and 5th class in the participating schools.

[731] Research indicates that younger children are often dependent on adult support in giving a narrative account of an event but as greater cognitive and linguistic flexibility develops, children become less dependent on adult support. Powell and Snow note that "By 5 years, children can usually provide well-sequenced, chronologically ordered accounts of their past experiences, and they can link story grammar elements using cohesive devices (such as 'so', 'then', 'because') that act as markers for cause – effect relationships in the story (Paul, 2001). At the ages of 6 and 7 years, children's vocabulary is more comprehensive, and their narratives are often judged as complete in terms of story – grammar content (Liles & Duffy, 1995). See Martine B. Powell and Pamela C. Snow, "Guide to Questioning Children During the Free-Narrative Phase of an Investigative Interview," *Australian Psychologist* 42, no. 1 (2007): 58.

discussed with the class.[732] The children were asked, if they were interested in participating, to bring material home to their parents, which included a letter (drafted by me and signed by the Principal) explaining that the Board had given permission for the research, an information leaflet for the parents about the project and another in child-friendly language for each child. In addition, there were two separate Consent Forms (back-to-back on a single page) which were to be signed by each parent and child respectively, but only where *both* parent and child were agreeable to the child's participation. Within each class group, the names of the six pupils to be interviewed would, if necessary, be drawn from a hat from amongst those who volunteered. In practice, the advice of the school principal was followed in determining from which class groups participants would be chosen.[733] It was hoped to interview an equal number of boys and girls where that was feasible. This worked well in the two Dublin schools, but just one boy volunteered to participate in the rural school. From those schools a total of 18 boys and 34 girls volunteered to be interviewed. In addition, the interview protocol was piloted to test the methodology and the protocols, the learnings from which are discussed below. In the end it was decided to consider in the study the data from the eighteen girls who participated in the pilot, so that a total of 70 children were included in all, across four primary schools – 18 boys and 52 girls.[734]

4.7.2   Interview Design

The in-depth interview is regarded as one of the best qualitative research techniques to use in probing underlying meanings and values, with a view to gaining insight and

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[732] It was considered important to explain to the children that they were equal partners in the process. For that reason, in the pre-interview visit to the class, I reminded the children that this was unlike the situation in class where a teacher already knows the answer to the questions she poses and the task of the pupil is to give the right answer. In the case of these interviews, there was no right answer and no wrong answer – each child would be asked to say how *they* experience the practice and it was they and they alone who knew the answer to that. They, in effect, would be teaching the researcher, as they were the ones who knew what the practice was like from their own direct experience! See Appendix B for full details of the documentation used.

[733] For example, in the multi-denominational school it was suggested it would be unwise to include children from 1st Class because their English language skills were not considered by the principal to be sufficiently good to enable the children to participate with confidence. The principal in this school also suggested that children form 6th class be given the opportunity to participate, as they had been meditating every day for their whole time at primary school.

[734] The pilot had been conducted in an all-girls school, so the final breakdown was 18 boys and 52 girls.

understanding[735] and will be the method adopted here. The literature suggested that a single interview, of whatever format, might not be sufficient to build adequate rapport and achieve sufficient depth with the children being interviewed;[736] accordingly, it was decided that each child would be interviewed twice by the researcher, about three weeks apart, for approximately thirty minutes each time; the limit was set to ensure that fatigue did not set in for the children. The interviews were designed to elicit from the children a description of their experience of the practice, what it meant to them and their experience of the benefits and/or fruits of the practice, if any. They involved the use of open-ended, holistic, semi-structured questions/prompts in a form suited to the age of the children involved.[737] The interview format was designed to give space to the children "to generate their own narratives and develop their ideas."[738] A number of texts proved to be particularly helpful in designing a suitable format for the one-on-one interviews.[739] Docherty and Sandelowski suggestion that "beginning an interview with free recall followed by the use of more direct questions may translate a general script into a more personal account" was followed.[740] The central aim of each interview was to obtain an account of the experience in the child's own words, with as little specific prompting as possible from the researcher.[741]

It was intended that the second round of interviews would be informed by issues that had arisen from the first round, both issues raised by the individual child and issues raised by other children. The intention was to see if a second round of interviews might generate a deeper level of meaningful conversation about the practice and its effects. A second interview also had the advantage of greater

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[735] J. and J. Lewis Ritchie, *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* (London: Sage, 2003), 138. See also Bill Gillham, *The Research Interview* (London: Continuum, 2000), 11.

[736] Noble-Carr, *Engaging Children in Research on Sensitive Issues* 19.

[737] Ibid., 189

[738] Ibid., 193

[739] In particular, Sheila Greene and Dianne Hogan, eds., *Researching Children's Experience* (London: Sage, 2011). Also Clark, *In a Younger Voice: Doing Child-Centered Qualitative Research*.

[740] Sharron Docherty and Margarete Sandelowski, "Focus on Qualitative Methods: Interviewing Children," *Research in Nursing & Health* 22(1999): 179.

[741] Research on interviewing children has consistently shown that a free-narrative account is best elicited with the use of non-leading open-ended questions and other prompts that encourage elaborate responses, but allow the child flexibility to report what information they recall. When interviewees have a good memory of the event, understand the information required, and have good language skills, no questions may be needed to elicit a narrative account. Where questions are found to be necessary, open-ended questions are found to be best for eliciting a more elaborate response. Powell and Snow, "Guide to Questioning Children During the Free-Narrative Phase of an Investigative Interview," 57.

flexibility, so that there would not be undue pressure to get everything covered in the first meeting. A draft interview protocol was developed for the children's interviews. In order to test the interview guide and to test the potential of a second round of interviews, it was decided to engage in a pilot project involving eighteen children in a single school.[742] The pilot also tested a range of conversational styles to discern which approach generated the most enthusiasm and the greatest depth of involvement from the children.[743] All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; during the transcription process, pseudonyms were assigned to each research participant.

The interview protocol, which is reproduced in **Appendix C**, was constructed on the understanding that the researcher was seeking to enter into the mystery of the child's experience of the practice, especially to explore the extent to which the practice impacted, if at all, on the spirituality of the child and the nature of that impact. The aim in the interviews was to help each child to articulate their inner experience in the dialogue of accompaniment and to facilitate them, gently and with great sensitivity, in discerning what it meant to them.[744] **Table 4.1** below summarises the key elements in each of the interviews:

	Round 1 Interview	**Round 2 Interview**
Phase 1	▪ Making child comfortable / Gathering basic facts ▪ Disposition towards meditation ▪ Description of Experience/ Benefits & Fruits	▪ Exploring more deeply what *this* child said in Round 1
Phase 2	▪ Photo-elicitation	▪ Exploring if what other children said in Round 1 resonated with the experience of *this* child

Figure 4.1: Key Elements of Interviews with the Children

Each interview was initiated with a broad open question, to allow the research participants to determine the direction of the interview by identifying what was significant or important for them about their lived experience of meditation. Follow-up questions were generally open - this was to ensure that the interviews did not seek

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[742] In the event, 18 children participated in both rounds of the pilot phase, approximately six children from each of 1st class (aged 7 approx.) , 3rd class (aged 9 approx.) and 5th class (aged 11 approx.).

[743] The variations involved a movement from more to less formal approaches and from more to less explicit prompting about the children's experience of God in their lives. They also resulted in thirty minutes being determined as the optimum time for each interview. The pilot also confirmed that the most important aspect of the process was for the interviewer to establish a good rapport with each child to enable the child to have the confidence and the trust to speak freely about what mattered most to them about the practice.

[744] Westcott and Littleton, "Exploring Meaning in Interviews with Children," 153.

to steer the conversation towards predetermined aspects of the phenomenon that may have been identified through the literature review and/or previous research as having potential significance. Given the mystagogical nature of the study, the protocol allowed for a question to probe if the child linked meditation to their experience, if any, of the transcendent or God.[745] In many cases, children spontaneously introduced this element into the conversation of their own accord. In the final part of the first interview, the children were invited to look at a selection of photographs and choose three or four that most reminded them of their experience of meditation.[746] They were then invited to describe what they saw in each image before exploring why it reminded them of meditation.[747]

There was generally a three-week gap between the two interviews with each child. This allowed the researcher sufficient time to type up the transcripts from the first round and to reflect on them with a view to identifying comments and/or themes for each child that might be followed up in the second round; the hope was to achieve a richer, deeper understanding of the experience and its impact on the child. In between the two interviews the children were invited to meditate at home, as well as in school, and each child was given a brief four-page journal (A5 in size) in which they could note when they had done so and record a brief observations afterwards, if they wished. While some children brought the journal back and discussed their observations, the majority 'forgot' to bring it back. The first part of the second interview with each child was devoted to this process of digging deeper into the more significant of their first-round comments. The second part of the second interview had a broader purpose. It was designed to share some emerging themes from the first round of interviews across all of the children interviewed in the earlier round and to ask *all* children about the full range of themes, including themes which might not

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[745] The interview-protocol and the wording used in the introductory meeting with the classes are reproduced in appendices D and C respectively.

[746] Barker and Renold, writing about the use of vignettes in children's interviews, note that research indicates, in relation to a non-directional application of vignettes, that 'fuzziness is strength' and ambiguity productive, insofar as it leaves space for young people to define the situation in their own terms. Thus, although vignettes need to contain sufficient context for respondents to have an understanding about the situation being depicted, it is beneficial for them to be vague enough to 'force' participants to provide additional factors which influence their judgement decisions. Christine Barker and Emma Renold, "*I Wanna Tell You a Story': Exploring the Application of Vignettes in Qualitative Research with Children and Young People," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 3, no. 4 (2003): 310. Note that their complementary status can be employed either to enhance existing data or to generate data untapped by other research methods (such as observation or interviews). See ibid., 311-13.

[747] The photographs, each originally A4 in size, are reproduced in thumbnail form in Appendix C.

have been raised by them in their own first-round interview. The intention here was to explore whether themes raised by some children, but not by all, might in fact be relevant and meaningful to those who had not initially raised them. Finding a practical way of doing this proved to be problematic and the pilot interviews proved to be crucial in resolving the problem through the development of the '**Selection Box**' method.

In the three-week interval between the two rounds of interviews, the researcher transcribed the sixteen or so round-one interviews from the relevant school, printed the texts and examined and reflected on them carefully. Possible emerging themes were noted and were written up as brief, one-line, phenomenological descriptions, usually in the children's own words, each phrase beginning with the words 'Meditation helps me to.' For example, 'Meditation helps me to be calm and relaxed' or 'Meditation helps me to open my heart.' The process of discerning these emerging ideas was a tentative first step in the analysis, a dipping of the researcher's toe into the pool of data and it fed into the next phase of data-gathering. The brief phenomenological descriptions are described from this point onwards as 'comment cards.'

Recalling that the photo-elicitation had worked very well in the first round of interviews, I concluded that a practical, tactile method was called for which would allow the child to handle each comment physically and respond tacitly, non-verbally, by separating out those comments which resonated with them from those that did not. The comments were typed onto paper and cut into rectangles, roughly the size of a credit-card, and laminated.

There were 32 cards in all, albeit some gave expression to the same core theme in different words. The cards were left in a pile (see **Figure 4.2**) and each child was asked to pick them up and to go through them one by one, at their own pace. Also on the table was a

Figure 4.2: Stack of Comment Cards

closed box. It was a cardboard box, with a pull-out drawer which had two divisions as shown in **Figure 4.3**.

When the drawer was opened, the child saw that the word 'Yes' was written in green lettering in the left-hand section and the word 'No' in red on the right, as shown. As the child read each card, they were asked to place it in the 'Yes' box if they too had experienced what they understood it to say, in the 'No' box if it didn't resonate with their own experience and on top of the box if they were unsure or if they did not know what the comment meant. It was a deliberate strategy to require the child to handle each comment physically and respond non-verbally, initially, by identifying, in a tactile manner, the comments which resonated with their own experience from those that did not.

Figure 4.3: Selection Box

The interviewer stressed to the children that there were no right or wrong answers and that every child was different and unique. Hence, they might have some cards in each of the three locations when they were finished – or not; it was entirely up to the child. They might find that some, even many, things mentioned by other children might not make sense to them and they were asked to put in the YES box only those comments that they too had experienced. They were advised that when they had finished the exercise, which was conducted in silence, we would talk about the comments they had chosen.

I have called this method the '**Selection Box'** because each child was doing just that, selecting the comments that resonated with their own experience and placing them in the box. They may, of course, have already mentioned similar comments in their own first interview, but in many cases they had not, so that the method gave rise to new material for discussion and new understandings emerged. When the child was finished, the discussion began. In almost all cases, there were some cards in each of the three locations. Just one child placed all of the cards in the

'Yes' box and one other placed all of the cards in the 'No' box. The researcher normally began by asking about the cards which had been left on top of the box, exploring the reason for their exclusion. If a child expressed uncertainty over the meaning of a word, the confusion was clarified and the child given the chance to place the card in the 'Yes' or the 'No' box. It was often the case that the child noted that the comment simply meant nothing to them in the context of meditation, in which case the card was left where it was. The cards which had been placed in the 'Yes' box were then removed from their side of the drawer and the box was moved to the centre of the table with the words 'Meditation Helps Me To…' clearly visible. The 'Yes' cards were them laid out on the table for further consideration.

It was only at this stage that the researcher adverted to the fact that each card had a coloured border. There were four different colours in all, and most children ended up with a set of cards that contained some of each colour. No explanation was offered to the children as to the meaning of the colours, but they were asked to help to sort them and lay them out on the table in separate groups. Typically, this resulted in a layout that looked something like **Figure 4.4**.
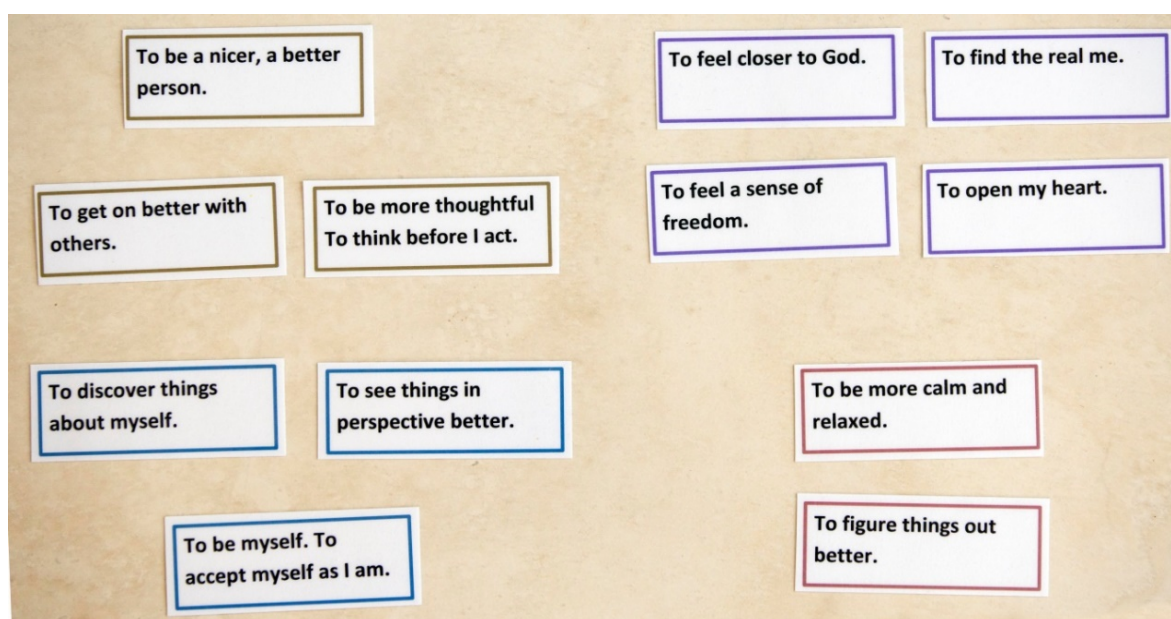
Figure 4.4: Selection Box Comment Cards Grouped by Category

As I was developing this method following the pilot project, I had observed that, by and large, the comments seemed to fall into four broad categories so I decided to give each card a thin coloured border so they could be sorted into the

159

separate categories during the interviews as shown. Some comments, those with the red borders, in the bottom-right quadrant of **Figure 4.4**, related to the *simple, pragmatic benefits* that seemed to flow from the practice e.g. 'Meditation helps me to be more calm and relaxed' or 'Meditation helps me to figure things out better.' A second group, bordered in blue, is shown in the bottom-left quadrant - these hinted at a *growing sense of self-awareness*. A third group seemed to touch on *aspects of personal transformation*, indicating that the person had been changed somehow by the practice – these comments had a brown border and are displayed in the top-left quadrant. The final category related to *a sense of transcendence*, to an awareness of something deep within or beyond the individual; in some cases the children referred explicitly to God. The addition of the coloured borders allowed the researcher to ensure that, in the time available for each interview, the discussion could touch on comments from each of these groups; otherwise a child might have chosen to stick with the simplest examples from their own experience. Having sorted the cards by colour with the help of the child, the researcher always began this part of the second interview by asking the child to take a moment to look over them and to begin by choosing a comment that really stood out as holding meaning for them, in light of their experience of meditation and its benefits. In other words, to choose a comment that really captured how they had experienced meditation or how meditation had most helped them. They were then asked to explain how that had arisen in their own experience, to describe in their own words what the comment meant to them in light of their own experience of meditation. After they had freely chosen and spoken about a few comments, the researcher then gently guided the child to choose a comment from a category not already touched upon. The process continued in this way, moving from group to group with the child choosing a new comment in each case and relating it to their own experience of meditation. A key benefit of this method is that, without saying a word, each child first identified those comments that resonated with them; it was the child who exercised the freedom to start the conversation by choosing to speak about those that meant most to them in their own experience of meditation. But it also ensured that the conversation was not restricted to just one set of colours, one category of comments. It meant too that as they choose a comment to talk about, each child physically reached out and picked up the comment they were going to speak to; they materially held it in their hands until they had finished speaking about it, after which they turned the card over so that we remembered it had

been covered. As the child spoke about each card, the researcher followed up with supplementary questions as appropriate. The whole process allowed the researcher to observe the child's body language as they first handled the comments, placing them in one of the three locations; and again, as they reached out to choose a comment card to start the conversation and finally as they physically handled the card as they spoke about it. This enabled the researcher to be alert to non-verbal signals and to follow up with appropriate supplementary questions prompted by those signals. As the time set aside came to a close, the conversation was brought to a close by the researcher by asking if there was any final comment left on the table that the child felt they must comment on. Any remaining comments were then gathered up with the ones which had been discarded earlier, making an effort to mix the colours in the process and the cards were then shuffled by the researcher, ready for the next interview.

Following the pilot interviews, some amendments were made to the interview protocol for round one – for example, prompts which seemed to work best were retained and, in places, the language was simplified. And the Selection Box method was developed in place of the rather cumbersome and unhelpful process devised for the second round of the first set of pilot interviews. The protocol was reviewed after each set of interviews as were the comments for the 'Selection Box' and changes were made as appropriate: for example, one child mentioned that meditation helped her 'to connect with God' and expressed a preference for that wording over the phrase 'brings me closer to God' and her wording was added as a new comment card to the Selection Box from then onwards. In this rolling review of interview data, general thoughts emerged which were noted in the researcher's reflective journal; this reflexive process enabled the researcher to keep in mind potential interpretations and understandings arising from the data. This practice added richness and a context to the process of analysis as the reflective journal was reflected upon throughout the analysis. As the texts were being studied, the researcher often returned to the original audio recordings which helped him to remain alive to the lived experiences as they were expressed by the children; this practice also contributed to a deeper understanding of the data. In addition, as each interview was transcribed, special attention was paid to the intonation of the children's voices and to body language; during each interview I had taken care to refer to the child's body language e.g. "I

see that you pointed to your heart as you said that" or "That was a deep sigh just now."

4.8   Criteria for Evaluating this Study

Questions of objectivity, reliability and trustworthiness are important in qualitative research. Maxwell suggests that "A realist understanding of validity leads to quite a different approach to issues of quality, credibility or trustworthiness than those normally employed in qualitative (or, for that matter, quantitative) research."[748] A realist approach focuses attention on the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the study. The researcher needs to demonstrate that the methodology is appropriate to the research question, that the data collected address the research questions adequately and that the findings flow from the data, are trustworthy and reflective of the views of the participants.[749]

However, there is no such thing as unbiased research. Inevitably, every act of research involves a choice of some kind. The particular perspective of the researcher means that certain aspects of the subject being researched will be highlighted and other aspects may be neglected. Hay describes the predicament in the following terms:

> It is clear that it is no good any researcher in the social sciences claiming to embrace a superficially neutral, open position, especially in a field like that of spirituality. The most important preliminary statement one needs to make is about integrity; the necessity to affirm a belief that the primary goal of research is knowledge, even though the findings may ultimately have educational and political implications. Honest acceptance of this requirement means that there is a reduction in the likelihood of our personal bias distorting the data to fit preconceptions about how the world ought to be. If we are to behave ethically in the role of researchers we need to record the other person's point of view as accurately as possible. This implies an acknowledgement that we may be surprised or disconcerted by what is discovered; that we are likely to have to change our minds. Instead of denying one's perspective, one needs to use it constructively.[750]

Wertz *et al.* note that, while qualitative findings are not designed to be generalizable, nonetheless "qualitative analysis can achieve surprisingly general

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[748] Joseph A. Maxwell, *A Realist Approach to Qualitative Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), 148.
[749] Greene and Harris, *Qualitative Research Methodology: Review of the Literature and Its Application to the Qualitative Component of Growing up in Ireland*, 33. See also Maxwell, *A Realist Approach to Qualitative Research*, 132.
[750] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle Location 945 of 2836.

insights and knowledge," even by analysing a single case in depth.[751] However, findings cannot be summed up as easily in qualitative as in quantitative research and achieving an appropriate balance between conciseness and richness is a challenge for the qualitative researcher who wishes to include abundant references to concrete life situations of the research participants.[752] Danaher and Briod note that since insight into experience is the goal of phenomenological research, "valid evidence is constituted by the representation in descriptive and narrative forms, of a general(isable) structure of meaning." Noting that "phenomenological intent … is the meaningful explication of the implicit," they assert that validation of results therefore does not correspond to the procedures of an empirical framework. Instead

> In the end, such research must guarantee its own validity in its own language: (a) *vividness*, describing the feeling of genuineness; (b) *accuracy*, making writing believable, enabling readers, also, to 'see' what it is like' (c) *richness*, the depth of description, the sensual-aesthetic dimension; (d) *elegance*, unifying the essential description in simple and economical expression (italics original).[753]

Danaher and Briod also stress that

> Phenomenological method intends the disclosure of meaning and significance only, with the intention of formal and thematic description. An important methodological distinction must be made between searching for meanings and searching for 'real' truths. Phenomenological methodology should be clear about this. Phenomenological research is not an inquiry into an assumed empirical world resulting in theoretical explanation, for it is only experiential description and explication that count.[754]

All forms of research need to demonstrate their trustworthiness. Seale cautions, 'If there is one thing that produces poor studies, it is a researcher who is blind to the methodological consequences of research decisions."[755] However "Rigor in qualitative inquiry does not have to be an inflexible set of standards and procedures as is imposed in quantitative inquiry but instead involves engaging in efforts that increase our confidence that our findings represent the meanings

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[751] Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research and Intuitive Inquiry*, 92.

[752] Ibid., 93.

[753] Tom Danaher and Marc Briod, "Phenomenological Approaches to Research with Children," in *Researching Children's Experience*, ed. Sheila Greene and Diane Hogan, (London: Sage, 2005), 225. See also Donald Polkinghorne, *Methodology for the Human Sciences: Systems of Inquiry* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983), 45-46.

[754] Danaher and Briod, "Phenomenological Approaches to Research with Children," 231.

[755] C. Seale, "Quality Issues in Qualitative Inquiry " *Qualitative Social Work* 11, no. 1 (2002).

presented by our participants."[756] Van Manen notes that "human science operates within its own criteria for precision, exactness and rigor … [and strives for them] … by aiming for interpretive descriptions that exact fullness and completeness of detail, and that explore to a degree of perfection the fundamental nature of the notion being addressed in the text."[757] He asserts that phenomenological truth operates largely as *aletheia* rather than *veritas*. [758] He argues that

> The basic philosophical method of phenomenology is the reduction, which aims not at logically valid deductive conclusions or inductive theory development, but at the production of plausible insight into the primal or inceptual meaning structures of pre-reflective or lived experiences.[759]

He notes too that the word 'validity' derives from the Latin *validus,* meaning strong and he suggests that the criterion of strength can indeed be used to assess the phenomenological acceptability and convincibility of a study: "A phenomenological study may be assessed on the criteria of its suspension of personal or systemic bias, it's originality of insight, and its scholarly treatment of sources."[760] Indeed, he suggests that "a strong and rigorous human science text distinguishes itself by its courage and resolve to stand up for the uniqueness and significance of the notion to which it has dedicated itself."[761] By contrast, measures such as content validity, criterion related validity, and construct validity are not compatible with phenomenological methodology: "Qualitative research is not well served by validation schemes that are naïvely applied across various incommensurable methodologies."[762] Instead van Manen argues that a different set of criteria is appropriate in reviewing a phenomenological text. The validity of a phenomenological study is to be found in "the originality of insights and the

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[756] Cynthia A. Lietz, Carol L. Langer, and Rich Furman, "Establishing Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research in Social Work: Implications from a Study Regarding Spirituality " *Qualitative Social Work* 5(2006): 441.

[757] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 17.

[758] Heidegger considered that in the Western world, *veritas* is the correspondence theory of truth -it relies on controllable methods and instrumental procedures. By contrast , the Greek concept of *aletheia* - which relates to disclosure and unconcealment - involves a heedful attunement to the things that present themselves to us in order to let them reveal themselves in their self-showing. *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*. ibid., Kindle location 8420 of 11092.

[759] Ibid., KIndle location 8469 of 11092.

[760] Ibid., Kindle location 8526-28 of 11092.

[761] *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 18.

[762] *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle location 8530-38 of 11092.

soundness of the interpretive processes demonstrated in the study."[763] One essential criterion is to assess whether the study is based on a valid phenomenological question. "In other words, does the study ask, "What is this human experience like?" "How is this or that phenomenon or event experienced?"[764] Has the researcher gathered "enough experientially rich accounts that make possible the figuration of powerful experiential examples or anecdotes that help to make contact with life as it is lived."[765] Likewise, one can ask: "Does the text show reflective allusions and surprising insights? What depthful insights have been gained through this study? Depth is what gives the phenomenon or lived experience to which we orient ourselves its meaning and its resistance to our fuller understanding."[766] Does the text induce wonder in the reader, does it lead the way to human understanding and questioning wonder?[767] In summary, van Manen suggests that

> Selected criteria to evaluate the phenomenological quality of a study are the following: heuristic questioning, descriptive richness, interpretive depth, distinctive rigor, strong and addressive meaning, experiential awakening, and inceptual epiphany.[768]

For van Manen, objectivity in human science research means that the researcher "remains true to the object" … [and] subjectivity means that we are *strong* in our orientation to the object of study *in a unique and personal way* (italics original) – while avoiding the danger of becoming arbitrary, self-indulgent, or of getting captivated and carried away by our own un-reflected preconceptions."[769] He asserts that "the object of radically qualitative research is essentially a linguistic project: to make some aspect of our lived world, of our lived experience, reflectively understandable and intelligible."[770] In a phenomenological sense, the research produces knowledge in the form of texts that not only describe and analyse phenomena of the lifeworld, but also evoke immediate understandings that otherwise lie beyond their reach.[771] The experiential examples need to be recognizable and

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[763] Ibid., Kindle location 8567 of 11092. Van Manen adds that "No predetermined procedure such as "members' check" or "triangulation of multiple methods" can fulfil such demand for validating a phenomenological study."

[764] Ibid., Kindle location 8608 od 11092.

[765] Ibid., Kindle location 8680 of 11092.

[766] Ibid., Kindle location 8712 of 11092.

[767] Ibid., Kindle location 8826 of 11092.

[768] Ibid., Kindle location 8727 of 11092.

[769] *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 20.

[770] *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle location 8906 of 11092.

[771] Ibid., Kindle location 8975 of 11092.

compelling.[772] The ambition of the phenomenological author is to grasp the naked now and rescue it from the just now. "The reader must be taken, touched, overcome by the phenomenological effect of a reflective engagement with lived experience."[773] "Phenomenological text must appeal to our cognitive and non-cognitive modes of knowing - to immanent and transcendent meaning. … Sensitive phenomenological texts reflect on life while reflecting life."[774] How well does the research report do these things? A researcher desires to capture meaning and put it into in words, but the danger is "that words constantly substitute themselves, destroying the things that they are meant to evoke. There are no "things"— only evocations, nothings."[775] Ultimately, the phenomenological method consists of creating one's path, not in following a path. Credibility is generated by how vivid and faithful the report is to the experience lived. Laverty suggests that when this is done really well the reader will come to see the report as a statement of the experience itself.[776]

I noted in the introduction to this thesis the potential for bias that arose because of my dual role as researcher and as coordinator of the project promoting the practice of meditation in Irish primary schools. I noted too Gadamer's assertion that while such potential bias can indeed distort one's way of seeing and understanding, it can also be productive and may actually promote understanding by bringing one's fore-understanding into the foreground for the researcher and readers of the research. In addition, every researcher approaches their research from the perspective of a specific professional discourse which may limit their research in ways they do not readily perceive.[777] Van Manen cautions that "our 'common sense' pre-understandings, or suppositions, assumptions, and the existing bodies of scientific knowledge, predispose us to interpret the nature of phenomenon before we have even come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological question."[778] Holroyd observes that "Interpretive hermeneutics offers the researcher the ability to see the way in which one's blind attachment to certain classifications and categorisations

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[772] Ibid., Kindle location 9187 of 11092.
[773] Ibid., Kindle location 9516 of 11092.
[774] Ibid., Kindle location 9527 of 11092.
[775] Ibid., Kindle location 9060 of 11092.
[776] Laverty, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations," 23.
[777] For example, Holroyd observes that while "health professionals know the pattern of an illness in a general sense … the individual understands his or her illness in an infinitely more sophisticated sense." Ann E. McManus Holroyd, "Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Clarifying Understanding," *The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 7, no. 2 (2007): 4.
[778] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 46.

limit how one understands and comes to know the world and to understand that there is no such thing as a pre-suppositional stance in any act of interpretation.[779] Gadamer introduced the concept of 'horizon of meaning' to describe a researcher's field of vision, which is a product of one's situatedness in the world and which influences one's perception of and how one interacts with his or her environment.[780] A fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) occurs as a researcher engages with a text and his or her horizon of meaning merges with the horizon of the text; the researcher must be open to being changed by the encounter.[781] Qualitative research therefore calls for great reflexivity and openness on the part of the researcher. As Kim Etherington expresses it "by allowing ourselves to be known and seen by others, we open up the possibility of learning more about the topic and ourselves, and in greater depth."[782] She suggests that "If we can become aware of how our own thoughts, feelings, culture, environment and social and personal history inform us as we dialogue with participants, transcribe their conversations with us and write our representations of the work, then perhaps we can come close to the rigour that is required of good qualitative research."[783] Researchers then "should make explicit [their] pre-understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories … not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to try this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow and concealing character."[784] Reflexivity is therefore vital to the research process; it requires the researcher to engage in "thoughtful, self-aware evaluation of the intersubjective dynamics between the researcher and researched" and to explore and outline how the

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[779] Holroyd, "Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Clarifying Understanding," 3.

[780] 'The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302.

[781] When our research experience challenges our subjective pre-understandings we may be moved to an experience of self-understanding, *Verstehen,* which names "an experience that is strangely, yet humanly enough, as much a knowing as a *not-knowing*. It is actually less a form of knowledge than a mode to find one's way around in the absence, as it were, of such knowledge." J. Grondin,, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003) quoted in Holroyd, "Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology: Clarifying Understanding," 9. Because the horizon of meaning changes in this way throughout the research process, Gadamer argued that there is no perfect method that can achieve a pure understanding of the inner world.

[782] Kim Etherington, *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Using Our Selves in Research* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004), 25.

[783] Ibid., 32.

[784] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 47.

"researcher's background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour impacts on the research process.[785] Linda Finlay expresses it well:

> The phenomenological process does not involve a researcher who is striving to be objectivistic, distanced or detached. Instead, the researcher is fully involved, interested and open to what may appear. Researcher subjectivity is prized and inter-subjectivity is embraced. The challenge is for the researcher to simultaneously embody contradictory stances of being "scientifically removed from," "open to" and "aware of " while also interacting with research participants in the midst of their own experiencing. An additional challenge is for the researcher is to stay vigilant, both to avoid charges of self-indulgence and solipsism, and to ensure that the focus of the research does not shift away from the phenomenon, and/or participants' lived worlds, to the researcher.[786]

As researcher I committed myself to take in whatever the data offered without bias or pre-judgement, to go out to the children and to look, see, and listen from as many perspectives and vantage points as possible, to question prior perceptions openly and to arrive at a conclusion that does full justice to the voices of the participating children. Steps undertaken to enhance reflexivity in this study include the maintenance of a research journal throughout the process, the preparation of a personal statement (below) and being attentive to the non-verbal language of children; during interviews, by devising approaches that facilitated such attentiveness and encouraged metaphorical expression by the children, and throughout the process of data analysis by paying close attention to their use of metaphor. In addition I undertook training as a spiritual guide to enhance my capacity for attentive listening, in particular to expressions of mystery in the children's accounts.

Each reader of the final text must make his or her own judgement as to how well this researcher has succeeded in meeting the criteria outlined above. Does what follows in the next two chapters evoke a strong sense of the child's experience of meditation? Does it do so with vividness, accuracy, richness and elegance? Do the descriptions explore to a degree of perfection the fundamental nature of the phenomenon? Do they make it reflectively understandable and intelligible? Have I gathered enough experientially rich accounts to induce a sense of wonder, even questioning wonder, in the reader? To what extent does the text meet Van Manen's criteria of "heuristic questioning, descriptive richness, interpretive depth, distinctive

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[785] L. Finlay and B Gough, eds., *Reflexivity: A Practical Guide for Researchers in Health and Social Sciences.* (Oxford: Blackwell Science, 2003), ix.

[786] Linda Finlay, "A Dance between the Reduction and Reflexivity: Explicating the "Phenomenological Psychological Attitude" " *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 38, no. 1 (2008): 3-4.

rigour, strong and addressive meaning, experiential awakening, and inceptual epiphany"?

4.8.1 A Personal Note

Section 4.8 began with the observation that there is no such thing as unbiased research. In Chapter 1, section 2, I reflected on the potential for my own background to be a possible source of bias in this research while observing also that as one's potential prejudices become apparent to oneself, they can also become an important focus of questioning in their own turn. For these reasons, I include here a brief note on my personal understanding of spirituality.

A significant turning point in my own spiritual life was appropriating the deep meaning of Chardin's quote: "While we think of ourselves as human beings on a spiritual journey we are in fact spiritual beings on a human journey."[787] This expressed in words something I had always 'known' but over the last two decades it seemed to clarify and deepen in my everyday awareness and impacted on my consciousness very meaningfully. I understood at a very deep level – I knew beyond knowledge[788] - that there is a divine spark within each person which is intimately connected to that which transcends us, to the Divine. I discovered that as my faith and apprehension of this Reality deepened, I became ever more deeply aware of an intense desire to honour my profound connection with all that is. I found my traditional image of God became undone yet my sense of God's presence in the world and in my life expanded beyond understanding. Over the following years, through the practice of Christian Meditation, I also became deeply aware that while one's image and concept of God can never match the Reality, which is beyond one's capacity to describe, one could nonetheless, come to discern and experience the presence of God in all of life. As Thomas Merton put it: "What a relief it was for me, now, to discover not only that no idea of ours, let alone any image, could adequately

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[787] Generally attributed to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "The Phenomenon of Man", (London: William Collins & Sons, 1959) in which the quote reads "while we think of ourselves as human beings having a spiritual experience we are in fact spiritual beings having a human experience". Quoted in Stephen R. Covey, *Living the Seven Habits* (New York: Fireside, 1999), 47.
[788] Beyond conceptual knowledge, it is perceptual knowledge. See Ephesians 3:14-20.

represent God, but also that we should not allow ourselves to be satisfied with any such knowledge of Him."[789]

I have mentioned already that Dermot Lane's definition of faith can serve as an excellent definition of spirituality.[790] Anthony de Mello explicates this idea on a very practical level. He describes spirituality as "waking up" to one's true potential; realising that one is blinded by one's conditioning, one's fears, one's desires, one's attachments, even one's beliefs and images of God and that, until one wakes up, one's actions will be tainted by that blindness. I came to understand spirituality as awakening to the mystery of God within and without; awakening to that cosmic divine spark within which animates one's desire towards truth and which leads each person to live life from that perspective, with greater clarity of perception and authenticity of response. MacNamara describes this inspirited drive as: "an inner dynamism of the human, a thrust towards ever greater consciousness, towards a greater aliveness to human potential, towards engagement with the true, the good and the beautiful."[791] I came to understand spirituality as awakening to this inner inspirited dynamism and ensuring that my actions were informed by the truth it revealed. The practice of meditation deepened my awareness of the true nature of the human person, of the true-self. As Jäger expresses it, "All psychic forces behave passively during meditation. Something happens to the person at prayer. … Something happens to the pray-er. It is an awakening to one's true divine essence."[792] The timeless nature of this truth, of this deep personal conviction, is captured beautifully by Rainer Maria Rilke:

> A billion stars go spinning through the night,
> Blazing high above your head.
> But in you is the presence that will be,
> When all the stars are dead.[793]

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[789] Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: SPCK, 1995), 174.

[790] James Fowler's understanding of faith as a universal feature of human living, a fundamental element in the human quest for relation to the transcendent, might also stand as a definition of spirituality. He described faith as `an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions.' See J.W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 14.

[791] Vincent MacNamara, *New Life for Old: On Desire and Becoming Human* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: The Columba Press, 2005), 27.

[792] Willigis Jäger, *Search for the Meaning of Life: Essays and Reflections of the Mystical Experience* (Ligouri, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2003), Kindle location 1414 of 5436.

[793] Rainer Maria Rilke, "Buddha in Glory," in *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Random House, 1995), 75.

4.9   Conclusion

In this chapter I have set out the nature of this study and the reason for choosing a critical realist paradigm and a hermeneutic, phenomenological, mystagogical methodology. I have set out in some detail what such an approach involves in light of the research question and the nature of the young participants involved. I have explored the literature on researching children and in particular on researching spirituality in children and I have developed a research design in light of the above. I explained that, because spiritual experience resides in the inner space of the subject and is hidden from the outsider, the paradigm of spiritual accompaniment was particularly appropriate because it helps the child to articulate their inner experience in the dialogue of accompaniment and helps the researcher to co-construct meaning with the subject.[794]

I reflected on best practice in terms of engaging ethically and meaningfully with children and the best means of encouraging them to become fully involved and finding ways of empowering their participation in the exploring the research question. I stressed the importance of a child-centred approach and the importance of attending especially to the non-verbal in interviews with children. I gave an account of the methods I adapted and developed – in particular, photo-elicitation and the Selection Box - to help take account of the mystagogical nature of the study and the primordial, non-verbal nature of the spiritual experience. And finally, I explored the criteria that may be used to assess the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. In the next chapter I analyse the rich data which the interviews with the children yielded.

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[794] Westcott and Littleton, "Exploring Meaning in Interviews with Children," 153.

Chapter 5

Analysis of Data and Insights Arising

The spirit of the One who creates the Universe dwells in the human heart and in silence is loving to all.[795]

5.1 Introduction

All raw qualitative data needs to be subjected to a process of analysis in order to reveal the meanings behind the text, to give expression to those features that emerged as common across the interviews and to enable insights to be drawn from the data. Because analysis is part of a process of interpretation of the data, it is important that one does "not see the research interview as providing researchers with a clear 'window' through which children's experiences can be seen."[796] In the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, the process of analysis seeks to mine the data in order to reveal its essence and its meaning in terms of the lived experience of the research participants. Attentiveness to lived experience is a central feature of phenomenological inquiry. Van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology is focused on the experiential reality of the lifeworld of the research participants. It approaches the phenomenon being studied in its lived aspect, with the intention primarily of explicating the meaning the phenomenon takes on in lived human experience.

As the semi-structured interviews proceeded and in the course of analysis I became aware that hearing "is an active process and is already interpretive, always drawing on meanings we already 'know'."[797] In analysing the data, therefore, the researcher must lay bare the processes used so that readers can understand how findings were drawn from the data and decide for themselves if the approach taken is reliable and the conclusions drawn are valid. This chapter analyses the data gathered from the 70 hours of interviews with the children. The analysis is presented under the eleven themes; four themes associated with the child's experience of the practice,

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[795] From the *Upanishads.* Quoted in Main, *Moment of Christ: The Path of Meditation*, 76.
[796] Pam Alldred and Erica Burman, "Analysing Children's Accounts Using Discourse Analysis," in *Researching Children's Experiences: Methods and Approaches*, ed. Sheila Greene and Diane Hogan, (London: Sage, 2011), 176.
[797] Ibid., 183.

three with the psychological benefits they spoke about and four themes related to the inner, spiritual fruits of the practice.

The raw data in this research is the recorded interviews undertaken with the 70 children in the three chosen primary schools and the pilot primary school. All 70 interviews were coded, but for the purpose of the identification of themes the analysis was limited to the three primary schools in the study proper. However, when the emerging themes had been identified using that data set, the researcher returned to the data from the pilot schools to identify especially pertinent additional exemplars of those themes and some of the additional exemplars are included in this analysis. Where direct quotes are included, children are identified by their pseudonyms and their age and school are indicated. For example Ella (9,X) indicates that the quote is from the child whose pseudonym was Ella, who was 9 years old and attended school X. The two denominational schools are identified as N and X, the multi-denominational school by the letter E and the pilot school by the letter P.

One final introductory comment needs to be made. Jennifer Mata draws attention to the danger that can arise when "children share their spiritual experiences with adults who interpret and report them in adult language."[798] For that reason, I have decided to quote liberally from the children in this research, in their own words. This chapter is a little longer as a result but if it errs in doing so, it is with a view to giving the children their own voice.

5.2   Method of Analysis

As a first step, a transcript of each interview was painstakingly prepared – great care was taken to transcribe faithfully every word spoken by me and each child. I then read the transcripts several times so that I could immerse myself in the data. The aim, as in empathic listening, was to enter as fully as possible into the frame of reference of each child.[799] The process of analysis followed the transcription of the recorded interviews with the 48 children from the three primary schools. However, in reality, the process began much earlier, with the transcription of the first round of interviews from the pilot-school. An initial analysis was necessary to develop a protocol for the second round of interviews; the development of that protocol was outlined in the

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[798] Mata, *Spiritual Experiences in Early Childhood Education: Four Kindergardners, One Classroom*, 24.
[799] Saul J. Weiner and Simon Auster, "From Empathy to Caring: Defining the Ideal Approach to a Healing Relationship," *The Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 80(2007): 123.

previous chapter. All of the texts were then imported into MAXQDA, a piece of professional software designed for qualitative data analysis and the data was coded. Every significant phrase used by each child was coded, generally *in vivo*; inevitably, the coding was also influenced by the literature review, the process of preparing for the interviews and the mystagogic approach to the study. For example, a key finding from the literature review was the capacity of children for relational consciousness; it could be expected that such characteristics might appear in the coding. Likewise, the interviews had been designed to elicit information from each child regarding their disposition towards the practice, their understanding and experience of the practice and their perception of the benefits and fruits of the practice for themselves and others – so it might be expected that the final coding would also reflect these key areas. The coding process led to the emergence of a large number of codes, which were initially gathered under the broad headings of the interview protocols. Where a piece of text in any transcript fell under more than one code, it was coded with each relevant code. The coding of the data in this way is not a necessary step in phenomenology but was undertaken as an additional first step in this case because of the large number of participants. Indeed, van Manen cautions against the use of special software in phenomenological analysis for fear it may become merely "a mechanical application of some frequency count" as in general qualitative analysis.[800] Sohn disagrees, arguing that while such software can be used in a way that may impede phenomenological insight – for example, if, as a result, the researcher fails to dwell sufficiently in the transcriptions – their use need not preclude the researcher from gaining phenomenological insight. Indeed, Sohn found that the software facilitated a thorough line-by-line analysis without interfering with his "sense of discovery, exploration and wonder."[801] Likewise, the use of the software enabled this researcher to identify significant thematic expressions that seemed to reveal something of the essence of the experience and its fruits and to link similar expressions together through the *in-vivo* coding, often in the children's own words.[802] The use of the software enabled the researcher to search the data with ease and keep track of emerging themes more easily across the interview transcripts. It is

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[800] van Manen, *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle Location 7862 of 11093.

[801] Brian Kelleher Sohn, "Phenomenology and Qualitative Data Analysis Software (Qdas): A Careful Reconciliation," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 18, no. 1 (2017).

[802] van Manen, *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle Location 7874 of 11093.

important to stress that the coding was done by the researcher, not by the software, which served merely to help keep the data organised and searchable. As noted above, all of the interviews were coded, including those from the pilot-interviews, but the initial analysis was limited to the data from the three primary schools in the study proper. Once the key themes had emerged from this analysis, the researcher did return to the data from the pilot schools to seek out particularly vivid exemplars to explicate the themes. Some of these additional exemplars have been used in the phenomenological description of the experience and to describe the benefits and fruits arising for the children. The software enabled similarly coded segments of the data from the schools to be retrieved easily for further analysis and reflection; meaningful segments of data were then easily identified, retrieved, compared, isolated, grouped and regrouped as part of the analysis. The process helped to elicit what was common to the experience of the children and to tease out the meaning of the emerging themes.[803] Miles and Huberman note that:

> From the start of data collection, the qualitative analyst is beginning to decide what things mean – is noting regularities, patterns, explanations, possible configurations, causal flows and proposition. The competent researcher holds these conclusions lightly, maintaining openness and scepticism, but the conclusions are still there, inchoate and vague at first, then increasingly explicit and grounded ...[804]

I noted in the previous chapter van Manen's observation that lived experience cannot be captured in conceptual abstractions. Instead, one seeks to mine texts for meaning, trying to unearth something meaningful in the themes arising from the data, from the children's lived experience of meditation. The approach taken in this study mirrors the detailed, line-by-line approach suggested by van Manen; each sentence was examined to see what it reveals about the nature of the phenomenon and coded accordingly. It is important to note that thematic analysis undertaken was both sequential and iterative; each step informed and influenced every other in a cyclical, hermeneutic process. This back and forth movement between the individual transcripts, the reflective journal and the themes emerging from the study as a whole continued until the analysis was complete. In this way, meanings emerging from the data were constantly tested for their plausibility and their validity. Nonetheless, the

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[803] Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Kindle Location 4053.
[804] Matthew B. Miles and Michael Huberman, A., *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage, 1994), 11.

emerging themes are inevitably influenced to some extent by the values, ways of thinking and writing style of the researcher as noted in section 1.3.

Van Manen points out that themes are a focus of meaning pointing toward an aspect of the essence of a phenomenon – he described them as like knots in the webs of experience, as threads around which the phenomenological description is facilitated. While no single statement can capture the mystery, the essence of a deeply meaningful experience, it is the job of the researcher to uncover thematic aspects of the phenomenon from the texts and to write rich, deep textural descriptions of each emerging theme that somehow capture its meaning. The interpretive power of thematic reflection is revealed when the essence of a theme is captured in a rich, deep phenomenological description. In the course of the coding, passages that seemed to vividly capture aspects of the meaning of the experience of meditation were marked with memos. I also reflected carefully on passages and emerging themes that seemed to challenge my prior understanding or assumptions about the experience. As I wrote up the insights arising from this research, I sought at all times to understand how my own assumptions and prejudices were reflected in the emerging interpretations and endeavoured to ensure that the "findings" remained true to what each child's experience of the practice was revealing.

As the analysis of the transcripts proceeded and deepened and as the write-up of the "findings" progressed, I began to see more clearly the connections between the different expressions of meaning across all of the interviews. As a new understanding or theme emerged or was clarified the software was helpful in retrieving and drawing together relevant related segments across all of the transcripts, so I was able again and again to go back to the language of the children themselves and recall the context in which they occurred and to identify the most apt quotes which seemed to capture the essence of what was being described.[805] This cyclical hermeneutic process of analysis, which involved moving between the parts and the whole, constantly clarified emerging interpretations and enabled me to identify emerging themes and to write up phenomenologically sensitive textural descriptions around the themes. Van Manen notes that "phenomenology differs from almost every other social and human science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, largely without taxonomising, classifying, codifying, or

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[805] The software also allowed for memos to be added to codes, quotes and retrieved segments, thereby assisting the analysis immeasurably.

abstracting it."[806] For that reason, I refer to the outcomes of this research as insights rather than findings. The process of writing up the insights emerging was not without struggle; it seemed often that a straightforward thematic analysis would have been much simpler to do and easier to write-up. However, I was sustained by van Manen's observation that it is only as one grapples with ambiguity and uncertainty while immersed in the data, only as one struggles with it that suddenly and unexpectedly one is struck or visited by an inceptive insight.[807] He notes that a sense of struggle and frustration is a necessary part of the journey and that

> It requires on the part of the researcher patience and a willingness to surrender to the grace of serendipity, even if that means to be frustrated and exasperated when phenomenological insights just do not seem to come.[808]

5.3   The Experience of Meditation

What is it like for a child to experience meditation? How does a child experience the pragmatic benefits of meditation, if any? How do children describe that which they encounter in the Silence? In what ways, if any, do they experience the practice as spiritual? In an attempt to answer these questions, I now present a phenomenological account of what it is like for a child to experience meditation. Van Manen observes that

> A phenomenological description describes the original of which the description is only an example. To say it differently, a phenomenological description is an example composed of examples. If the description is phenomenologically powerful, then it acquires a certain transparency, so to speak; it permits us to 'see' the deeper significance, or meaning structures, of the lived experience it describes.[809]

In other words, a phenomenological description "gives us the feeling that we are brought 'in touch' with something and thus 'see' something in a manner that is

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[806] van Manen, *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle location 1702 of 11092.

[807] I noted in Chapter four that van Manen uses the notion of inception to describe how a sudden insight can reveal a truth about a phenomenon. But it is important to understand that "Inception does not depend on my creative agency; rather, an inceptual thought may happen to me as a gift, grace - an event that I could neither plan nor foresee … [but there occurs] that most momentous moment in the struggle of phenomenological enquiry when an intuitive understanding is sparked … suddenly … discerning a truth in an instant of writing." See ibid., Kindle location 5847 of 11092. He notes too that "we cannot find an inceptual thought; rather it finds us … And yet, paradoxically, if we are not searching, it will not find us." See ibid., Kindle location 5911-22 of 11092.

[808] Ibid., Kindle location 5928-48 of 11093.

[809] *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 122.

revealing of its experiential sense."[810] It is not intended to be empirical or factual but to have a stirring quality that establishes a 'feeling understanding' which has an augmenting, enlarging effect.[811] It produces a sense of vividness, nearness and intimacy with the phenomenon.[812] It provides a form of access to the phenomenon which is not directly sayable, somehow making it knowable and understandable so that the reader 'gets it.' It mediates one's intuitive grasp of the phenomenon or an aspect of it.[813]

Wertz *et al.* consider that in order to create resonance for the reader of human science research "the researcher must provide the texture that brings the fullness and richness of the experience to the reader so that it is alive in Gendlin's ''felt sense,'' allowing one to … find in oneself the physicality evoked by the words."[814] The description presented here draws on the format developed by Les Todres; he established a method of presenting a phenomenological description in the form of a composite first person narrative;[815] this is "a 'reflective story' [which] draws on the composite picture" emerging from the research participants.[816] Wertz *et al.* note that

> the composite first person narrative is more than a definition or series of statements about a phenomenon; [it] tells something that connects with universal human qualities so that the reader can relate personally to the themes; [it] is a story that readers can imagine in a personal way; [it] attempts to contribute to new understanding about the phenomenon; and [it] is not exhaustive, but allows the topic to be seen more clearly. It aims to illuminate, to allow the reader to have an increased sense of contact with the phenomenon without fully possessing it. Use of the personal pronoun ''I'' is essential to the method. It indicates the composite-informant in the first person sense as someone who typifies the general experience within a living and situated context.[817]

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[810] *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle location 6189 of 11092.

[811] Gendlin has also written about the felt-sense and experiential knowledge. See Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective.*

[812] van Manen, *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle location 6191 of 11092.

[813] Ibid., Kindle location 6450 of 11092.

[814] Marcia Stanley Wertz et al., "The Composite First Person Narrative: Texture, Structure, and Meaning in Writing Phenomenological Descriptions," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being* 6, no. 2 (2011). Available online at http://www.ijqhw.net/index.php/qhw/article/view/5882

[815] See Todres, *Embodied Enquiry: Phenomenological Touchstones for Research, Psychotherapy and Spirituality*, 50-58.

[816] Ibid., 50.

[817] Wertz et al., "The Composite First Person Narrative: Texture, Structure, and Meaning in Writing Phenomenological Descriptions," 2 (Method).

The description re-presents the narrative data gathered from the children with a view to helping the reader to develop a more embodied apprehension and understanding of the phenomenon. Todres notes that "this involves an aesthetic balance between language as poetic pointing and language as analytically precise."[818] The description which follows is not, then, a single description from a particular child, but is a composite, based on the accounts given by children in their conversations with the researcher; as far as possible, it uses actual phrases and idioms as employed by the children themselves interlaced with some imaginative description based on the researcher's knowledge and personal experience.[819] In all of the accounts that follow, including phenomenological descriptions and excerpts from the conversations with the children, the ellipsis (…), which normally (and elsewhere in this report) signals that a piece of text has been edited out, signals instead a brief pause in the conversation as the child (or the interviewer) struggled to voice a thought; a longer pause is indicated as follows: '… (pause) …'.

5.3.1   A Phenomenological Description of the Child's Experience of Meditation

I love meditation because it's so peaceful and quiet. Especially in school, because everyone is really quiet at the same time. When it started first I thought it would be boring because I love to play. I love to run and chase and I didn't think I would be able to do nothing. But I can and I really like it now.

Meditation is like a break from all the drama. Sometimes you don't know you need a break until you take it and then it feels so good when you do. I discovered that for myself. It's not like you're asleep or anything, but it's a different kind of being awake. It's like you're swimming underwater without having to worry about breathing. As if it wasn't you that was moving but the water and everything in it slowly flows by you. You see it all but you

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[818] Todres, *Embodied Enquiry: Phenomenological Touchstones for Research, Psychotherapy and Spirituality*, 55. Todres notes that the researcher strives to achieve a balance between moments of closeness and distance in engaging with the phenomenon. Closeness by attempting to enter the experience of the participants and "bring the 'heart' of the textures to language" and distance by adopting a more academic perspective, teasing out meanings thematically. Ibid., 58.

[819] Van Manen notes that "An anecdote can be constructed from "lived experience descriptions" gathered through interview, observation, personal experience, related literature, written accounts, or from imagined accounts. Sometimes experiential descriptions are so well narrated that they already have the narrative shape of an anecdote." See van Manen, *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle location 6222 of 11092.

don't go chasing it. I saw a beautiful picture of the fish swimming in a coral reef and it reminded me of meditation. Everything was bright and colourful and the fish were happy and free. They could just be themselves. It made me realise that meditation is like that for me. I can just be myself.

If meditation was a colour it would be yellow, because when I see the colour yellow I am all of a sudden so happy. Meditation does that too. If meditation was a flower, it would be a sunflower. It just sits in the sun all day, just being itself. Time flies because there's nowhere else you want to be. When our class meditates, we are like a field of sunflowers.

Meditation brings me inside myself. It feels like it is somewhere deep inside. I can't describe the feeling. I can't compare it to anything else. It feels like you are just thinking ... well, not thinking but just sitting there ... I'm not thinking about what's going to happen next ... it's like I'm in a bubble, it feels like there is nothing around me and I feel like I'm in freedom... Imagine a picture of a path curving into a wood – meditation is like walking along that path into an empty dream ... you don't know what's in there but you want to go in and you know it will be safe ...

When I meditate it feels like my whole body has stopped and, even though my eyes are closed and I can't see anything, it's as if I'm enjoying the view ... as if I'm sitting on a beach, just looking out at the waves, with nothing on my mind, feeling the breeze in my hair ... listening to the sound of the waves ... I've stopped moving, I've stopped working and I just feel at peace with the world. A certain kind of emotion comes inside of me and it makes me feel better. It makes me feel happier in the world and it makes me feel grateful for everything good in my life. If I was in bad form before meditation, I feel good afterwards. I don't know why, but whatever was bothering me doesn't seem to matter so much afterwards. I'm able to let it go. It's like I give myself permission to get over it, instead of hanging on to it. It's as if the waves wash my worries away, carrying them back out to the sea. When I really get into it, I'm not thinking about anything, it's as if my brain has shut down – just like my body is still, my brain is quiet too. Even when it's noisy outside, it doesn't feel noisy inside me – it feels calm and quiet.

Whatever is happening around me doesn't disturb that. I can hear the sounds around, the rain on the roof, cars passing by, a dog barking … but I let it all go. It's like I'm slowly sinking into myself and, when I get deep enough, it's as if my heart opens up and I realise more what I'm feeling… I'm not thinking about them, but I feel my feelings more … I realise what I actually feel like and how others feel. Sometimes I realise that something I said or did at lunchtime wasn't nice and I realise I need to apologise for it. Then I'm able to let it go and after meditation I say 'Sorry.' My anger is gone and I'm not worried anymore.

Some days, after meditation it feels like a new day, as if you knew something was going to happen today, without knowing what it was, and you have to get up and do it … It's the same feeling I would have if I had something really exciting to look forward to… It makes me want to get back into the day so it can happen … Meditation gives me energy. I'm more focused afterwards. It's like I've had a great rest and my mind is clear. Like all the stuff that had built up in the morning is gone and there's loads of space for starting again. There's nothing on my mind and I have energy to start again.

When the time for meditation comes, I feel kind of excited, because meditation is my favourite thing. I feel really relaxed. When I meditate I become aware of my heart beating, I can feel my heart slow down. Wherever I am when I meditate, it feels like I'm just here now and this is exactly where I'm supposed to be. Even when I'm meditating at school, it feels like I'm at home. The feeling of being in school completely goes out of my mind. It brings me to a place of joy and happiness and it feels like I'm somewhere I always wanted to be since I was small. You feel like everything is right with the world. Even if things aren't perfect, if something is bothering you, you still feel that in the end everything is really OK. It's like you know in your heart that everything is all right even if it seems to be going wrong. All of the negative things flow out of my head. I'm not thinking about happy things, but it's as if I'm surrounded by happiness. It's like my whole body is happy, like my heart is really happy. Instead of being anxious or worried, I feel good. It feels like something comes into me, a happiness that I can't describe. It's as if

the space that is filled when all my thoughts and worries have left … it's as if that space is filled by happiness and love. I can feel happiness in my body; it's like my heart feels happy - I'd say my happy place is in my heart.

But some days meditation makes me happy and sad at the same time. My Nana died last year and I always feel she is close to me in meditation. That makes me a little bit sad because I miss her but happy at the same time because I feel close to her when I meditate; and I feel that she is close to me and that she loves me. I always feel different after meditation. Meditation makes me feel safe and loved.

After meditation I feel like I'm a better person. Meditation makes me realise all the goodness inside me and in everybody. Even people I don't really like or who are not very nice to me. Even bad people, only they can't see it. It's as if I've reached a certain part of me that has most of the goodness and once you meditate you can kind of figure out where it is and let it show. It feels like this is who I really am. And, often, it feels like God is there, filling my heart with love. I feel loved by my family and loved by God.

Sometimes I meditate for a reason. Like, if my little brother is annoying me, I'll go up to my room and meditate and when I come down I don't feel mad at him anymore and I just tell him he's not to take my ruler anymore without asking. And, once, when I couldn't do my Maths homework, my Mam said to leave it and I did. After my homework, I went upstairs to meditate and when I was coming back down the stairs the answer just popped into my head. I do that now if I can't figure something out. It doesn't always work, but it works a lot. And even if it doesn't, I don't worry about it – I just let it go.

I don't worry about what's going to happen next. I just let everything be itself. And me be me … whatever happens will be OK. And I find I really don't mind what happens next.

5.3.2 Some Interview Excerpts

While the previous passage seeks to capture what it feels like for a child to meditate, it does not represent any one child who participated in the research; instead it is an interpretive narrative, giving voice to the many voices of the children who participated in the study. By contrast, what follows are three individual accounts that give voice to the experience of particular children. Van Manen suggests it may be very helpful to

> identify and capture thematic expressions, phrases, or narrative paragraphs that increasingly let the phenomenological meaning of the experience show or give itself in the text. If the whole experiential account is particularly powerful then we try to lift it out as an exemplary story or anecdote.[820]

The following accounts were chosen to demonstrate the breadth and depth of some of the individual accounts of the experience of meditation and its fruits as perceived by the children. The first description arises from a pair of seven-year-old twins, Gráinne (7,P) and Mairead (7,P).[821] They meditate regularly at home as well as in school. At home, they sometimes meditate in a built-in wardrobe in a spare bedroom. The floor is very hard, so they bring cushions to sit on. They close the wardrobe door so it will be even quieter as they meditate together. When they visit their grand-dad's place, they often meditate in an outside shed. As Gráinne spoke about the experience of meditating, her voice often dropped almost to a whisper, mirroring the quiet she was speaking about. She says she feels very close to God every time she meditates. Gráinne also said that "*sometimes in the car, if we're going to have a little long drive, I close my eyes and I meditate and God's there.*" Elsewhere in the conversation she observed that "*when you close your eyes (and meditate), then you can see God in your eyes and some people think it's a dream but it's real*. [Can you tell me more about that?] *Well, em, sometimes you can just see God in your eyes and he's telling you to be … like when you had a fight with your friend, he could just, God could say "Just say sorry, it doesn't matter who started-off the fight; just say 'Sorry.'" It's like he's telling you what is right* … [What is the right thing to do?] *Yeah.*" Her twin-sister, Mairèad, also felt close to God when she meditated. When asked why that was so, she responded "*it feels like meditation just*

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[820] Ibid., Kindle location 7876 of 11093.

[821] Every time a child's name is mentioned, their age and the school will be noted as well. Gráinne and Mairèad were both seven years old and attended school P, the school in which the pilot interviews were tested.

brings me … brings God down to me…" During the photo-elicitation phase of the first interview, Mairèad chose a photo of the Milky Way as one that reminded her of meditation. When asked why, she responded:

M: *I like to go outside at night time, just the two of us to have some peace.*
I: So you go out and look up at the stars at night?
M: *And we used to wish upon a star …*
I: You used to go out with your sister?
M: *Yeah*
I: So tell me a little bit about that, what would you do?
M: *em, we would usually look up at the sky and like, em, hold hands and sit beside each other …*
I: Hold hands and sit beside each other?
M: *Yeah … And, but … When the boys are gone away … they usually play football*
I: So you sit outside on the green in front of your house when the boys are gone?
M: *Yeah. We just sit down there and like …*
I: And hold your sister's hand?
M: *Yeah, when it's all* (indecipherable) …
I: And look up at the stars?
M: *Yeah*
I: And what does that feel like?
M: *It feels like, em, instead of Gráinne … it feels like God …*
I: So it feels like you're holding God's hand instead of your sister's hand
M: *Yeah.*
I: How would you describe how that feels?
M: *It feels, em, like Gráinne is gone in – say, to go to the toilet - and God came down instead.*
I: Have you ever told your sister that?
M: *em, I was going to yesterday but it was bedtime …*
I: So she doesn't know that yet…
M: *Yeah, but I was going to tell her though…*
I   That's okay. You don't have to tell. You can decide that for yourself. That's up to you.
I: Do you feel very close to God then?
M: *Yeah.*
I: Is there anything else you'd like to say about that?
M: *em … We used to like, like when we were 5 or 6, we used to, like … Sit by the window when it's raining and like, look up at the stars…*
I: And what would be going through your mind at that time?
M: *em, it would be like, em, that rain is bringing God …*
I: Bringing God into your mind?
M: *Yeah.*
I: Just to be with you?
M: *Yeah.*

Her twin-sister, Gráinne, made no mention of this in her first interview, so during the second interview I asked Gráinne if she and her sister ever looked up at the stars at night. She responded:

G: *Well we do, when it's nearly night-time. We put on a jumper and then ... And then we ... (pause) ... We look at the stars and then we wish sometimes at ... (pause) ... like, that God came down ... and then, when we go in, we meditate and then our eyes get, like, they brighten up; it's not dark any more - because it always black - and then, em, it feels like it's not, it's a dream ... like it's not a dream or a thought but it was a thought and you actually saw God in it ... Then you thought your drea...., your wish came true.*

I: Will you look at this picture for me? (It was an image of a boy and a dog looking up at the stars.) It's a boy, or is it a girl, and his or her dog, looking up at the stars.

G: *I think it's a boy.*

I: What do you think might be going through his mind?

I: *Like, he might be thinking of God because, or Jesus, because they are up in the sky in heaven and like, he might be thinking that God is right beside him ... He might be thinking...like us, sometimes we bring our dog out with us and then we think ... We just close our eyes for a long time and we spin around in circles and then it looks like our dog turned into God but he doesn't it's just our dog ... And we think our dog ...*

I: So the three of you are there, but it's like you and your sister and God, instead the dog?

G: *Yeah but then when we do the ... It's just our dog and then some wind blows and it feels like someone is tapping us on the back.*

I: So you have that sense of God touching you again?

G: *Yeah* (Earlier in her second-round interview Gráinne had mentioned that she sometimes likes to meditate near an open window, adding that "*then when the wind comes in, it feels like God is with me.*" The interviewer had asked if she liked the feel of the breeze against her skin and she replied "*Yeah, because it's so light and, em, and God won't play rough, he'll just touch you very carefully.*"

Another child, Leanne (9,N) described meditation as the highlight of her day and described meditation as a joyful experience:

I: If meditation was a colour, what would it be?

L: *If meditation was a colour I think it would be yellow.*

I: What makes you think of yellow?

L: *I think yellow is a soft and welcoming colour and I think meditation is like that.*

I: So meditation is soft and welcoming? That's a lovely description of meditation. When the time for meditation arrives in the school day, how do you feel?

L: *I feel like that's the highlight of my day. I just get, like, time to stop working, to take a break and just meditate.*

I: That's an interesting way of describing it, as the highlight of your day. Why do you think do you feel so positively about it? Why do you look forward to it so much?

L: *I feel positive about it because I think it really relaxes you and for the rest of the day I just feel joyful and it just gives me like, more energy just to take a break from working. And if I get stressed I just meditate and then, I just feel like it's the highlight of my day on one of them days.*

185

I: You've mentioned two things there that you hadn't mentioned before that I find really interesting. You just described meditation as joyful. Tell me more about meditation being joyful?

L: *It makes me feel joyful because it gives me more energy. And it just makes me … like, if my brother is just being annoying, I just let it bounce off my chest and just … because I feel meditation … It's for a reason and I think that's the reason.*

I: Did somebody explain that to you or do you think is that something you figured out for yourself.

L: *It's something I figured out for myself.*

I: Do you remember when you made that discovery and what was it like to make that discovery for yourself?

L: *I was just like meditating … But then it just hit me in my mind … This is for a reason, and not just doing it (for no reason) … But I'm doing this for a reason … And then it's just where like … It just calms me and it gives me a break from all the drama … So, Yeah.'*

I: It just struck you very strongly one day and it stayed with you ever since?

L: *Yeah.*

Jason (12,E) was a young boy for whom meditation seemed to be a deep and rich experience, the depth of which became even clearer in the second interview. He was twelve years old and attended a multi-denominational primary school where he had meditated every day for the previous eight years, generally following a form of imaginative, guided meditation led by a presenter on a CD. Meditation was introduced to the children as part of the ethos and culture of the school, from Junior Infants (4-year-olds) onwards. While it was not introduced specifically as a spiritual practice, the children were aware through their ethical education curriculum that meditation was a practice promoted in many world religions.[822] At the time of the interviews, Jason was also receiving out-of-school preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation which was to take place in his local Catholic parish soon afterwards. Jason was a deeply reflective young man. According to Jason, his family did not attend church regularly but did on special occasions. He said that when he meditates he sometimes focuses on the sounds of the wind outside and the birds singing and people and traffic passing by. When he meditates, he can feels like all the bad thoughts are going out of his mind and good thoughts are coming in. Meditation gives him a sense of freedom. In response to the prompt 'People meditate because,' he responded '*I think people meditate because it helps them to feel free…*' He also

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[822] An ethical education curriculum, *Learn Together,* is taught in place of religious instruction in Educate Together schools. There are four strands in the *Learn Together* curriculum - it aims to develop in children awareness and a critical knowledge and understanding of Moral and Spiritual questions, Equality and Justice issues, Belief Systems and Ethics and Environmental concerns.

mentioned that meditation gave him energy. When asked where the energy came from he said "I think it comes from your heart … like your heart is telling you it's a good thing."

The themes of freedom and energy recurred a number of times during Jason's interview. In the photo-elicitation phase, Jason choose the bright and colourful image of tropical fish swimming underwater on a coral reef. The interview continued:

I: Will you describe what you see when you look at the image; what's happening in the picture?

J: *There are fish swimming around coral on the bottom of the ocean.*

I: So why did you pick that one? Why does that remind you about meditation?

J: *I picked that one because it's like all the fish are free to swim around and they have space to do what they want to do; and it's very colourful and, oh, like everything under the ocean is beautiful and there isn't really much harm you can do to the ocean, apart from pollution and stuff.*

I: And all that you have mentioned, you link with meditation?

J: *Yeah.*

I: So you say the fish are free.

J: *Yeah.*

I: So tell me how meditation frees you?

J: *Like, as I said before, you get all of your bad thoughts away and it just makes you feel free like a bird, or like a fish in the sea … Like a bird can fly around as long as he likes until the day that he feels he can't do it anymore and a fish is always swimming because that's one of the things he was made to do.*

I: So, is there a sense in which you are saying that … em … it enables them to be what they are supposed to be?

J: *Yeah.*

I: And does meditation do that for you?

C: *Like, it makes a person normal … To get up every day and just go and do what they have to do … Like go to school or go to work …*

I: Do you think does meditation change a person somehow?

J: *Yeah. It can make people nicer than how they normally act … Say before I used to do meditation like when I was a younger child, I used to go around putting sausages in jam and stuff and being very bold and stuff … I still do some of that now but not as much as I used to …*

I: Do you think meditation has made you a better person?

J: *Yeah.*

It is interesting here to note the nature of the freedom that Jason speaks about: it is, in essence, the freedom to choose to be a better person, to live up to his ideals. The practice of meditation gives him the space to be himself. A few minutes later he chose an image of the Milky Way as one that reminded him of meditation:

I: Why do you link that meditation?

J: *Because it is like … in outer space, where not many people go … And it's quiet … And there are things you can look at … Take for example in this galaxy it is all colourful and there is just more than*

187

one of them there in the universe ... It's all different planets that people have probably never seen before in their lives ... And it makes you feel like you can be free in this zone ... like, and just be part of space.

I: So are you saying that this image is about space and that same sense of freedom that you talked about before [*Yes*] and a sense of exploring outer space

J: *Yeah*

I: Do you think is there anything about meditation that has to do with exploring inner space?

J: *Yeah.*

I: Does that make sense, to say that?

J: *Yeah.*

I: Can you say a word about that for me?

J: *It's like ... When you're ... When you are outside, out and about you are full of like energy and thoughts of what you can do next but when you go to do meditation all the thoughts of things that you can do, sitting still and being calm and not moving around, you're going to stay there ... like in space you can move around freely... You can't stop moving.*

I: So there is a sense of inner freedom in meditation?

J: *Yeah*

During the second interview, I commented that:

I: One of the things you mentioned the last day was about animals and birds and the sense of freedom that they have …

J: *Yeah.*

I: Will you talk to me a little bit more about meditation and that sense of freedom…

J: *The way it is with us humans, the way we live, we have to have money to live. Animals don't. They can live off whatever they find. And birds can fly anywhere they like in the world for free. They don't have to pay for anything...*

I: So, if in ordinary life we feel … tied down, might be one way of saying it, … by so many things in life, is there a sense in which meditation frees you?

J: *Yes, because I like to imagine like I'm like an animal and I'm able to run free in the fields... or go out and just run around like my friends and just be who I want to be ... and not be like a person needs money to live and money to travel and stuff.*

I: And does meditation somehow make you realise that deep inside you are free?

J: *Yeah ... like, it helps me to let go of worries.*

I: Uh, huh

J: *And it makes me think about good things and the advantages I have in life.*

I: You also said the last day that meditation gives you energy. Can you say a little bit more about that?

J: *Say if you have a rough day ... and you're doing a lot of work in class ... and doing a lot of sports ... and lifting chairs and tables in the classroom... You can feel very tired, but if you sit in one space and just meditate, like you feel the energy flowing through your body again. It's like because your body stops and focuses on energy.*

I: So it gives you physical energy. You talked earlier about a teacher you regarded as being a very spiritual person. Do you think somehow does meditation give you spiritual energy as well?

J: *Yeah, because you feel closer … (coughs) … You feel closer to your mind and your heart than you would, like, on an average day … It* [meditation] *makes you feel like the spirit of … of like the person that you are not* [yet] *… but the person that is trying to* [get] *released inside you … Say if you're a person that likes playing rough … like the person that you actually are isn't* [always] *the person that you act.*

I: Will you tease that out a little bit more for me. I agree with you. I think meditation does help to release that inner you. Will you talk a little bit more about that, even though I know it can be hard to find the right words.

J: *em … It's a bit like … Like imagine I'm, say, like, a mean person … But I'm actually only being mean to you because I felt it before … But I'm not meaning to be harmful to the person I'm bullying … or whatever … It's just that it's the way I felt before, already … And like it's not who you are it's just what you're doing … And that's affecting other people.*

I: In that case, can I ask - and this is probably going to be very hard to put into words - who is the *real* Jason?

J: *I think he is a more calm person … Like, I tried to show off a lot like… Trying to be cool and blending with people … But I'm actually more of a … a calm person myself. I always try to make people laugh by doing funny things … or trying to do cool things … that ordinary people, which I usually am, wouldn't do.*

I: Of course, we all try to get on as well as we can with people in our life. And to present ourselves as well as we possibly can. Can you say anything else about the real Jason?

J: *I think he's more of a calm person than* [I can be at times] *… But like I'm very chatty in class and all but like I think the real me is like more focused on study and calm stuff.*

I: And the real Jason, at the heart of it, what does he desire most from life …

J: *I think he just wants to be free to do what he really wants … But nobody can really do what they want unless they have money to pay for* it

I: So, therefore, you have to do some of the hard stuff and earn a living?

J: *Yeah.*

I: You said a minute ago that the teacher you mentioned takes time out to help people?

J: *Yeah, because … she went to do aid work in Nigeria - to be a teacher in Nigeria … I think it was before she came to this school because she only came to the school last year.*

I: And you think that is a desirable thing to do?

J: *Yeah, it is like something that most people should do. But we just don't have time, like we can't take, let the money go … Because even if you're on holiday you still have to pay rent for your house, plus paying for the holiday…*

I: So, you feel the real Jason might like to do something like that when he's older?

J: *I always thought about going to help people that are sick or donating money or something but like nobody really has the money to do that anymore.*

I: How then does meditation, do you think, relate to that desire?

J: *I think because you can imagine what you want to do .. But then when you open your eyes your back to your normal everyday life. ... But when you're meditating, like you can feel like you are free and ...*

I: ... that you have the capacity to do what you want?

J: *You have, you have whatever you need, like ... I want to help people.*

I: I think earlier you used an expression about meditation opening your heart, bringing you closer to your heart's desire? Do you find meditation does that?

J: *Yes.*

I: I asked you the last day where does the energy you get in meditation come from? And you had said '*it comes from your heart ... Like your heart is telling you a good thing.*'

J: *Like, your mind and your heart and all the parts of your body are telling you that what you are dreaming is what they want you to be ...*

I: Yes. So there is a sense then in which you are really, in meditation, discovering [*Yeah*] the truth about yourself? I don't mean to put words in your mouth, [*Yeah*] so, how would *you* describe it?

J: *I'd, like, I think it's more or less like exploring what you really are; like trying to find out who you really are. Not the person you try to be but you are, actually exploring the person that you are.*

I: So, it's almost as if there was a 'true-self...' [*Yeah*] ... a real Jason ... under the surface there ... [*Yeah*]... And that in meditation you get closer and closer to that ... And would you say that meditation is helping you to become that person?

J: *mmm* ... (hesitantly) ... *Yeah, it is helping but ... like, every day, like, things happen that, like, make you go down again and make you feel bad and then you like ... You are starting to lose hope of being what you want to be ... You are starting to, like, ... sometimes I feel like I just want to be the person I am ... But if I be the person I am, people might bully me about it ... Because I want to be a smart person that knows a lot ... But, like, people, people often, like, ... you know, like, ... call people bad names because 'they know so much' ... like in secondary school I know some people who got bullied just because they were in a high class* (i.e. an academically higher stream).

I: So, there is a real tension that you are describing very well ... between being the person you would like to be, becoming the person you want to become while at the same time you are aware that others in your class and in society might not agree with that?

J: *Yeah.*

I: And there is a tension then between trying to ... you know, not fall out with people, and still be yourself?

J: *Yeah*.

I: And that's okay. That's good - really good self-knowledge. It's really good that you have the capacity to think that through for yourself.

During the second interview, I asked Jason to clarify what he meant when he said that meditation brought him closer to God:

I: The last day when we spoke about God and meditation and I wondered if meditation was like prayer, you said '*I think meditation is like praying ... And it brings me closer to God*.' Can you say a little bit more about that?

J: *It's like you feel very spiritual and like you have time ... It's like you have ... I think meditation is very like praying because you're thinking about good things that you want to happen in your life.*

I: Did anybody ever say to you that there was a link between meditation prayer, between meditation and God?

J: *Yes, well, not really ... but ...*

I: Have you discovered that for yourself?

J: *Yeah I discovered myself because, like, I have to go to religion ... I go to religion and I'm making my confirmation on Friday ... and, em, it helps me to calm down and, nearly at the end, like I might do a little prayer or something like ... Nobody will know I'm doing it but I know inside that I am ...*

I: One of the reasons I doing this research, the reason I'm involved in promoting meditation, is because I believe very deeply that meditation can bring a person closer to God and I'm really interested that you seem to have discovered that for yourself … Even though the school hasn't been saying that to you … Nobody has ever said that, you figured it out for yourself.

J: *Yeah, like, you have time to figure it out for yourself ... We are all grown up now and we have our own minds we can think ... We think about what we want to do...*

Jason mentioned he had introduced meditation to a friend who attended a different school and he commented on how he felt it impacted on his friend's behaviour. Even if he exaggerates the impact, because of his own conviction, nonetheless, the account reinforces how Jason believes the practice of meditation has the potential to generate in people a capacity for acting more responsibly and compassionately in the world:

I: I see from your journal that you meditated one day with your friend.

J: *Yeah.*

I: Had you meditated with him before?

J: *No, because like sometimes I was like a bit embarrassed to tell people that I meditate ... Because they might start mocking me for being spiritual ... But he is real nice …*

I: Is he in your class?

J: *No. He moved away very recently. I used to play with him all the time and he was very nice ... He was a very nice person because like, if I didn't have money for the shop he'd buy me something or if he didn't have money I'd buy him something.*

I: So did you stay over with him recently? [*Yeah*] and how did the meditation go?

J: *I think he found ... Because he said to me after it was finished that he's going to do it more often ... Because he even ... I see merit in the way he was acting later on the day we done it ... I could see he was starting to change ...*

I: Can you describe to me what you noticed that was different in his manner or his behaviour?

J: *His brother and his sister are ... they always ... they know how to push him to the limit and make him really angry ... But when they started to annoy him after the meditation, he just like ...*

I: He was able to handle it?

J: *He was able to handle it by not pushing them away or being rude or something.*

I: Were you nervous about asking him to meditate?

J: *Yeah, I was a bit nervous at the start but like, I just felt grown-up and then I decided to ask him.*

I: Were you glad afterwards that you had done it?

J: *Yeah, yeah, because I got another person to be calm in their life. That made me feel good and I think it made him feel good too.*

Towards the end of his second interview, Jason returned to how meditation helped him to be free to be himself and to make better decisions. He said:

J: *Before I started meditating, like I was very, like 'Let's do it now' and very ... like, I wanted to do things fast. And now that I do meditation, I take things slowly ... It makes me think about something before I do it.*

I: So you think it through better?

J: *Yeah.*

I: And what makes you think that meditation has helped you to be more like that?

J: *Because it allows you to, like, get aside ...* [To stand aside from it?] *To decide between the person that you want to be and the person that you are now, it's like they're having a debate between each other on what we should do …*

I: OK. And meditation makes you aware of that tension …

J: *Yeah.*

I: And you're able to think 'No, this is what I really want to do.' Even though you are being pulled towards something else, you know that the real you wants to do the other thing?

J: *Yeah.*

I: OK. That's very helpful. Is there a card from this bundle that you would like to pick out and talk about

J: *... (pause) ... This one:* 'Meditation helps me to open my heart'

I: Talk to me about that, then.

J: *As I said before, when I was in my friend's house, when I went there I wasn't going there with the objective to ask him to meditate with me ... But I just thought about it and meditation helped me to feel that I should do it because I would help him as well is helping me ... It allowed me to feel like more ... (pause) ... like, braver in myself ... It's like, it's like it's pushing me towards ... like pushing me in the direction of my inner person ... rather than pushing me away from what I should be ...*

I: Would it be true to say, do you think … em, you say it's pushing you in that direction, so is there a sense then in which meditation kind of feeds you? Nourishes you?

J: *Yeah. It's like it feeds you in a spiritual way. And like knowledge-wise as well. Because it helps you to think … like all you should, like the person you should be …*

Just before the interview concluded, in explaining how meditation made him more aware of the goodness inside him, Jason observed that

J: *Like, meditation pulls you … Meditation is like a map and the destination is who you really are and it's pointing you in directions … it's pointing you towards … the destination is your inner person and it makes you want to be a better person than what you, like how you act now … It's pulling your towards … it's like it's pulling me towards … to be a better person … Not to show off or a bad person who likes being mean to people … Or who thinks he's so cool just because he can do stuff, like cool things that everybody likes …*

I: One last question before you go. Are you glad you volunteered to speak with me?

J: *Yes. Ever since our teacher started talking to us about meditation, that a man would be coming in, I like started to feel happy that I could express my feelings on meditation and that they wouldn't laugh … Someone that would take it seriously … I know I'm helping … Like it makes me feel that I know I'm helping someone…*

These excerpts give a very strong sense of the some of the more revealing interview exchanges. They are included, not to suggest that all children think this way, but to give an indication of how deeply some of the children experienced the practice of whole-school meditation and its impact on them. There were many other accounts worthy of mention and they will be referred to as the findings of the study are further explicated in a description of the essential themes emerging from the analysis of the data. These themes are presented under three headings: themes arising in respect of the experience of meditation, themes arising in respect of the practical, pragmatic benefits as perceived by the children and themes emerging in terms of the fruits of meditation as described by the children.

5.4   Uncovering Essential Themes

Human beings desire to make sense of experience and such desire is more than a psychological state – it is also a state of being.[823] I noted above that themes are a focus of meaning pointing toward an aspect of the essence of a phenomenon; they are knots in the webs of one's experience, threads around which the phenomenological description is facilitated. Van Manen observes that

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[823] van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 79.

> Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is … a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure - grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of 'seeing' meaning … Theme gives control and order to our research and writing.[824]

Somewhat paradoxically, themes are discovered in the process of writing, reflecting and re-writing as the researcher engages deeply with the data, moving from one transcript to the next and reflecting on each one, repeatedly, in light of the emerging themes, as part of a hermeneutic circle. As noted above, each sentence of each transcript was analysed for its potential meaning. For example, Jason wrote

> Before I started meditating, I was very, like 'Let's do it now' and I wanted to do things fast. And now that I do meditation, I take things slowly. It makes me think about something before I do it.

This was thematised as: 'Meditation leads to better decision-making.' When Leanne noted that "*I like meditation because it relaxes me. It lets me loose and the anger kind of flows away,*" this was thematised as: 'Meditation is calming and relaxing.' When Sarah said "*I just close my eyes, put my hands on my lap and let everything flow away,*" that was thematised as 'Meditation involves letting go.' Of course, a different researcher may have thematised these somewhat differently – there is no one, single meaning inherent in any given statement; indeed some statements were assigned several thematic codes. This process was continued until I was satisfied that I had identified a range of key themes that seemed to represent significant meaning across the transcripts. Upon further examination, it became clear that themes emerging could be grouped under eleven key headings, in three broad categories. Four themes related to the children's experience of meditation, three to their experience of its pragmatic benefits and four to their experience of its deeper spiritual fruits. In the remainder of this chapter, each of these essential themes is presented and explicated, accompanied by some phenomenological descriptions that exemplify how each theme found expression in the children's conversations.

It is important to clarify the editing process before I present the themes. In many cases the quotes are verbatim; in others they have been edited in simple ways to remove, for example, verbal hesitations such as 'er' and 'um' and personal mannerisms such as 'You know,' 'like,' and 'I mean.' However, great care has been taken not to alter the sense or meaning of what was said and in no case have words

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[824] Ibid.

been substituted – the children's original words and meaning remain intact.[825] In some cases a minor interjection by the interviewer was removed if it interrupted the flow of data from the child. Oliver, Serovich and Mason touch on this question in describing two main approaches to transcribing qualitative data:

> Transcription is practiced in multiple ways, often using naturalism, in which every utterance is captured in as much detail as possible, and/or denaturalism, in which grammar is corrected, interview noise (e.g., stutters, pauses, etc.) is removed and non-standard accents (i.e., non-majority) are standardised.

As mentioned, the early part of the second interview sought to review things the child had mentioned in the first interview and this often led to additional comment on the same issue. Typically, I would have said something like "You mentioned the last day that meditation made you feel ….; can you say more about that" and this often inspired the child to say more. During the presentation of the themes below, to enhance readability, I have sometimes combined related comments from both interviews by adding the follow-up comment as if the additional question had been asked at the time of the first interview; on other occasions, where I considered it was appropriate, I have mentioned specifically that an additional comment arose on the second day. In some cases, a quote was edited – but without interfering with its original meaning or intent - in order to ensure that the participant could not be identified. I am satisfied that any amendments meet the practical test suggested by Killenberg & Anderson: in other words, my presentation of every quote is such "that I'd be comfortable having all my audiences - interview subject, editor, public, and self - simultaneously monitor my choice(s), knowing that I might later be called upon to justify my actions."[826]

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[825] Anne Corden and Roy Sainsbury, "Exploring 'Quality': Research Participants' Perspectives on Verbatim Quotations," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 9, no. 2 (2006). See also *Using Verbatim Quotations in Reporting Qualitative Social Research: Researchers' Views* (York: Social Policy Research Unit, University of York, 2006), 18.

[826] G. Michael Killenberg and Rob Anderson, "What Is a Quote? Practical, Rhetorical, and Ethical Concerns for Journalists," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality* 8, no. 1 (1993).

The categories and their related themes are depicted in **Figure 5.1** below. There is inevitably some overlap in the themes that arose in respect of the experience of the practice of meditation and in respect of their experience of its benefits and fruits. For example, the serenity experienced by the children as they meditated was also experienced as an ongoing consequence of meditation, because it often results in the practical, on-going benefit of being calm and relaxed and feeling restored to wellness of being.

Experience

Simplicity

Serenity

Self-Awareness

Heart-Awareness

Benefits

Calms & Restores

Generates Energy & Confidence

Improves Decision-Making

Fruits

Deepens Self-Awareness

Awakens the Heart to the Goodness Within

Connects Children with God

Inspires Children to be Better Persons

Figure 5.1: Themes of the Experience, Benefits & Fruits of Meditation (Version 1)

In the next section I describe the four themes related to the experience of meditating, before moving on to explore the themes related to the benefits and fruits of practicing meditation over time.

5.4.1   Themes related to the Child's Experience of Meditation: Sssh!

I have chosen to name the four themes related to the children's experience of meditation as: Simplicity, Serenity, Self-Awareness and Heart-Awareness. These may be summarised by the interjection 'Sssh!,' an abbreviation of 'hush; this is particularly apt because meditation is the disciplined practice of silence.

5.4.1.1 Simplicity

It is very clear from the analysis that the children found the practice of meditation came easily to them. The conversations explored their disposition to the practice by asking them directly what they liked about it, what they did not like and how they would feel if the school ceased the practice. There was an overwhelming positivity towards meditation, which the vast majority of children wanted their school to continue meditation as a whole-school practice. This was evident too in their responses to the photo-elicitation.

Madeleine Simon, writing in *Born Contemplative*, notes that children take to meditation "like ducks to water."[827] John Main, who described meditation as a journey from the head to the heart, also wrote that the opening of the human heart is as natural as the opening of a flower – the heart opens when one chooses to dwell in stillness and silence.[828] Because it is such a simple practice, it can be practiced anywhere with minimal or no resources. It does not require advanced cognitive or technical ability to sit in silence. There is no curriculum to follow; there are no books that children need to read before they can master it. Equally, it is non-competitive and there are no levels of achievement, no measuring stick to test proficiency, no weekly test. It is within the capacity of every child to meditate and all children can do it equally well.

The children in the denominational schools (schools N & X) focused their attention on the word 'Maranatha' as taught, while the children in the multi-denominational school (E) generally followed a guided meditation, interspersed with periods of silence. However, some children devised their own means of focus. For example, Norah (10,X) noted that "*We're supposed to clear our mind of all thoughts and I usually just see a candle in my mind and I watch the flame flickering*," while Ella (9,X) imagined she could hear the sound of waves in her ears and she gave her attention to that. Andre (10,X) said that his aunt had told him to repeat the words "*God loves me, God loves me*" and that worked well for him; and Sarah (9,N) notes "*I just let everything flow away.*" Kevin (9,X) explained that if he was teaching a friend to meditate he would advise him to "*Say the word, Maranatha, at the speed of a clock.*" At the beginning of her first conversation, Ella (9,X) had mentioned that

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[827] Simon, *Born Contemplative: Introducing Children to Christian Meditation*, 2.
[828] John Main, *Community of Love* (Singapore: Medio Media, 2010), Kindle location 1594 of 2952.

> E: *Usually when I meditate I hear the sound of waves in my ears.*
>   *And the waves make me really calm when I hear them.*
> I: You can hear the sound of waves crashing on a beach?
> E: *Yeah.*
> I: Does that give you a rhythm that matches the word Maranatha
>   almost?
> E: *Yeah. When the waves crash, they call like Ma ... Ra ... Na ...*
>   *Tha... Ma ... Ra ... Na ... Tha...*
> I: So the fact that the waves go slowly makes the word go slowly
>   too?
> E: *Yeah.*

At home, some children listen to calming music while they meditate. And in one of the schools which practiced meditation every day, some teachers also played calming music in the background once or twice each week, meditating in silence on the other days. Lena (11,E) liked the fact that it wasn't really about doing anything, it was about relaxing and letting go whereas

> Whatever you do in the real world, in reality, you have to actually do it.
> In meditation nobody is telling you to 'Do this or Do that.' It's not like
> you're on a stage (performing) and everyone is watching (and judging)
> you meditating. You just remember to sit nicely and let everything go.

Many of the children practiced meditation at home, for a variety of reasons and, because most of them have access modern technological devices, they were creative in accessing alarms and timers and, occasionally, suitable calming music on their mobile phones or iPads. Some children felt very drawn to the practice, perhaps because of its simplicity. Alice (7,N), for example, meditated four times a day: "*when I wake up, in school, when I come home from school and before I go to bed – oh, and after swimming on Mondays.*"

Most of the children found it easy to sit still in meditation and did so willingly. Jason (12,E) described meditation as being "*really easy, because it's like you're sleeping but you're actually wide-awake and you can hear all the things around you. Everybody knows that sleeping is very easy to do - well, meditation is exactly like that, easy to do.*" In school, there was little or no sense of 'having to do it;' the vast majority of the children in all of the schools were happy to have the opportunity to meditate and would be very disappointed if their school ceased the practice. Lena (11,E) declared:

> I wouldn't agree if they wanted to stop it… Because meditation is such
> a wonderful thing … We all, all the kids here, like they don't know it is
> actually is their life, instead of actually video games and the Internet …
> they really need to know what is wonderful in life and meditation shows
> that.

Adrian (11,X) felt that "*it would be very bad* [to stop the meditation in the school] *because you are stopping children from … getting that feeling of being with God… that sense of feeling at one* [*with God*]." David (10,X) said that "*No one is telling me to do it, I'm doing it for myself.*" And Aideen (11,P) said that " *I'd probably be upset because it's one of the times that I get to do something that I enjoy … but I could still do it at home.*" Tara (11,X), and many others, offered that if the Principal wanted to stop the meditation "*I would tell him that it helps me to do* [*better*] *whatever subject we do after the meditation.*"

The fact that meditation comes naturally to children because it is so simple, does not mean that it is easy or that it always works well. A number of children spoke of the struggle it presented some days. For example, Paul (9,X) chose the image of a dejected looking rag doll as an image that reminded him of meditation because "*He's real annoyed. He looks angry or annoyed and he needs to meditate, but it looks like he's just meditated and it doesn't work.*" Tara (11,X) observed that

> It's a challenge for me. Sometimes, when I have an itch, it is really hard for me not to scratch it … And I keep telling myself it's only an itch, it will go away soon … and keep saying the word 'Maranatha. And when the meditation is over, and I can scratch it, I realise it's not itchy any more!

Frank (9,X) had the same problem and he found "*Sometimes I can block it out, but if I can't it just kind of ruins the whole thing.*" David (10,X) observes that "*Sometimes it takes me a while to get started. I find it kind of frustrating that everybody else's like halfway down, well into meditation, and I can't, sometimes, get into it. That's the only thing really that I don't like about it.*" Adrian (11,X) commented that he finds it challenging to meditate if he has a special occasion he is looking forward to; he keeps anticipating how great it's going to be and in the silence of meditation the excitement makes itself felt: "*It keeps popping into my head and I'm thinking 'Aw, I really want to do it' but then you think 'I'm meditating and I have to relax" but it keeps popping up in my head… and that can be annoying sometimes.*" Some children, girls especially, found it difficult if they heard whispering or giggling in the classroom during the meditation, because it led them to wonder if someone on the far side of their table may have opened their eyes and is now looking at them and giggling. And, if the giggling gets worse, they become very self-conscious and begin to fear that everyone is looking at them and they may be the

only one left meditating.[829] While the vast majority of children found it easy to be still in meditation, a small number found it difficult to remain physically still for the full length of the meditation.

It is important to stress that meditation is a very ordinary experience for the children, not something extraordinary. Once they have become used to the practice, its simplicity takes over and they simply allow themselves to be. It may be helpful here to reflect on the child-like nature of the practice. Young children have endearing qualities that are often described as child-like. Children can be very spontaneous, unselfconscious, and imaginative, joyful, innocent and trusting; they are uncomplicated and unaffected, simply living in the moment. They are too young to understand very much about life and they are comfortable with the state of not-knowing. They generally live in a state of curious, receptive wonder, open to new experiences and possibilities. Of course, children can also be self-centred, impulsive and irritable, argumentative and stubborn but these qualities are more generally referred to as childish rather than child-like. As one grows into adulthood, it seems that one loses one's childish qualities - one becomes more mature, and more in control of one's emotions - but unfortunately, one tends to lose much of one's child-like qualities at the same time. One becomes less able to be spontaneous, unselfconscious and joyful. When their child-like nature is disturbed or upset by the challenges children face, meditation has the capacity to restore them to their child-like nature. The following exchange with Nuala (7,P) shows how with child-like simplicity and creativity she can clear her mind:

> N: *When I meditate I just ignore everything ... I just go blank. Sometimes, it's a bit hard. When I think stuff I just think it away (emphatically) ... I just wipe my head over and bring it out*
> I: So, when an idea comes into your head you just think it away?
> N: *Yeah ... In the middle of meditation, if it happens, I just wipe my head and suddenly it goes.*
> I: Do you actually wipe your head with your hand or do you imagine doing that?
> N: *I actually just imagine that and it all goes away.*

Children, in their simplicity, are comfortable with not-knowing; they know they have so much to learn about the world; they don't have all the answers and remain open to possibility. They have a trust in their primordial way of knowing, their perceptual knowledge, in a way that one loses as an adult, as one's capacity for conceptual knowledge enlarges. As the human person becomes more rational, they

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[829] Teachers advised that this could be resolved by having the children pull their chairs back a little from their desks and having all the children turn their chairs to face in the same direction.

begin to think that everything can be explained in words and concepts and to distrust perceptual knowledge. Children, then, have a natural humility and are comfortable with not-knowing; being comfortable with ambiguity is a child-like quality, a humble quality. Children are at home with the experience of allowing life to unfold its mysteries whereas adults generally feel the need to analyse, to explain and to control their environment. Most adults are deeply uncomfortable with anything that cannot be expressed clearly in words. But children seem to embody the understanding that while knowledge may be complex, wisdom is simple. Richard Rohr observes that "if we are to speak of a spirituality of ripening, we need to recognize that it is always characterized by an increasing tolerance for ambiguity, a growing sense of subtlety, an ever-larger ability to include and allow, a capacity to live with contradictions and even to love them!"[830] Furthermore, in this modality, knowledge is gained not by grasping but by letting go. Meditation is a simple, humble practice. Western culture brings one up to appreciate complexity; one develops skills of technique, analysis and debate and one constructs theories to explain the world and all one encounters in it. When one first practices meditation, it is therefore counter-intuitive and there is a strong egoic tendency to reject it. But children have no such baggage – they approach the practice with a natural humility. While adults may feel they should be doing something, children are happy to simply be. They seem to have an innate understanding that it is not so much that they are doing nothing, but they are doing nothing else. Simply being. Leaving themselves open and vulnerable to whatever may transpire in the silence, without having to understand it or explain it. Meditation requires a simple, easy-going, relaxed attitude. Children easily discover this for themselves, as Frank (9,X) did:

> F: *Usually when I meditate I get very relaxed, but sometimes I get tight and stiff.*
> I: What makes the difference do you think?
> F: *I think what makes the difference is if you just **don't concentrate too hard**, don't try too hard, just say the word Maranatha and it just works. It's easier if you don't think you are **doing** meditation, you're not **doing** anything.*

Children have a natural capacity for letting go. For example Lucy (10,X) commented that in meditation "*I'm not using my mind at all. … I'm not thinking of anything … I'm not thinking of what's going to happen next … I'm just relaxing.*" While Sarah (9,N) says "*I just close my eyes, put my hands on my lap and let*

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[830] Richard Rohr, "Introduction," *Oneing: Ripening* 1, no. 2 (2014): Kindle location 139 of 944.

everything flow away." When I meditated with Deirdre's class there was a lot of noise outside because there was an extension being built for the school. When I asked Deirdre (P, 11) if the noise distracted her when she was meditating, she replied: "*I can just like blank it out. I don't know how but I can just not think about it. I know it's happening but I don't get involved. I just let it go*." Jason (12,E) was asked how he would explain to another person what was good about meditation and he said "*I'd tell them that it's peaceful and it's something you can do on your own, you don't have to have people around you to help you do it, anybody can do meditation; even if you are stressed and you're tired. All the things you are thinking about just go away.*" What these children do so naturally can be a big deal for Western adults who may find the idea of effortless intention hard to grasp! It doesn't seem to come as naturally to adults, who may tend to think of intention as a very wilful activity and something that must be worked at. It seems that, unlike adults, children don't tend to impose their desire for achievement onto the practice but willingly participate in its simplicity, with child-like humility. Perhaps children remain open to mystery and ambiguity because they don't expect to know the answers. New things are revealed to them every day; they accept what they discover through their lived experience and for them the process of discovery is more often a slow unfolding, rather than a sudden insight. They seem to be as content to be submerged in mystery as the tropical fish were to be submerged in the coral in one of the images used for the photo-elicitation.

John Main once reflected that "Sometimes when people are beginning a meditation, the most colossal frown appears on their face which seems to say, 'I'm going to meditate if it kills me!'[831] But while the practice is a discipline, the effort should be 'effortless,' just as it is with the paradox of intention.[832] The more one tries to grasp the fruit of meditation, the more it eludes one. The trick is to trust humbly in whatever will arise both in meditation and its subsequent fruits, to hold effortlessly to the desire for harmony of mind and heart, for the arising of inner wisdom; but also to

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[831] John Main, *Door to Silence: An Anthology for Meditation* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2006), Kindle location 457 of 1451.
[832] The paradox is that, when one wants to recall something that is on the tip of one's tongue, yet eludes one's grasp, one discovers that the answer lies in effortless intention. In other words, one holds on to the intention to recall it – but loosely, at the back of one's mind as it were, and one lets go of all deliberate effort at recall, allowing oneself to be surprised some time later when, inevitably, that which eluded one before is brought to mind as a sudden insight! The same is true for meditation – it requires effortless intention.

welcome whatever arises, without attachment. As Laurence Freeman observes, it is only then that "we would … recover without effort the healing insights that fall into the lap of those who are not trying to grasp them."[833] Children seem to be more innately at home with such paradox. In their child-like humility, they do not over-complicate things. The last word in this section on simplicity goes to Grace (9,X) who observed "*I think God is very generous, very kind and… what's the word I want, humble. Yes, very humble.*"

It is clear, then, that simplicity was an essential theme in the children's experience of meditation. John Main often stressed the centrality of simplicity in meditation. He once wrote that "To meditate you need great simplicity, the simplicity of an unselfconscious child. Meditating is returning to the innocent source of our being. We return to ordinary life refreshed and renewed, more childlike, by our encounter with the Source."[834]

5.4.1.2   Serenity

The theme of serenity arose in almost every conversation. Children found meditation to be very calming and relaxing. They loved the peace and quiet that it generated. This theme arose very quickly in the conversations in response to the interview prompt cards 'Meditation makes me feel' and 'What I like about meditation.'[835] Leanne (9,N) stated that meditation calms her down: "*It feels like we can have a break from all the drama and just stay there.*" Weronika (7,E) observed that "*My body feels slower and rested, soft and relaxed.*" Jason (12,E) noted that he felt "*peaceful; I can feel all of the bad thoughts moving out and going to find somewhere else to go.*" For Alex (13,E) "*it feels like something came into me, like happiness or something like that.*" Pamela (11,X) noted that in meditation "*it feels like you're kind of flying. You feel light and relaxed.*" Without realising it, she began to smile broadly as she spoke those words; when I asked her why that was so, she responded: "*Because it makes me feel happy; it takes me away from all the stress of … reality*

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[833] Fr Laurence Freeman, Lenten Reflections, 19 February 2016, First Friday of Lent, accessible at http://us4.campaign-archive2.com/?u=c3f683a744ee71a2a6032f4bc&id=180f76ae91&e=b69624270f, accessed 19 February 2016.

[834] Main, *Door to Silence: An Anthology for Meditation*, Kindle location 463 of 1451.

[835] The interview protocol called for some of the questions to be written on prompt cards which the children picked up, turned over and read before making their response.

and life, from any problems I might have." Antoni (11,E) said he felt " *very calm and peaceful. It's like I have a bubble around me and everything outside (the bubble) doesn't matter anymore.*" In the photo-elicitation part of the conversation, Molly (10, N) chose an image of a bird sitting on a branch as one that reminded her of meditation because

> He's just sitting on a branch, he doesn't have any worries. Birds don't really have any worries. They don't know what's going to happen to them next and they just go along with life.

Lucy (10,X) commented she sometimes meditated because "*my brother was after being mean to me and I didn't want to be mean to him. So I went to meditate to calm down.*" Later during the photo-elicitation part of the conversation she choose an image of three ballerina-like figures floating against a blue background, observing that

> What I like about this picture is that when you're doing meditation, it's like all of the anger is flying out of you. Because if you're angry it's staked into you but when you do meditation it's just like it all flies ([away].

Many children meditated for a reason and one of the most common reasons offered was to help them become calm and relaxed. Grace (9,X) discovered that meditation helped her to discover her feelings more deeply:

> G: *Meditation has helped me to discover what feeling I'm feeling. Like, if I'm feeling happy, and I don't know it. Sometimes I don't know all that I'm feeling, like sad or happy or anything. But meditation helps me to figure it out and to feel it more and to be more of what I'm feeling and not to just hide it.*
> I: OK. That's very interesting. You say 'meditation helps me to feel more of what I'm feeling.'
> G: *Yeah*
> I: Does it also help you sometimes … how will I phrase this … not to be imprisoned by what you're feeling?
> G: *Yeah. It helps us to be free and it helps us to be like free and not just be trapped in it. I'd be more of it …. I would just be what I feel and then I would be free.*
> I: So, once you are aware of your feelings, it helps to free you from them?
> G: *Yeah.*
> I: You don't allow yourself to be trapped by them
> G: *Yeah.*

Grace also discovered that even when there were days she didn't feel like meditating, it was only when it was over that she realised she had needed it: "*I discovered I was really glad afterwards that I had done it.*" She had learned that

204

"Sometimes, if I'm feeling sad ... I just feel like letting everything go. When I feel there is something inside me, I just think about it at the start of meditation and I just decide 'I'm going to let it go.' And then I let it go and it's not annoying me anymore." Kate (11,N) choose an image of the Milky Way galaxy because

> K: *It's all peaceful there. I picked all of these images because they were all peaceful.*
> I: Is fair to say that the picture (of the Milky Way) gives you a sense of everything being in its place?
> C: *Yes. That everything is going right even if it feels like it's going wrong.*
> I: And is that something you link with meditation?
> K: *Yes, that everything is in its right place. That the world is where the world is supposed to be. Our world is where it's supposed to be. The galaxy is where the galaxy is supposed to be.*

In response to the prompt 'If meditation was a journey, where would it bring you?' Eileen (11,P) said "*to a place of peace and tranquillity*" while Emelia (9,E) responded: "*It brings me to a land of joy and happiness. It brings me to a place where it is very happy, there are no worries, there is no anger.*"

Alex (13,E) mentioned that after meditation:

> I feel good. I feel different. I always do when I meditate. I don't know why but I feel like, very … not happy … but I feel like happiness in my body … I don't really know … But it makes me realise it is good for us. I don't know how to say it, but it is good for us to meditate because … it makes us better people. (After meditation) I always feel like everything is golden, nothing is bad.

I mentioned earlier (p184) how Leanne (9,N) described meditation as the highlight of her day, for similar reasons. During the photo-elicitation, one of the images that reminded her of meditation was the image depicting the left and right hemispheres of the brain. She described the image as follows:

> It is a picture of a brain opened up. I see people on the right-hand side … There is grass and people are playing. They are very happy. On the left-hand side people are working at their desks …. everybody is working. At the start of meditation I feel like that (*Leanne is pointing to the left side of the brain*) because we are working hard in class but then when we go into meditation it's like we are on the other side.

The fact that meditation was experienced as serenity was clear also from the responses to the question 'If meditation was a colour, what colour would it be?' Many chose white because it was like a blank canvas but equally because it was bright, calm and peaceful. Casey (11,P) chose white because "*it's a really simple colour, it's plain and there's not a lot going on*" while Grainne (7,P) chose it

205

because *"meditation is the time to get away from all the noise and white has no colours in it. Other colours are full of colour but white is just empty …it's like emptying your mind."* Kate (11,N) chose yellow because it was bright, adding *"Meditation is like a bright feeling, because calm is all bright and it makes you shine if you're calm."* Julia (12,E) choose *"a light peach, a yellowish colour … because meditation is so good; there is nothing bad about it. It's just really light. Peach is like a flowing melody colour. It flows."* Irrespective of the colour chosen, the reason children chose it very often related to the fact that it was a favourite colour for them and represented happiness, peacefulness, quiet and calm.

5.4.1.3   Self-Awareness/Attentive Self-Presence

A sense of self-presence and spaciousness was a recurring theme across all of the children. Speaking about the picture of the Milky Way, Sophie (8,N) commented:

> It's as if you were going into your own world. As you calm yourself down, you are going to your own little world. It's a very happy space where you can do what you want and no one is being mean to you or anything.

For many of the children, this sense of inner spaciousness was linked to a sense of freedom, the freedom to be themselves. As Pamela (11,X) expressed it: *"You kind of go into your own world and you don't have any distractions and if you have, like if there is some noise, you just block it out and you … have a sense that everything is OK, there isn't anything wrong; it's feels like a good place to be. And you're in your own world, your little space, your own little room."* Although, she used the words 'little room,' she clarified a moment later that she was talking about an inner spaciousness also:

> I: So, it brings you to a place inside yourself?
> P: *Yeah.*
> I: And how would you describe that place?
> P: *I would describe it as a happy place. It would be kind of my holiday from the real world and all its problems.*
> I: So, is it a place where you can be yourself?
> P: *Yeah. Say if there was someone that you wanted to be like, that you wished you were more like them – you think you should be more like them? When you go into your own world you realise that it's fine to be totally yourself.*

Many children chose the image of the tropical fish swimming in a colourful coral reef as an image that reminded them of meditation. Among the reasons offered for their choice was that meditation gave rise to a sense of spaciousness and a strong sense of personal freedom. In many cases the children referred, in one way or another, to a sense of self-presence; to a sense of being ever more present to themselves. I will develop this theme further in light of Hay and Nye's work on 'relationality' as a key characteristic of children's spirituality when I examine the children's experience of the fruits of meditation.

For example, Aideen (11,P) spoke about what went on in her inner world during meditation, albeit unknown to her at the time:

A: *I'm aware of what's going on in my head and I'm able to think if what happened today was my fault or if I can do better.*

I: OK. So, when you're meditating, are you are actually thinking a lot? Or do you reach a stage where you might realise you haven't been thinking?

A: *I kind of think subconsciously. I wouldn't know I was thinking but I'd be thinking … Does that make sense?*

I: Yes. Do you mean that when you'd come out of the meditation …

A: *I'd realise I had figured out something that I didn't even know I was thinking about …but, the thinking must have been going on the whole time.*

I: When you're in the meditation, do you realise that is going on?

A: *No.*

I: Can you say any more about what it's like to be in that state when you're meditating?

A: *It's kind of like being in a deep sleep – you can't hear anything, or see anything. It's just really relaxing.*

I: Is it that you can't hear it or that you don't pay attention to it? For example, if your brothers are messing downstairs …

A: *It's kind of both. I don't listen but sometimes I just can't hear it.*

When asked what colour meditation would be, Tara (11,X) said it would be white, because

T: *When I say the word 'Maranatha,' I just think of me standing in a room that is completely white. The room has nothing in it and there are no doors or anything. It's just completely white. I'm standing in the middle of it and no one ever comes into the room. When I was in the room I was looking around it. But it's more like I'm looking down at me … It's not from… like I'm in the room … I'm like looking down at myself in the room and I can see myself sitting on the floor looking around.*

I: Which of those is the real you? The one that is looking down or the one that in the room?

T: *The one that is looking down.*

I: You think so?

T: *Yeah.*

I: So who is the other person?

T: *em ...* (chuckling) *... me.*
I: Have you ever wondered about this before?
C: *Yeah. I was thinking that it was me. But I'm not like, I'm not in the world. It's just my body.*
I: So your body is in the world but there is some part of you that is looking down at that?
T: *Yeah.*
I: And what part of you do you think that is?
C: *My spirit?* (said questioningly)
I: OK. Have you ever thought about it this way before?
T: *Not really.*

It seems clear that the periods of meditation were helping Tara to develop a sense of detachment and inner freedom. I will return to explore the implications of that further, when I examine the fruits of meditation. Suffice it to say at this point that the descriptions offered by Tara, and many others, point to a growing sense of inner freedom and a capacity to detach themselves from their everyday worries and concerns.

Meditation gave them a capacity for greater self-presence, where they were more keenly aware of their thoughts, emotions and feelings, yet they seemed also to develop a capacity of non-attachment towards them. Meditation also gave them a sense of being safe and protected. Frances (11,N) described the experience of meditation as "*warm and safe.*" Helena (7,E) observed that "*I feel nice and calm and really safe. So, I don't really get too frustrated and have a lot of stress around me, I just feel normal. I don't get frustrated.*" And Pamela (11,X) expressed it as follows:

> I think people meditate because it makes them feel kind of safe from everything that is going on and makes them feel safe from, like, fears of anyone hurting them or kind of annoying them or making them angry every single day.

For some children, the sense of safety was linked to an experience of God in meditation. I will explore this aspect further under the next theme and again when I explore the children's experience of the fruits of meditation.

5.4.1.4   Heart-Awareness/Attentive to Divine-Presence

While meditation gave rise in children to a growing experience of being ever more present to themselves, they also sensed a connection to something greater than themselves, a sense of relationship with that which transcended the egoic self. Many children spoke about or hinted at intimations of Divine Presence and a sense of connection with others and all of creation. Many children spontaneously referred to

God early in their conversations, sometimes hesitantly and with difficulty, indicating some experience of mystery in meditation, some sense of accessing Divine Presence. Where it did not arise naturally in the conversation, I referred to God by asking 'Can we leave meditation aside for a little while and talk about God?' and went on to explore if they ever wondered about God and, if so, what did they wonder about. I would then explore whether they felt God was close to people or far away and in many cases children at that stage referred to God feeling very close in prayer and meditation. If it did not arise naturally, I would ask directly whether they considered there was any link between meditation and God. The term God was used because that is the term that they would be familiar with through their religious education programme in the denominational schools and in the *Learning Together* programme in the multi-denominational schools.[836]

Waaijman notes that often the most successful research interview is one "in which a respondent puts into words something he or she had not expressed or even known before."[837] For many of the children it seems clear that meditation heightened their awareness of their innate primordial spirituality although they would have struggled to find the words to give verbal expression to it. I referred earlier (pp35-37) to Thomas Merton's concept of the true-self and to Richard Rohr's description of the true self as 'who we are in God and who God is in us.' From the excerpts that follow I think it will be clear that the children in their conversations were pointing towards their innate understanding of their true essence. In a previous study, I described how a young girl gave expression to her experience of divine presence in meditation for the first time. She was in a class of children where the teacher had introduced the practice in a purely secular context, without reference to spirituality, religion or God, so that "each child had to discover God in the silence for himself or herself. However, it became apparent that most had made a connection, in one way or another, but that no one had made the link explicit for them or given them the words

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[836] Instead of teaching religious education, the multi-denominational schools offer a programme in ethics and values. For example, Educate Together National Schools offer the *Learn Together* ethical education curriculum in place of religious instruction – see https://www.educatetogether.ie/about/learn-together for details. The ETNS website offers a resource bank for teachers here: http://learning.educatetogether.ie/course/index.php?categoryid=9 One of the strands is on Belief Systems. The section on Christianity uses, for example, a BBC video called "My Life, My Religion: Christianity," which is accessible on YouTube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qtXUr2C6aI

[837] Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 930.

to express it."[838] Explaining when she felt closest to God, one of the child-participants in that study, Aoife (11, *Previous Study*[829]), said:

> "It's actually usually like when I'm meditating and *I'm only realising that now because it is quite quiet and you always feel something around you* because no one is really talking … like, you feel like something coming around you and it's a good presence not a bad one."[839]

In that study I note that "The words in italics were spoken in hushed tones, with a sense of awe. It was remarkable to watch the realisation dawn on her as she spoke. It was as if she had always known but it had not yet impacted on her consciousness what was happening."[840]

Many of the children spoke spontaneously about a sense of divine presence in meditation, most often using the familiar expression 'God' to verbalise it, but each using their own unique approaches and metaphors to describe their experience of that Presence. Derek (9,X) described the sensation he encountered when he felt God's presence: "*It's almost like a little pinch. I feel like it's in my mind … Like a static shock something.*" Leanne (9,N) described how she physically experienced God's presence: "*I feel it in my heart. I just feel like my heart is knocking; not knocking, it just warms up when I meditate.*" When Frank (9,X) was asked 'If meditation was a colour, what colour would it be?' he said it would be yellow:

> I: Why do you think yellow comes to mind?
>
> F: *I always think of yellow is a happy and relaxing colour. I always think that yellow is kind of a holy colour.*
>
> I: OK. That's interesting. You have talked about meditation being calming and relaxing and getting things off your mind. Now the word 'happy' has entered the conversation and the word 'holy.' Will you say a little bit about those two words why you link the words happy and holy with meditation?
>
> F: *I say holy because when you're meditating you're kind of … connecting with God as well. It's kind of like praying.*
>
> I: Is that something that your teacher or your parents told you or is it something you sense yourself?
>
> F: *I sense it and, when we first started meditation, em, Miss XXXX, had written God up on the board. And she told us about that. But I still think I kind of feel it.*
>
> I: Talk to me a little bit about that sense of God's presence that you feel in meditation. I know it can be hard to find the right words to describe it, but do your best.
>
> F: *Well … I kind of hear … When I say Maranatha I think of Jesus and everything. When meditation is over I just feel like I'm after saying a prayer and I feel really good about it.*

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[838] Keating, "To Explore the Contours of the Child's Experience of Christian Meditation," 39-40.
[839] Ibid., 40.
[840] Ibid.

In her first interview, Sarah (9,N) said that she didn't normally get a sense of God in meditation, but in her second interview she clarified that "*Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't.*" When asked what made the difference she replied "*When I'm more calmer, I do.*" Responding to the question 'Is God close to us or faraway,' Grace (9,X) considered that God "*is actually very, very close to us, when everyone thinks he's really faraway. (Grace is chuckling as she says this.) He is faraway like physically but he is not really. Like, in the heart he is not far away, he is very, very close.*" When asked when she felt closest to God, she said

> G: *I feel closest to him when I'm meditating or when I'm in church, em, taking the bread; taking the holy bread, taking communion. I feel close to him because I'm trying to be like him.*
>
> I: And how would you describe that closeness? Where do you feel it or sense it in your body?
>
> G: *I feel like he's right beside me telling me the right choices and the wrong choices. So like when I … Like I said, when I'm trying to decide whether to be totally honest or not with my friend, he is … I feel like he's beside me telling me that I should tell my friend the truth, to be honest with my friend...*

In response to the same question, Adrian (11,X) simply and remarkably said he considered God was both very close and far away at the same time because "*I think, God has the power to be at one with everyone at the same time.*" While Norah (10,X) offered:

> N: *I feel that God, when I need him, he is close. But when I don't, he is far-off. He is helping somebody else and I know that.*
>
> I: When do you feel closest to God.
>
> N: *I feel closest to God when we're doing religion, when we are talking about Mary or her son. That's when I feel most close to him. Or when I'm doing meditation in my room. I get my Communion candle and I light it and I feel like he's there in the flame. He is there watching me as I meditate. I feel that through the freedom I feel.*
>
> I: And do you feel that he is with you in school when you meditate?
>
> N: *Yes, I feel like he flies into each candle, leaving hope in each one.*
>
> I: As if there is a little flame lighting inside us? Burning inside us all the time.
>
> N: *Yeah*
>
> I: And does it burn a little brighter in meditation?
>
> N: *Yeah it does. It feels more … It feels like … It feels just more bigger and more, like, stronger.*
>
> I: Might that be where your energy comes from after meditation? [Earlier, Norah had said that she had more energy after meditation]
>
> N: *Yeah, I think it is.*
>
> I: Have you ever thought about that before.
>
> N: *No I haven't. I haven't thought that it's where my strength is but I always knew that he was there.*

I: So you've always had that sense? I notice that all this time you have been very demonstrative with your hands? Just now, you've been bringing them up towards your heart?

N: *Yeah.*

I: Suggesting that that's where you feel his presence inside you, there, in your heart?

N: *Yeah.*

In her first-round interview Natalie (11,X) had said that she felt closer to God during meditation. She elaborated on this during the second interview:

I: Can you say any more about that sense of feeling close to God in meditation? Even though it can be very difficult to describe, will you try to say a little more about that sense of somehow encountering the mystery of God in meditation.

N: *I just think because you don't hear any noises and you're just able to like ... I don't know if he is there, but you can pretend (imagine) that he is there and then feel closer and then you might feel better after.*

I: So is it pretending or how would you describe that sense that he is there? You can see me here, sitting directly opposite you. You know I am here. But in meditation you are on your own. And yet you say you have a sense that God is present.

N: *Yeah.*

I: It's a different kind of knowing, isn't it?

N: *Yeah.*

I: Can you try to talk about that for a little bit, even though it's difficult. If you have to stumble trying to find the right words, that's okay.

N: *I think ... He just comes to my head and probably that ... I think he is mostly here all the time ... And he is there when I do meditation because I always feel closer to God then ... That's how I feel.*

I: So might it be that he is there all the time?

N: *Yeah.*

I: But because you are so busy, you're not aware of it?

N: *Yeah.*

I: So it might not be that he just arrives for meditation, but that when you sit in meditation you clear everything else away? Does that make sense? Does that resonate with how you experience it?

N: *That's mostly why I enjoy meditation.*

I: Will you say more about that?

N: *Because you can take a break from every other busy thing that's going on and just concentrate on God for a few minutes. It makes me feel like I'm closer to God and I feel more safe and protected after.*

For some children the sense of encountering this mystery in meditation was linked to a sense of feeling the presence of a loved one who had died –to siblings, other relatives, even pets; in some cases, grannies or granddads who had departed this world before the children were born. Ella (9,X) mentioned that in meditation "*I*

just sit still and I close my eyes and I'd start thinking about my granddad because he passed away quite recently. But after about a minute or two I'd forget about everything and I wouldn't really remember what I was thinking about and I would just be meditating." She went on:

> I get a little bit sad sometimes … But other times I can remember happy memories. And it's almost like he's whispering in my ear. Saying 'Don't cry,' because sometimes in meditation I almost cried, because I miss him so much. But then I think about good memories and sometimes it feels like he's about to give me a little kiss on my cheek when I do meditating.

When Natalie (11,X) meditates, her brother, who died before she was born, always comes to mind. Cora (10,X) was asked to describe how she meditates and she said: "*I close my eyes and I just clear my mind. I just think about happy thoughts and then my mind clears.*" When asked what happy thoughts she brought to mind she replied: "*I think about Jesus and my nanny and my little puppy, Lola. She died.*" A little later she clarified:

C: *When I meditate it feels like my whole body is all happy.*
I: And do you feel that anywhere in particular in your body?
C: *Yeah, my heart feels all happy.*
I: How would you describe how your heart feels happy? I know it can be very difficult to find words to describe it well, but do your best.
C: *Because I don't really see them in my head. Sometimes I see them in my heart.*
I: What do you see in your heart?
C: *I see Jesus and my nanny and my dog.*

Commenting on a photograph of a sad-looking young girl, Barry (10,X) observed that perhaps she had lost someone in her family and added: "*If anyone died in your family, they would be always in your heart and when you are stressed or being sad about them, you can always do meditation … You just know they are all in your heart.*" And Alyssa (12,X) observed that in meditation she felt as if she was being held, being embraced by loved one's who had passed away: "*The people whom you have loved the most and are gone, they show that they are still there for you… Even when they are not there* [*anymore*]." At such times she also felt close to her dog, Betsy who had died some years before. Alice (7,N) too felt very close to loved ones in meditation:

> Meditation opens my heart because when I'm spending time with God - it opens my heart to … see my granddad up there and my nanny. It feels like … I'm ready to be … (pause) … up in heaven. Ready to be up in heaven with God.

It seems clear then that in meditation children experienced something that transcended their being. As they meditated, they seemed to be brought beyond themselves into an awareness of a presence greater than themselves. Their experience is very much in tune with the teaching of John Main for whom meditation is about leaving oneself open and vulnerable to Divine-Presence, which he often referred to as Reality, Love, Spirit or sometimes, as in the passage below, simply as 'energy'. He saw meditation as simply being in the here and now, just being as one naturally is and, through the process, allowing oneself to come into harmony with and become one with "the basic energy of the universe."[841] In meditation one realises that this harmony is already available. It's not something that meditation does to the person but something that comes to awareness (perceptually) in the silence of meditation as one passes "through the wall of the ego into the infinite space and freedom of God."[842]

A number of the children seemed to have deep understanding of the Divine presence within themselves. Jason (12,E) suggested that the most important thing his religion had taught him was "*to know that God is in you … To know that God is a part of you and that will never change no matter what happens.*" Helena (7,E) felt that meditation helped her to connect with God because "*God is like someone that is inside me and I feel safe, I don't feel like I'm all alone.*" While Aideen (11,P) expressed her conviction as follows "*I think we are all a bit of God.*" She added:

A: *I think we can all be like God if we try, so that's really why I think that we all have just a little bit of God in us*

I: So you think there is a little bit of a divine spark within us, some little piece of God in everyone of us?

A: *Yeah.*

I: That's a very deep thing to say. Where did you pick up that sense from?

A: *I was out in America, I was eight years old and I saw this man … A woman had tripped over; she was quite old, and her trolley had slipped out from her hands and it kind of rolled away a bit and she couldn't reach it to get back up and this man he helped her up and gave her the trolley and that's kind of where I figured out … That maybe all of us have a bit of God in us …*

I: That's a lovely way of putting it … that there is a touch of God in each of us … Does meditation then help us in any way to get closer to that sense of God in us, do you think?

A: *It kind of brings us more in touch with it … It helps us to be in touch with the inner God … That is inside us all …*

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[841] Main, *Door to Silence: An Anthology for Meditation*, Kindle Locations 418-76 of 1451.
[842] Ibid., Kindle Locations 418-76.

<table>
<tr><td>I:</td><td>This notion of your inner God, do you know where that came from?</td></tr>
<tr><td>A:</td><td>*From my mammy. She wouldn't be the most religious person but she does believe that God can help and she believes in the inner God as well. So I think I just picked it up from her.*</td></tr>
</table>

Other children referred to this presence but linked it to experience of nature as well as meditation. For example, Aine (12,P) felt that meditation made her more aware of nature and the world. She loves the sensation of being outside in the garden on a fine day when the sun is out. It makes her "*feel really happy and I feel ... sort of ... (sighing deeply), I feel like I'm part of God as well.*"

5.4.1.5 Summary of the Themes of the Experience of Meditation

These four key themes, Simplicity, Serenity, Self-Awareness and Heart-Awareness describe what it is like for a child to experience meditation. Children gave clear accounts of these qualities in their experience of the practice. It is clear from their accounts that in their regular practice they experience a sense of simplicity, serenity, a deepening awareness of self-presence and a growth in heart-awareness, an intimation of Divine-Presence. These are very often pre-reflective experiences that may not arise in self-consciousness at the time and are not easy to capture in words, but they can be brought to mind when an opportunity for reflection is created. As the interviews with the children were conducted, it was clear to this researcher that many children were reflecting on their meditation experience for the first time and trying to express in words the depth and richness of what they had experienced.

The explication of the four essential themes of the practice of meditation in the children's experience further deepens the phenomenological description presented in section 5.3. Together they provide a vivid account of what it is like for a child to meditate. This answers the first research question posed at the outset of the study. The remaining two questions related to the impact the practice had on their lives. What practical benefits did they consider flowed from the practice and how did it impact, if at all, on their spirituality?

The next two sections explicate the children's accounts of their experience of the benefits and fruits of the practice in their lives.

5.4.2 Themes Related to the Benefits of Meditation

It seems clear from the analysis that most of the children readily experienced the practical, psychological benefits of meditation about which there has been a great deal of research in recent years, as I noted in the opening chapter. I use the word benefits to refer to the physical and psychological gains that arise from the practice and which are "very beneficial to both mind and body."[843] The benefits are summarised briefly in the next paragraph.

Research on adolescents has shown that such benefits include reducing distress, enhancing general wellbeing and impacting positively on basic brain function and habits of mind.[844] Other studies suggest that being attentive to and aware of the present moment is predictive of heightened self-awareness, positive mental states and self-regulated behaviour.[845] Jonathan Campion has reviewed the research on meditation and education with a particular focus on its role in promoting mental health.[846] He notes studies by McCown which demonstrate that adults who meditate benefit from greater focus in the face of distractions, improved self-awareness and the ability to solve complex problems and make confident decisions.[847] Meditation has a positive impact on cholesterol levels, blood pressure, insomnia, anxiety, stress, depression, the immune system and self-esteem, as well as improvements in problem-solving and decision-making skills.[848] These benefits arise even where the practice is introduced on a purely secular level[849] but the practice is even more powerful when it operates within the context "of a person's deepest religious or philosophical convictions."[850]

The conversations with the children in this study brought to light three essential themes across the benefits of the practice as experienced by them. They found that meditation calms and relaxes them and restores them to a sense of well-being; it generates energy and confidence in them and it improves their capacity for

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[843] See, for example, Johnston, *The Still Point: Reflections on Zen and Christian Mysticism*, 3.

[844] Campion and Rocco, "Minding the Mind: The Effects and Potential of a School-Based Meditation Programme for Mental Health Promotion."

[845] Kirk Warren Brown and Richard M. Ryan, "The Benefits of Being Present: Mindfulness and Its Role in Positive Well-Being," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 4 (2003).

[846] Campion, "A Review of the Research on Meditation," 29-37.

[847] Donald McCown, "Cognitive and Perceptual Benefits of Meditation," *Seminars in Integrative Medicine* 2, no. 4 (2004): 148-51.

[848] Nataraja, *The Blissful Brain: Neuroscience and Proof of the Power of Meditation*, 170-82.

[849] See for example, Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness*. See also Benson, *The Relaxation Response*, 8.

[850] Benson, *Beyond the Relaxation Response*, 4.

decision-making that is free of conditioning. Because these practical benefits have been demonstrated for adults and children in many studies over recent decades, the account presented here is limited to a brief description of each theme together with some brief excerpts from the interviews with the children.

5.4.2.1 Meditation Calms & Restores

Almost all of the children in the study claimed that meditation calmed and relaxed them. It was far and away the most common answer to the prompts 'What do you like about meditation' and 'Why do people meditate?' For example, Frank (9,X) said that " *I like the way it just gets all your thoughts out of your mind and it relaxes you so you're not always thinking about bothering stuff, you can relax and all of your worries go away*." He gave a very practical example:

> One morning recently I didn't feel in the mood for school because it was a Friday and I was worried about the tests.[851] So I thought I'd meditate to get the worry away. And even though I had learned all the spellings off by heart, I always feel nervous. I'm afraid I will spell them wrong in the test.

Derek (9,X) said he liked meditation because "*it makes me feel relaxed and it makes me feel calm and it stops me thinking about the bad things. And when the meditation is over, to start thinking about the good things.*" Antoni (11,E) commented that "*when I meditate, I don't really care about what's outside my bubble. In there I can relax; it is just a place for me and for nobody else.*" Sarah (9,N) mentioned that she often meditated before an important match: "*As soon as I am dressed for the game, I take some time out* [*to meditate*] *so I won't be worried about the game.*" Others did likewise for swimming and dancing competitions. Many children chose the photograph depicting the two hemispheres of the brain, pointing to the right-hemisphere to indicate how meditation made them feel. Karol (9,E) observed that people meditate when they are sad or angry "*just like Siddhartha did when his Dad wouldn't let him leave the grounds of the palace – he went and meditated under a tree.*" And Emelia (9,E) said that "*a good thing about meditation is that you can do it all the time and you can just feel relaxed and not like be angry, or sad, or worried about something. You can just meditate.*"

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[851] In Irish primary schools children often have simple spelling and other tests on a Friday morning.

Natalie (11,X) chose the comment card 'Meditation helps me to handle pain better' because meditation really helped her when her granddad died recently:

> I had to meditate a lot for that and it helped. I didn't want to go out or anything because I was very sad. I meditated every day and it really helped me. I realised that he had been going through pain every day and I was happy he wasn't in pain any more. So, even though I missed him, I was able to let him go.

There were countless further examples. There is no doubt that if one thing stood out from the conversations with the children, it was that almost without exception they found it cleared their mind of worries and anxieties and it relaxed them and restored them to a state of peacefulness and calm.

5.4.2.2   Meditation Generates Energy & Confidence

Another very common experience was that children felt more energetic, more focused and more confident after meditation and as a result of practicing meditation regularly. For example, Norah (10,X) observed that "*Every time I do meditation, I feel I'm more bouncy. I have energy inside me and I just feel like I'm really happy.*" Leanne (9,N) noted that "*meditation makes me feel joyful because it gives me more energy. And I can deal with things that annoy me. If my brother is just being annoying, I can let it bounce off my chest and ignore it.*" She also found meditation gave her confidence; she responded to the comment card 'Meditation opens my heart' by saying :

> Before I started meditating I was very shy and was often scared to say what I wanted to say. But now I think that my confidence has grown and I'm opening up my heart for the words that are just locked in there, I'm able to say them now … It makes me feel that I can do anything if I put my mind to it. It makes me think of the saying 'Nothing is impossible' when I meditate because it just feels like I can do anything.

Grace (9,X) mentioned that

> I sometimes feel like it's the sunrise when I'm meditating, because I'm feeling more awake and I'm feeling like I'm not bored any more in school. I feel like I'll put up my hand more in class. I take part more as well.

Ella (9,X) felt that meditation helped her "*to try new things and do more things instead of just doing the exact same thing every day. I'm scared of something, meditation kind of pushes me to do it and after I do it I feel much better.*" When I

asked Rowan (9,N) how she would feel if the school stopped doing meditation she said:

> I would feel like very disappointed with my teacher because we need that sort of break. To relax ourselves because we do a lot of work in the day; because we have ten lessons every day, we have ten different subjects every day. If the school stopped meditating, it would make me very angry because I need that meditation; it makes me feel more relaxed and more confident to ask questions in class, more than I usually do.

Derek (9,X) commented that other boys will taunt him sometimes, saying that he shouldn't do something, that he would never be able to do it and when they say that "*they pretty much dissolve my confidence and stop me from doing it. But when I meditate the confidence rises up inside of me and it helps me. And I go and do it.*" While Rowan (9,N) commented that "*After meditation, all the worries have gone out of your head and you're very positive in yourself. It makes you very confident in yourself, like you can do anything you want.*" She was one of many children who found meditation helped them with their homework:

> Sometimes I get stuck on my homework and I know now that if I just meditate for a bit it will help. It helps me to concentrate and I'm more relaxed to do my homework. And I realise that it's all right to be stuck because you learn from that; it's OK to make mistakes, because you learn from your mistakes.

Olivia (11,E) commented that meditation gets her more focused.

> I find it very hard in school sometimes. I find it very hard to concentrate because my class is very giddy at times. When I didn't meditate before school, I would get in trouble for laughing and looking around the classroom. But when I meditate before school, I focus much better on my work and I'm not so easily distracted.

Aideen (11,P) recalled that meditation helped her with her Maths homework one evening:

> A: *I was working on a Maths problem and I was really stuck on it. I'd been trying to do it for, ten minutes or more so I decided to go up to my bedroom and meditate for a while. And, just I was just about to stop meditating, the answer just popped into my head.*
>
> I: The answer just popped into your head? What did that feel like?
>
> A: *It felt, coming down the stairs, that I already knew the answer all the time and I just couldn't figure it out because my head was just so cluttered.*

It was a very common experience for the children that meditation energised them, helped them to focus on tasks, both in school and in sport, and they felt more

confident, better able to tackle challenges and to test themselves in unfamiliar situations and new opportunities.

5.4.2.3 Meditation Leads to Improved Decision-Making

Many of the children observed that meditation helped them to make better decisions. This usually had to do with developing the capacity to stand back from a challenging situation, to be deliberately thoughtful about it and to respond appropriately rather than reach out of anger or upset. Rowan (9,N) said that sometimes her brother or her family annoy her "*and I ask myself if they are doing it to annoy me. Meditation helps me to figure it out because it relaxes me. It gives me more confidence and it makes me more smart (sic).*" In other words, meditation has taught her not to react to provocation but to take a moment and think about it before she responds. It has, in her own words, made her '*more smart.*' Helena (7,E) chose the comment card 'Meditation helps me to be more thoughtful, to think before I act' observing that

> Sometimes when I'm really, really mad and angry, I feel like I want to say something mean to someone. But now I think before I act because when I meditate it makes me think before I react.

Antoni (11,E) observed that "*I can see deeper into things, so I don't just look outside of the things but I look inside of the things, so I can think better about them, not just see what they are on the surface.*" He suggested also that "*when you're calm you can talk to people and not just argue with them.*" Megan (11,N) too talked about the danger of reacting out of anger observing that when she meditates it changes her mood and that changes how she responds. Frank picked up on a metaphor I had mentioned of a muddy window, saying "*If you are angry about something, the window will be all muddied but when you are calm, you get a clear picture.*"

Derek (9,X) commented that

> Meditation makes me feel open-minded. Whenever I have something bad happening in my life, I usually don't want to think about it, so I try to forget it. But when I meditate I find I do think about and then I do the right thing. A little while ago I was being bullied; I was upset and didn't want anyone to know. But then I took meditation and I thought about it afterwards. And I didn't refuse it. I told my mom what had happened.

Derek suggests that meditation helped him to realise that he shouldn't repress his feelings.; that is was better to talk it over with someone and deal with the issue. He said he was glad he had done so and that he got the matter sorted out.

David (10,X) had a similar story but in his case it related to arguing with his parents:

> D: *Sometimes I might get in a fight with my Mam or Dad and I might say 'I don't like you. I hate you.' And stuff like that. But when I meditate and clear my mind I begin to feel grateful that they are giving me food and clothes and a good life and I realise I shouldn't be destructive to them.*
>
> I: What makes you think it's the meditation that makes the difference, makes you feel grateful?
>
> D: *Because I think it helps me to clear my mind and start from the beginning and admit that it was my fault.*

Lena (11,E) felt that meditation had changed her for the better, because it helps her to solve problems better, freeing her to do the right thing:

> When you do meditation it mostly relaxes you and you figure out what not to do and what to do. When you meditate, you are more independent than you have been before you meditated. So when forgotten memories rush back and all of these things go through your mind, you are able to say 'You know what, that's all in the past, let that go; You are more independent now.'
>
> You are able to work things out. Some people think that shouting and screaming at the other person is the way to handle things - but actually it's not. It's better to calm down, to explain what you feel and to sort things out that way.

There were many other examples of where the children credited the practice of meditation for an improved sense of decision making, for a capacity to stand back from a problem and reflect more thoughtfully on it. In particular, they seem to have developed a capacity to look at problems more objectively, to adopt a changed perspective on things that highlights their own contribution to the causes of a problem as well as the factors that may have motivated others to behave badly towards them. I shall explore this a little more as I reflect on the fruits of meditation.

5.4.2.4   Summary of the Benefits of Meditation:

Three essential themes arose regarding the benefits of meditation as experienced by the children. They found that meditation calms and relaxes them and restores them to themselves; it fills them with energy and confidence and leads to better decision-making. These correspond very well with earlier studies but offer nothing original. For that reason, the descriptions in section 5.4.2 have been kept very brief, as has this summary.

5.4.3 Themes Related to the Fruits of Meditation

In the modern world meditation is very often promoted within a strictly secular context and as a secular practice. Ove the past three decades, John Kabat-Zinn developed the model of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and the practice of silent meditation is central to it. Its growing popularity has made very many people keenly aware of the psychological and physical benefits that flow from the practice. However, as noted before, the story doesn't end there. In addition to the benefits of the practice, the wisdom traditions have long asserted that the practice also has the capacity to produce deep *spiritual* fruits. A core question for this research was whether meditation had the capacity to produce such fruits in children and, if so, how did they experience those fruits in their lives. This next section explores what the children have to say about this. In this section I explore their experience of those fruits in their own words, under four broad themes. Each theme is explicated using direct quotes from the conversations with the children. The fruits are presented under four themes: Meditation deepens self-awareness, meditation awakens the heart to the innate goodness within, meditation connects children with God and meditation inspires children to be better persons. While the first two themes surfaced also in terms of the child's experience of the practice, here they arise not just as a temporary experience, but as a long-term fruit of the practice.

5.4.3.1 Meditation Deepens Self-Awareness

The children observed how meditation helped them to notice things more and made them more present to themselves and to their lived experience; they were better able to live in the moment and for many this led to a sense of inner freedom. It seemed too that the more they became attentive to self-presence, the more they connected with an inner wisdom which seemed to manifest itself in the silence. While I noted earlier that children experienced self-awareness in the practice of meditation (section 5.4.1.3), they also experienced a growing and deepening capacity for self-awareness over time as they remained faithful to the practice.

Jason (12,E) described the capacity for being more attentive as a matter of noticing his behaviour more:

> Meditation has helped me to notice things more. It helps me to notice
> how my behaviour is. Before I meditated, I didn't really care about how
> I behaved, but now I'm starting to notice it. And I'm starting to get a

handle on it. Sometimes I still 'mess,' but not as much as I used to. And I've started to notice that I waste paper. A lot of paper means you have to go and buy more, so now when I'm doing copy work I always make sure I use the whole page and not just use half-pages. Wasting paper is not only harming nature, it is harming us too because there will be less trees for us to breathe from, so it's slowly harming lots of people.

Julia (12,E) too linked meditation with being more attentive:

People like technology too much and they don't notice things around them. We need to stop and stare up at the stars but nobody really does that any more. They just walk past things and don't notice. But when you're meditating you wake up and you notice everything around you. For example, I notice that I'm a much nicer person and I realise I'm not really a nice person all the time - I can be cranky at times! But meditation makes a difference, a big difference. I remember once with my homework, my maths homework when I was in 5th class. I was annoyed because my mum made me go upstairs and do it again. So, I just closed my eyes and sat there. I didn't turn on anything, I just like sat there in silence, breathing in and out calmly. And then I was fine. And then I was able to figure it out.

Pamela (11,X) gave an example of an occasion when she tapped into such attentiveness to language:

I get frustrated when my parents don't understand what I'm saying. I think they should know everything, so, it gets me frustrated and then they don't know why I'm frustrated. Meditation helps because it is like a kind and gentle parent to me. It tells me, 'They don't understand,' and it makes me realise I might not be making sense sometimes because my grammar is not good. Meditation tells me 'You have to use the proper words.'

Julia (12,E) was asked if she thought meditation brought her deeper inside herself:

J: *Yes, because you are not talking when you're meditating so it takes you more inside.*
I: Can you think of any example that might help me to understand better how you might have experience that?
J: *I think a lot. I don't write all my thoughts in a diary, I just keep my thoughts and feelings inside me. If I was angry, for example, I wouldn't talk to anybody about it. I just keep it inside me. I'm not a person that's really good at showing my feelings.* (Intake of breath) *Sometimes I do; if I'm really angry or really happy I start showing it. But otherwise I keep them inside me and never show them.*
I: Does meditation help you to manage your issues, your stress, whatever is on your mind?
J: *Yes, because after meditation I will sometimes start talking about what I feel, because I feel so relaxed after it. It makes me much more flexible.*

Responding to the same question, Antoni (11,E) said

223

A: *Yeah. When you meditate you can look inside of yourself and you can like think better about things and all. I can see deeper into things so I don't just look outside of the things but I look inside of the things and not just see what they are (on the surface).*

I: Is there any particular example that comes to mind?

A: *Sometimes when I'm arguing with my mum or my dad about something, I see things differently after I meditate. I can see there wasn't any point arguing about that because it wasn't about anything much.*

I: So it puts things in perspective for you. What seemed like a big thing of the time, doesn't look so big after you meditate?

A: *Yeah.*

Clodagh (11,P) said that meditation helped her too to change her perspective on problems and gave a simple example from her own experience:

C: *My sister - she is doing her Junior Certificate Exam this year - and at the start I was thinking, 'Why does she not have to do any jobs around the house, why is she always up in her bedroom?' And then one day I meditated and I thought how to look at it from her perspective. And I saw that the reason she's always up in her room is because she's studying; she is working really hard for her exams, and she's nervous and so I should be more understanding.*

I: Why do you think it was the meditation that helped?

C: *If I have something on my mind, I meditate. When I meditate everything I don't need in my head just goes out. And then afterwards I'm able to figure out the problem or whatever is bothering me.*

Sophie (8,N) agreed. Responding to the comment card 'Meditation helps me to see the goodness in others' she commented: "*Say if your friends were mean to you, and you don't like them anymore, meditation makes you realise that maybe they were just cross or angry for some reason.*" Having chosen the comment card 'Meditation helps me to feel a sense of freedom' Antoni (11,E) gave an unusual example. He spoke about how meditation helped him to realise that he deserved to be grounded for some misbehaviour:

I don't know if you mean this kind of freedom, but about this time last year I was grounded for something I had done. I was angry I was grounded but when I meditated I felt better and I realised it was my own fault that I was grounded. I had the freedom to do the right thing and, if I had, I wouldn't have been grounded. When I realised that, I felt better about being grounded.

Helena (7,E) found that meditation made her more sensitive to the feelings of others:

When meditation is deep in you, you feel like you are somewhere you've always wanted to be since you were small. And you can actually

think about what you actually feel like and how others feel. And then if you're not happy with someone you can say 'Sorry.' You realise 'I did something wrong' and then you go and say 'Sorry.' And afterwards you'll feel happy again.

Adrian (11,X) too noticed that he was becoming more sensitive and responsive to the needs of others. He chose the comment 'Meditation helps me to open my heart' from the Selection Box, saying:

A: *Yeah. It's kind of that feeling that I get as well when I shut off my brain and I open up my heart.*

I: Will you tell me how you are different when your heart is open?

A: (Sighing) *You 'get' people's feelings more. Before, when another person might say 'Oh, I'm really sad,' I wouldn't have shown that I cared. But now I do, I let them know that I care by saying something like 'Aaw. Are you okay?'*

I: So you think meditation has made you more sensitive to other people?

A: *Yeah, because I wasn't really like that before.*

These examples demonstrate that the children experience meditation as helping them to become more aware of themselves. For them, one of the fruits of meditation is a greater capacity for attentive self-presence which helps to change their perspective on their worries or pre-occupations and makes them more sensitive to the needs of people around them.

There was also a number of children who claimed that meditation made them notice *things* around them more, including nature. For example, Mairead (7,P) commented that:

Meditation has helped me to notice things more. When I'm playing outside I might notice that a plant is going to flower. Before I meditated, I would not have seen it, but when I meditate I see it. I take time to walk over and I just look at it and I really see it.

Doireann (11,P) also realised this:

Whenever I meditate, I notice my surroundings more and everything going on in the world. I hear stuff that I don't usually hear. There is a bird's nest in the roof beside my room and I can hear them. Meditation makes me notice that they are there and it makes me think more about nature. I notice that they are screaming their heads off, but usually I wouldn't hear them. And I notice more what humans have done to the world. That we took it all over, compared to the little bits the birds take up.

Mairead (7,P) also found that meditation made her pay closer attention to her surroundings:

225

Before I meditated I didn't notice things as much. Now, when I'm playing outside I just notice things more, like a plant is going to flower or a ladybird on a leaf. I just stop what I'm doing for a minute and take it in.

A recurring feature of the children's experience, related to greater attentiveness to self-presence, was a strong feeling of gratitude. The practice of meditation seemed to heighten their awareness of how well cared-for they were and engendered a feeling of gratitude for all they had been given in life. For example, Olivia (11,E) said meditation made her realise, that, even though her parents were divorced, each one had a current partner who treated her like she was their own daughter and meditation made her appreciate that. When I asked her why she credited meditation for that understanding she said:

When I meditate my mind lets go of everything. Say, if someone said to me 'You don't have a proper family.' Meditation makes me realise that's not true because I have everything I need. And I feel grateful for that. And the gratitude stays in me. Say I meditated the day before … and then I go to sleep… The next day it feels like I still have the meditation in me.

As well as pointing to gratitude as a fruit if meditation, Olivia's comment also hints at a growing awareness of the true-self within. Antoni (11,E) too said that meditation made him grateful:

Sometimes when I want something from my dad, he usually says he will think about it and sometimes he says 'Yes' and sometimes he says 'No.' When he says 'No' I usually ask him 'But why?' And he says 'You already have a lot of things and you should be grateful for them.' Sometimes I will be angry and argue with him and say 'But I really want that' … But then I meditate to calm down and I have time to think about it. And I do feel grateful.

And Derek (9,X) commented that

When I meditate I feel … em … I feel like a certain kind of … A certain kind of emotion comes inside of me and it makes me feel better in the world. It makes me feel happier in the world and it makes me feel grateful for all I have … I feel it gets all of the bad things out of my mind and I'm really focused on all of the good things in my life and I realise that everything I have is one of the best things in the world. And I feel very grateful.

Meditation also seems to engender a capacity for detachment: children begin to notice how their preoccupations and conditioning imprison them and they discover that this awareness is often enough to free them from their attachments. Leanne (9,N) observed that "*If I'm fighting with my brother and I meditate, I get freedom from*

being caught up in that situation. I'm able to move on." And Norah (10,X) reported that

> Meditation frees me. It frees me from worry and stress. When I'm worried or stressed, it weighs me down, as if there are heavy chains around my neck. But when I meditate, I feel like they just fall away and I'm just like (*sounding a sigh of relief*) I'm just free. I can do stuff I'd never done before.

And Lena (11,E) observed that

> When your mind is full of worries and troubles, it's like you are locked in a cage and you can't get out but then when you meditate, you begin to feel free. The bars of the cage just disappear and you just know what to do. You are able to picture your own path and you follow it.

Barry (10,X) too felt meditation set him free:

> B: *Meditation helps me to feel a sense of freedom. It makes me feel free. That I know that God loves me. And that makes me feel good.*
> I: How does meditation make you feel free? And what does that freedom feel like?
> B: *It makes me feel really cool and happy and awesome. To know that God loves me*
> I: So what is the opposite of freedom? What in your life causes you to be not free?
> B: *When I'm in trouble; when I'm like worried. And when I'm sad.*

In other words, these children discovered for themselves that meditation develops in them not just an awareness of their pre-occupations and conditioning, but also a capacity for detachment from them, from their everyday worries and concerns. Pamela (11,X) described the freedom from such attachments differently. Looking at an image of a rose covered with drops of water, she said:

> This reminds me of meditation. Imagine you're in a shower and you refresh yourself; it brings you back to your normal state. Say, if you had a really hard day and things didn't go the way you had planned. Meditation is like a shower that refreshes you. It's like water being poured over you. [It washes everything away?] Yes.

It is clear from these accounts that meditation develops in children a deepening sense of self-presence, of attentive awareness to their own lived experience – not just in the course of meditating, but a greater sense of being present to themselves and their circumstances at all times. The ongoing practice of meditation seems to generate a growing capacity to see themselves non-judgementally and non-dualistically and to see others as other selves, not merely as objects.

5.4.3.2   Meditation Awakens the Heart to the Innate Goodness Within

Very many children spoke of becoming intensely aware in meditation of their own inherent goodness and a strong sense that they are unconditionally loved. For example, Frank (9,X) observed that *"There's no badness inside when you do meditation, you know you're not a bad person. You realise that you are really a nice friendly person."* Jack (11,N) perceived that *"When I'm angry I don't feel the goodness inside, but when I meditate, then I do feel the goodness in me."* And Sophie (8,N) noted that

> Meditation helps me to be more aware of the goodness inside me. I let go of the things that are bothering me and it's like I've become a kinder person. If I've done unkind things to others, it makes me realise that's not who I am. It makes me kinder and I go and say 'Sorry.'

Barry (10,X) expressed the same idea a little differently, saying:

> Everyone is really good but a few people are bad on the outside and they forget they are good inside. Meditation helps me to understand that if someone is behaving badly, that there is still goodness inside of them. And if they meditated they might realise that for themselves. They might begin to think 'If I'm good on the inside, I should be good on the outside. I shouldn't be doing the bad stuff, I should be doing good stuff.' That's the way I see it.

Jason (12,E) expressed his awareness of the inherent goodness in others in similar terms:

> You might come across someone who is a mean person. But they might be behaving like that because they felt it before, [because someone was mean to them]. Maybe they don't really intend to be harmful to the person they are bullying. Maybe, it's just that it happened to them before, that they were bullied. Maybe that's not who they are really, it's just the way they are behaving.

Kate (11,N) seems to have had a poor opinion of herself before others helped her to discover the innate goodness within her:

> I feel a lot more free, from doing meditation. I used to always feel trapped because I couldn't accept who I was. I used to try to be this girl I imagined in my dreams. I used to think of myself as a loner and even as a mean girl. But other people have been saying 'No, you are really nice, you are always kind and caring.' Meditation has helped me realise what they mean by that.

Lucy (10,X) felt that meditation made her aware of the goodness within because:

> When you're not doing meditation, you sort of … have a *snap* inside you. As if you are always getting ready to snap. But when you do meditation, the goodness comes out. The badness goes out and the goodness flows in.

Derek (9,X) described this innate inner goodness as a growing awareness of inner kindness and open-mindedness:

> The key thing about meditation is that it is quiet and still and that it releases kindness in you. And as well as that, it makes me feel, makes me feel open minded. When I open my eyes after meditation, it makes me feel open minded, to think about things.

As well as making them aware of the goodness within themselves, meditation also helped them to become more keenly aware of the innate goodness in others. Derek (9,X) explained it as follows:

> When I meditate I can really see the goodness inside of people. For example, if someone was bullying me, my first reaction would be that they aren't very nice or that they are really mean. But when I meditate, I feel like I get to know them a lot more and I begin to realise that they could be very nice people. I naturally see the goodness in them if I meditate.

David (10,X) said meditation helped him to see the goodness in others because

> Sometimes a person can mess up and you should not 'be blocking the mountain,' telling tales on them or making up stories about them, because that mightn't have been the regular them … They might be really nice underneath and might actually want to be friends with you. They might just be shy.

Jessica (9,N) suggested a parity of goodness inside herself and others when she said that "It doesn't make me think '*Well, that person is better than me*' and it doesn't make me feel like I'm better than anybody else. It makes me feel that I fit in with everybody else*."

Having sensed the deep human quality of an innate goodness within themselves, children find that meditation instils in them a greater confidence in accepting and expressing who they really are. Kate (11,N) expressed it very succinctly; responding to how she would explain to somebody why they should meditate, she said she would tell them "*To figure out who you really are and to accept who you are.*" Jack (11,N) observed that "*Sometimes when I'm angry or upset, I don't feel like I'm the real me. But then I meditate and I find that I am the real me.*" Pamela, (11,X) having chosen the image of a bird on a branch as one that reminded her of meditation commented that "*I see a bird looking into the sky and thinking 'Why don't I go out there and show them who I really am.*' Elsewhere in her conversation she observed:

I think meditation brings out the real me, and I don't have to pretend to be someone else. There are three 5th Classes in our school and one class has all of the ones who see themselves as the cool kids. And I used to want to be like them, instead of me. I wanted to be as pretty as them, to behave like them. But when I meditate, when I go on 'my little holiday' I can be myself and I accept myself for who I am. I can't change anything and I accept that I'm … me. You realise that, say, if you weren't happy with someone else's looks or features … that means you are not accepting them for who they are. You can't make them change into something you would prefer. So I realise it's just really nice to be myself.

These conversations which gave voice to the children's sense of their deepest nature, their true-self, were laced with tensions around fitting in and peer-pressure. Grace (9,X) spoke about her growing capacity to be at home with her deepest self in terms of honesty:

When I'm not being myself, when I'm not being honest, I think that people will notice and I worry about what they might think. But when I am being honest, when I'm being true to myself, I don't mind what other people will think.

David (10,X) also spoke of the tension of wanting to fit in with the 'gang' and how meditation gave him the courage to be himself:

I think meditation helps me to be myself, to accept myself as I am because most people try and fit in, to be with a gang of lads who are really popular. They might not like them, but they want to be with them because they are so popular. But they should learn to be themselves, and to be with friends that they actually like.

When she examined the comment cards in the Selection Box, Lena (11,E) felt that the card 'Meditation helps me to be myself, to accept myself as I am' was the one that stood out most for her because

We are all unique and I just really like this comment because you don't expect other people to behave as you want them to and you shouldn't do things just because other people expect you to do them. You can be different, you can be yourself. Even if you get things wrong, if you make a mistake, you have to accept that and be able to look back at them and laugh. Or, if it was really serious, to realise it was just one mistake. When you meditate, you think about all of these worries and you just say to yourself like, 'Let them go, just relax; you are a good person … (*in a lower, whispered tone*) At least, *you* think you are."

Norah (10,X) chose a similar comment card 'Meditation helps me to find the real me' because

I'm this person. I'm not any other person. When I meditate I feel more 'me' than I ever did before. I'm not trying to be anybody else, I'm trying to be me. I'm not trying to fit in. I'm just trying to stand out,

because that is me. Meditation helps me because I feel more of that part in meditation, more than I do anywhere else.

Jason (12,E) also addressed this question as noted in his detailed extract earlier in this chapter (pp184-190). In it he described the real tension that young people experience as they struggle to 'find themselves,' to be true to themselves in the context of wanting at the same time to be accepted by others and becoming prone to peer pressure. Jason had chosen the comment cards 'Meditation helps me to open my heart' and 'Meditation helps me to achieve my heart's desire.' As we discussed what they meant to him, I reminded him that in our first conversation he had said that the energy he gets from meditation "comes from your heart … as if your heart is telling you a good thing." He responded

> J: *It's like your mind and your heart and all the parts of your body are telling you that what you are dreaming is what they want you to be.*
>
> I: So there is a sense then in which you are really, in meditation, discovering the truth about yourself? I don't mean to put words in your mouth - how would you describe it?
>
> J: *I think it's more or less like exploring what you really are; like trying to find out who you really are. Not the person you try to be but you are actually exploring the person that you are. … Sometimes I feel like I just want to be the person I am, but if I be that person people might bully me about it.*

In her first interview, Frances (11,N) chose the image of the tropical fish as one that reminded her of meditation because of the sense of freedom it generated, because "*they can go wherever they want to go*" – they could simply be themselves and "*You can think about anything you want and nobody will know besides God.*" I asked:

> I: So, are you saying that there is a sense in meditation that you can be yourself?
>
> F: *Yeah.*
>
> I: Who is that self that you can be?
>
> F: *The 'me' that I've always been.*
>
> I: The 'me' that you have always been. Talk to me a little bit about that.
>
> F: *Someone who can think about anything they like and they can be calm whenever they want.*
>
> I: Will you try to describe to me what it is like when you are being yourself or when you are not being yourself?
>
> F: *When I'm not being myself, when I'm talking to people I might say what I think they want to hear, things that I wouldn't normally say.*
>
> I: It wouldn't be what you would really feel?
>
> F: *Yeah. Because, If I say what I would think myself, they might not be happy with me and they might not want to talk to me.*

I:	But in meditation you can be totally yourself?
F:	*Yeah*
I:	Does that mean that when you talk to God, you just are totally yourself? No pretence?
F:	*Yeah, because he can't judge you.*

It seems that many of the children cherish the opportunity to simply be themselves in the silence of meditation. It seems to create an opportunity for self-recognition at a very deep level which makes children keenly aware of the tension that arises within when they are not true to 'themselves,' not true to their sense of their 'true-self.' Derek (9,X) commented that if someone says something nasty to him it can make him feel bad inside "*but when I do meditation I feel different. Something inhabits inside of me that makes me feel I am still a good person. When I meditate it helps me feel that whatever anyone says, I know 'This is who you are.'*" Elsewhere, Derek was clear that such knowledge seemed to arise from the heart. Indeed, many of the children spoke of meditation as a heart-centred activity. Aimee said that meditation felt really good and, placing a hand on her heart, indicated that she felt a warmth around her heart when she meditates. Lucy (10,X) said that meditation brought her deeper inside herself and that it helps a person to discover their heart because

> when you're in school or at home, like, you won't be … you don't pay attention to your heart. But when you're in meditation, you don't use your brain; instead, you are realising what's *inside* you … what are you inside; and you are your heart.

Frank (9,X) chose an image of the sun streaming down onto a grassy area as one that reminded him of meditation because it was a warm, welcoming place:

I:	And is that a fair description of what meditation is for you? A warm welcoming place of peace and quiet?
F:	*Yes. It's kind of where I go in meditation.*
I:	So in meditation you see yourself as going to a quiet place?
F:	*Yeah.*
I:	Is that place outside of yourself or inside yourself?
F:	*Inside myself.*
I:	And where would you locate that place inside yourself?
F:	*I'd say … near the… the heart.*

When Derek (9,X) mentioned that when he sees a field of roses "*it opens my heart,*" I asked him what did he think was released inside him when his heart opens? He replied:

I think for one, it kind of opens thought, imagination and happiness and also kindness to people. And, instead of being really grumpy and being mean to people, I think meditation helps that as well.

In his second interview he added

The last time when we were sitting down here I was talking about how meditation really opens my heart. It opens my heart to let new things come into life. Sometimes if I'm thinking about things, I'd feel like my heart is kind of empty. But when I do meditation, I feel like I open my heart… and good flies up. Light and goodness.

Jessica (9,N) described her heart opening in meditation by referring to the movie "The Grinch."

Have you seen the movie 'The Grinch?' It's about this bad person who has no heart and he tries to ruin Christmas and he goes around to all the houses and steals all the presents. But then his heart grows at the end of the movie … And it's like my heart started to grow a bit more when I started to do meditation at home. I used to row a lot with my cousins, but now I don't.

Grace (9,X) too felt that meditation brought her deeper inside herself because

When you're meditating, you're not thinking about someone else or something else. You're just thinking about yourself. You're just going to be in the moment, and you're not going to be thinking about what's happening or what happened. You're just thinking about yourself and what's happening now. And you can just go deeper into yourself and really feel what you're feeling.

Although she uses the word 'thinking' to describe both senses, in this comment Grace captures well the subtle distinction between conceptual and perceptual knowledge. She is suggesting here that in meditation, she does not engage in conceptual thinking but she is aware that (perceptual) knowledge somehow arises in her consciousness nonetheless – her feelings surface and make themselves more intimately known in a way that might be described as primordial or perceptual, as knowledge that presents itself to the conscious mind which is not the result of thoughtful reflection.[852] Aideen (11,P) had referred to this too; while every realisation makes itself felt ultimately at a conscious level, in her experience any 'thinking' that preceded it would have taken place at a subconscious level as she meditated. As she explained earlier (page 205):

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[852] Van Manen observes that "Perception through sight, hearing, and touch is first of all primal. Similarly there is the body knowledge that guides us through what we do. And we do not always "know" what we know. It is the unknowing consciousness, a non-cognitive knowing, that guides much of our daily doing and acting." See van Manen, *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle location 1240 of 11093. (Kindle Locations 1240-1242).

When I meditate I kind of think subconsciously. I wouldn't know I was thinking but I'd be thinking. Does that make sense? When I would come out of the meditation I'd figure out something that I didn't know I was thinking about … but my mind was thinking the whole time.

Her description reflects her attempt to put into words what Maggie Ross described as 'deep mind' which she contrasts with self-conscious mind.[853] Doireann (11,P) also hints at this process of perceptual discovery, in her own unique way. She had chosen the comment card 'Meditation has helped me to discover things about myself' and she went on to explain:

D: *When you meditate you discover things you didn't know. It's like a really old house. You might have lived in the house for years and then one day you just find a little cubbyhole that you never noticed before. And what you find is really interesting. It's like that about yourself. It's like a secret garden that you don't find, even though you walk by it every day. And then, suddenly, you discover it. I used to go to ballet every day because my mother made me do it. And I hated it so much. And then I just kind of grew to like it.*

I: How did meditation help?

D: *Because it used to annoy me when I would meditate. And I would ask myself 'Why do you think this?' And after a while I realised I had gotten to like it.*

I: Can you tell me more about what you had in mind when you mentioned your secret garden?

D: *It's just a hidden part of you that no one knows about, not even yourself. But one day you just come across it and you keep it to yourself. You don't really tell anyone about it.*

I: And, what's in there?

D: *I don't really know I haven't found that yet.*

I: But at least you have discovered it- you are aware it is there, even if you don't know exactly what is in it.

D: *Wait! I've found it now. It's all the love - my family and my friends and all the hope that I have. It fills everything with love and hope. But it's hard to explain.*

It seems clear from these examples that meditation makes children aware of the innate goodness inside themselves and, likewise, the innate goodness in others. The language of the heart is often used to speak about this discovery which leads slowly but surely to a realisation of their true nature; that there is an essence within them that captures who they truly are and that meditation helps them to discover their own unique character. It is discovered in the context of the tensions that arise from trying to fit-in and as a result of the peer-pressure that arises as they attempt to do so. It would appear too that for the children the metaphor of the heart is used to capture

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[853] Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide (Volume 1: Process)* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2014), Kindle location 135 of 5654.

their essential nature, their true-self. In other words, the discovery of the true-self is heart-centred.

5.4.3.3 Meditation Connects Children with God

In the last two sections I focused on the children's experience of a deepening awareness of attentive self-presence and the emergence of a perceptual knowledge of the goodness within themselves leading to a sense of their 'true-self.' Earlier in this chapter (section 5.4.1.4) I described that the children experienced, as they meditated, a sense of that which transcends them, of a sense of encountering mystery in the practice. Over the coming pages I will reflect on the concept of the true-self as I explore the child's experience of Divine Presence and their experience of spiritual nourishment as fruits of the *ongoing* practice of meditation.

Natalie (11,X) expressed the connection with the Divine very succinctly:

Meditation helps me to connect with God because normally we are so busy and we don't pay attention to God. But when we meditate, we get about five or ten minutes to connect with God and to feel closer. I take a few minutes, not to talk to him, but to feel closer to him.

In her second conversation, having chosen the comment card 'Meditation helps me to connect with God,' from the Selection Box, Ella (9,X) noted that: "*When I meditate it feels like me and God are connected. And sometimes in my sleep, in my dreams, I'm meditating and I can see God sitting there beside me meditating*."

I:	In your dreams? What a lovely dream to have!
E:	*Yeah, I have it a lot.*
I:	Do you really? So in your dream you are meditating and God is sitting watching?
E:	*Yeah.*
I:	And does that make you think it must be happening every time you meditate?
E:	*Yeah, I think it's happening to everybody but I don't think everyone has that dream* (chuckling).
I:	Perhaps they don't realise it's happening? So, when you are meditating, do you get a real sense that God is beside you, as well as dreaming about it?
E:	*I think so, but also all of the animals he's created and all the people I've loved.*
I:	They are all a sign of God?
E:	*Yeah.*
I:	So, you're saying you feel close to God in meditation?
E:	*Yeah.*
I:	Will you describe to me how you sense that closeness to God in meditation?

E: *Well, I think I just sense him from all … it feels like he's giving me loads of love when I'm meditating and when I'm praying … I can feel his love …*

I referenced earlier in this chapter (p213) how Norah (10,X) described how she felt really close to God in meditation because "*I get my Communion candle and I light it and I feel like he's there in the flame. He is there watching me as I meditate.*" Although she described him as being in the flame, her body-language made it clear that she experienced his presence in her heart. Barry (10,X) explored how his connection with God deepened through meditation:

B: *Meditation helps me to connect with God. Everyone is connected to God. And, he's never going to leave anyone out. You will always be connected to him. Even if people have different religions, they can all still connect with him.*

I: So, how do you think does meditation help you to connect with God?

B: *You are connected to him already but you can connect more. And he would probably read your mind. He'll realise that you like him more and that he should connect with you more.*

I: What does that feel like to you, when you feel connected to God?

B: *It's a good feeling… And you still see the light coming and all that. You won't see much darkness because God is light basically, I suppose.*

I: His light shines in you? Within you, stronger, as you meditate?

B: *Yeah.*

I: Where did you get that idea from do you think, that God is light.

B :   *It just popped into my head someday when I was in church. The priest said something about light. I was only like seven years old and since then I have always realised 'Oh, right. I think God is light and he wants the world to be a better place.'*

Nessa (11,P) described her sense of being connected to God somewhat differently. She explained that meditation made her feel that she was loved:

N: *By God and by my family.*

I: I noticed you smiled when you said that?

N: *Yeah.*

I: As if you really recognised it? Would you like to say a little bit more about that?

N: *When I do my meditation I think of God and it makes me feel closer to God, like I know him. And I know my family really loves me as well.*

I: Will you talk to me a little bit more about that please?

N: *When I do my prayers and everything it feels like he is talking to me; he is like saying that he will take care of me and my family and everybody.*

I: So you get a real sense of reassurance? You feel safe and secure?

N: *Yeah.*

I: How would you describe what that is like?

N: *When he says it, it feels like there is a circle around me and my family.*

236

Emelia (9,E) imaginatively considered God and meditation to be intimately connected:

> E: *Meditation connects me with God because God and meditation are alike to best friends. I think God did meditation because he likes to do it when he was small or where he is now. He likes to do it. When I am meditating, I want God to be with me. Maybe he is. And maybe he is meditating. When I meditate it feels really good. There's nothing bad or sad about it, it feels really OK. It feels exciting, really good. It feels like goodness is flowing through me.*
> I: Like goodness is flowing through you?
> E: *Yeah*. (Whispered).

Adrian (11,X) felt this connection with God was strengthened by the fact that the whole-school meditated together saying

> It feels like everyone is one. Everyone's eyes are closed. We're all together and still it feels like there is just no one. It feels like no one is around you, as if everyone is where you are now. And God is in the presence.

This is a profound statement for an eleven year-old and suggests that meditation has the capacity to impact on the whole school community. This is explored further in the next chapter.

Many of the children commented that meditation made them feel God's love not just for themselves but also for others. For example, Barry (10,X) said

> God is always beside you. And I think you feel love when God is close to you. He is everywhere you could say and, he shares love to everyone not just you. So you can feel closer to all of that.

Nessa (11,P) considered that God "*keeps everybody safe and he loves people even if they do bad things. Every night I ask God to bless the poor people, even the bad people in the world because he loves them all.*" When she meditates she just closes her eyes, picks a word like 'faith' and goes "*on a journey down to God. And then God just appears; he doesn't talk. It's just like a sense that he is there. And I can see my granddad (who passed away) in the background.*"

As I noted earlier (p214), many of the children linked closeness to God with closeness to relatives who had passed from this life. Ella (9,X) was asked what she liked about meditation and she said "*I like that it makes me really refreshed and calm and I can think about those who passed away when I meditate. It's like we can communicate when I'm meditating.*" Norah (10,X) liked the fact that the whole school meditated together because it made for one big happy family, adding:

I know people who are meditating for me. I know people who are meditating for themselves and I know people who are meditating for their loved ones. If somebody is troubling them or somebody died, meditation can just bring you with them. It can bring you to them and show you their world.

I was meditating up in my bedroom one night and my mum came in. She has been crying because her uncle had died and she really missed him. She just lay on the floor and meditated with me. I held her hand and I just went into her world with her. She went with her uncle and she said she saw a clear picture of her uncle and he talked to her.

When asked 'If meditation was a colour, what colour would it be,' Karen (7,N) chose the colour red *"because it's the colour of a love heart."* She chose the colour of a love-heart *"because you go up to the person who loves you, if they had died, and then you can just talk to them and see them."*

As well as stating that they experienced a sense of God's presence in meditation, some of the children indicated how they struggled to come to terms with what that actually meant. At the start of his conversation, Adrian (11,X) said he liked meditation because *"it's very relaxing and you get a break and you're away from everything and it's just time to be one with God."*

I: That sense of being at one with God, is that something your teacher talked about or suggested to you or is it just a feeling that you have picked up yourself?

A: *It's just a feeling that I get myself.*

I: Will you talk to me a little bit about that. What does it feel like to be at one with God?

A: *I kind of feel warm on the inside.*

I: I noticed that you put your hand up to your heart as you said that.

A: *Yeah.*

I: So you get a nice warm comfortable feeling in your heart?

A: *Yeah.*

I: Is there anything else you can say about that, about that sense of being at one with God?

A: *It just feels nice, knowing that you are doing something important and it could be with God.*

I: I noticed the way you described that … You said that you 'could' be with God.

A: *Yeah.*

I: Would you like to explain what you mean by that? I think I know what you might mean but I'd like to hear you describe it in your own words.

A: *Well, it's not definitely proof that he is real, but I think he's real. And if he is real then, he really will be with me. And it's really nice knowing that.*

I: That's an important distinction isn't it? So, even though you have no way of proving it, there is a sense in which you ***know*** you are with God.

A: *Yeah. But my brain is, like, thinking 'How is it? How is God?'*
        But I'm … myself … is … [Adrian struggles to capture in words
        what he wants to say.]
I: So while, on the one hand, there is a sense in which your brain
        is asking 'How can this be?' and 'What does this mean?' on the
        other hand, in your heart you are confident that you are with
        God.
A: *Yeah.*
I: Did you always feel that way about God or has meditation
        helped you to deepen it?
A: *Yeah, I think meditation has helped me. Because every now and*
        then, before I had done meditation, I'd be like 'Is God real or is
        he not? I'm not too sure.' But then when I get that feeling in
        meditation, it really makes me feel like God is real.

The sense of struggle described by Adrian is important and points to the implicit but unspoken distinction between conceptual and perceptual knowledge. This may point to an urgent need to speak with children about their experience of perceptual knowledge and how it can manifest itself in their lives in the context of their spiritual development and in their appreciation of poetry, drama and art.

Aideen (11,P) also experienced God in meditation, saying "*It helps us to be in touch with the inner God that is inside us all.*" In her first interview, she had suggested that there was "a little bit of God in everyone," but she too struggled to describe adequately in words her deep sense of her innate spirituality:

I kind of … well … It's kind of hard to explain … I can explain it in my
head … It's like you have just kind of reached a certain part of you that
has most of the goodness and once you meditate you can kind of figure
out where it is and let it show.

Although these children are young, they are not entirely naïve. They struggle, as adults do, to come to understand what constitutes the true-self which is the source of the desire to live authentically. They seem to apprehend that the landscape they are traversing, the landscape of the heart, cannot adequately be understood or described because it is ineffable. It seems possible, perhaps likely, that for these children the practice of meditation gives them an opportunity to experience over and over again that heart-felt sense of presence that transcends them, yet makes itself felt, however subtly. There is a sense of being touched by God, of being embraced so lightly and gently – a sense that was captured earlier by Gráinne (p184) who liked to feel of the breeze against her skin as she meditated near an open window because "*it's so light and God won't play rough, he'll just touch you very carefully.*"

In the section on self-presence as an essential theme in the child's experience of meditation, I quoted the example of Aideen (11,P) who spoke about a man whom

she witnessed helping a woman who had fallen in a supermarket. In the second conversation with her, she spoke about this incident again, adding:

> A: *I realised that some people don't enhance their inner God, and some people, like the man who helped her, do; they enhance their inner God and let it shine through.*
> I: And how do you think can a person enhance their inner God?
> A: *When you see somebody in need, do something about it. Some people just pass by and say 'Sorry, I can't help you.' But some people stop and help.*
> I: I'm hearing you say that, by actually responding to a need, that helps to enhance your inner God? Rather than just think about it, you do something? That that helps you to develop your inner God, to bring that to the surface?
> A: *Yeah.*
> I: And do you think does meditation help a person to bring out the inner God?
> A: *It can help to surface it even more. When you do a good deed, you just bring it up a bit. But in meditation you can bring it up all of the way because you clear your mind and it all just comes up - meditation brings it up faster than doing lots of small little deeds.*

A little later, having chosen to talk about the comment card 'Meditation has helped me to feel God's love for myself and others' she was even more specific in linking the practice of meditation to enhancing her inner God:

> I use the meditation time to let my inner God show. I would hope that if someone had problems, say like a criminal who got into trouble, I would hope that meditation would help them to change their lifestyle and let their inner God show and not be back and forth from prison all the time.

Jason (12, E), who was preparing for his Confirmation as a Catholic in his local parish, outside the context of his multi-denominational school, was clear that in meditation he could feel God's love for himself and for others. For him, the most important thing about his religion was "*to know that God is in you. To know that God is a part of you and that will never change no matter what happens.*"

But meditation did more than give these children a sense of Divine Presence, they also described meditation as a means of deepening that relationship, of nourishing their true-self. For example, Derek (9,X), described his sense of being connected to God in meditation in terms of being nourished and energised by that connection:

> D: *When I meditate I feel as if I have called to God. I feel as if I'm telling God to come closer to me, to help me to do other things. And I feel there is something like ... a certain stretching of me. It gives me the ability to concentrate, to feel more aware and act before I do something. And I feel like God is helping, doing*

> *that for me, and that brings me closer to him. I thank him for doing that.*
>
> I: How would you describe the feeling of being closer to God.
>
> D: *It feels like a light is shining on me. All over me like the light of God through the window … and, I feel like God is telling me something. Or he's talking to me. And that brings me closer to him. He is telling me … He's giving me the ability to be more aware, to deal more with things. To concentrate better, to be focused.*

As we finished our second conversation, I asked Derek if there was any final comment he would like to make and he said:

> The last thing I'd like to say is … em… that (*Derek sucks in air*) every time I do meditation … I feel like … (*phew*) … I feel something supernatural inside of me; something, like God is inside of me, and he's giving me abilities of confidence and love and being able to see that I am who I am. And inside of me, that makes me feel calm, and relaxed, better at my homework and able to get things off my mind and all of the other things we talked about.

Jason (12,E) described his sense of being nourished as

> pushing me in the direction of my inner person, towards what I should be. Meditation feeds you in a spiritual way. And knowledge-wise as well. Because it helps you to think about the person you should be.

Karen (7,N) spoke of this inner nourishment when she chose an image of a red rose as one that reminded her of meditation. In the picture, the rose was sprinkled with drops of water, as if after a Spring shower. She commented: "*It reminds me of meditation because God let the flower have some water. So it has room to grow and someone can pick it.*" Kate (11,N) too used the image of the red rose to describe very beautifully her understanding that meditation nourished her spirit:

> This flower just got watered so it's growing. Like our soul is growing every day. It's growing stronger. As you can see, before it was just this small little thing and now it has opened out and I thought it was really pretty. We are all beautiful on the inside. We are all beautiful even if you feel like you're ugly, you are not; you are beautiful to everyone else. And that beauty will shine. Meditation makes you realise that you are perfect for who you are. This image is saying 'This is the world and this is who I am. And I'm going to let my spirit grow.'

Elsewhere she observed that meditation helped her to see the goodness inside herself and in others. I asked her:

> I: So you sense in meditation that the goodness rises up inside a person?
>
> K: *Yes, and it takes over the badness. Everyone always has a piece of badness in them but people can overcome that badness and change it with goodness.*
>
> I: And how do make sure that the goodness rises? And prevent the badness from arising?
>
> K: *By calming down. Because when you are hyper and you are willing to do anything, that's when you get more badness in you.*

I: So is it a question then of watering the good seeds? Is meditation about watering the good seeds?

K: *Yes, and being hyper is watering the bad.*

All of these excerpts point to the fact that these children experienced a strong heart-felt sense of inner, spiritual nourishment as a fruit of the practice of meditation, even if they found it difficult to give voice to it explicitly in words. In her second conversation Norah (10,X) struggled to describe adequately how she felt meditation nourished her, saying

N: *I felt some bit of my body getting stronger.*

I: I am conscious that the recorder can't see you. You are actually pointing here towards your chest or your heart as you are saying that.

N: *Yeah.*

I: You have a sense of something growing and strengthening inside of you, there.

N: *Yeah.*

I: Will you say a little more about that?

N: *It feels like it's just getting bigger stronger. I can feel this somewhere around here. It just feels really nice because I know that I'm growing ... for that thing ... I know I'm growing to love more about that thing ... and meditation helps me with that.*

I: Let's see if there is any way we can put words on ... that thing. How would you describe what that thing is?

N: *I would describe it ... as ... Well, I love reading books and some people would say I'm mad because I always have my head in a book but I feel my love of books is actually getting stronger every time I do meditation. Because I always read a book after it, because I feel that part of my body is getting stronger.*

I: And what part if you is being nourished?

N: *I'm sorry ... I don't understand what you mean by 'nourished'?*

I: Nourished means 'being fed.' So can you tell me what part if you is being fed in meditation?

N: *I think it's ... just beside my heart.*

The idea that meditation should be practiced regularly because it nourishes the spirit of the person was probably expressed most clearly by Adrian (11,X):

A: *It's kind of that feeling that you are with God, inside. And you're connecting with him.*

I: You described that feeling earlier as a lovely warm sensation around your heart?

A: *Yeah.*

I: Does that last with you after meditation? Are you able to recall that sensation at times throughout the day?

A: *Yeah, I can. Sometimes easily and sometimes it kind of fades as the day goes on. And then when I do meditation again, it is back again for a few more days until it begins to fade again.*

I: Would you ever say to yourself sometimes when you have a quiet moment, 'I'm just going to sit here quietly' to bring back to that sense of being with God, of being close to God?

A: *Yes. Sometimes.*

I: To bring back that sensation of being close to God or just to be
        more relaxed and calm?
A: *I'd say both.*

These conversations suggest that the children experienced a sense of God's presence as they meditated, a sense somehow of being touched and/or embraced by the love of God during meditation and deeply nourished by the encounter with that ineffable Presence. The regular practice of meditation brings about a transformation in how the child sees the world and their place in it and this is intimately related to their growing sense of being connected to God, to the Divine Presence. The children's conversations were interlaced with striking examples, as we have seen. Many children gave rich metaphorical expression to their sense of encountering the Divine Presence in meditation and being nourished by that encounter as we have seen above with Kate's reference to the red rose, Derek's image of being flooded with light and so on. Two further metaphors merit special mention.

5.4.3.3.1 Two Metaphors of Nourishment

Van Manen writes that "The role of metaphor is to illuminate an "invisible" phenomenon given by nonsensory experience by means of a "visible" or concrete or sensory image. Thus, a phenomenon that cannot be directly described may be indirectly evoked." [854] The use of photo-elicitation as a means of engaging with the children was very productive. It gave rise to some interesting metaphors as they sought to give verbal expression to something their chosen images represented or pointed towards about their experience of meditation and its fruits in their lives. Two metaphors in particular stand out as indicators of how the children experienced meditation as spiritual nourishment, as a sense of Spirit working within them, offering them inner wisdom and guidance.

5.4.3.3.2 The Blossoming Branch

Kate (11,N) chose the image of a blue bird sitting still on a branch as one that reminded her of meditation. As was the practice in the interviews, Kate was first asked to describe what she saw before exploring why it reminded her of meditation.

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[854] See van Manen, *Phenomonology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, Kindle location 3788 0f 11093.

243

K: *I see a tree, a living tree, like a living person. And, the bird, like the brain is peaceful and still; nothing is bothering it and everything is calm.*

I: That's interesting, that you describe the tree as a living thing, like a living person. You can see the buds coming out.

K: *Yes, these would be … like … it's spirit … blossoming.*

I: OK so the spirit of the tree is blossoming forth, it's just about to burst forth. Is there a sense from what you're saying, and I want to be careful not to put words into your mouth, but is there some sense in what you're saying that, for you, in meditation there is something about the spirit… blossoming?

K: *Yeah. It's like the spirit is showing its 'bright.' Everybody has their own unique, talent or 'shine.' Mine would be music.*

I: So there is a spirit or an energy in every person?

K: *Yes. My best friend's 'shine' is that she is really friendly.*

I: So are you saying that meditation somehow enriches that or releases that or encourages it?

K: *Yes. It's like it says to you 'OK, now it's your time to grow.'*

I: And this silent growth happens because you take the time for meditation?

K: *Yes.*

I: And this blossoming within you makes you stronger somehow?

K: *Yeah. Your heart or your soul grows stronger and is a lot less easy to break.*

In the second conversation with Kate, she explained more fully what she meant:

K: *It's a lot harder to break a stronger person than it is to break a person who hasn't got the meditation in them.*

I: When you use the word break, what kinds of things do you have in mind?

K: *For example, people hurting your feelings.*

I: Is it your experience that because you meditate, that gives you the strength to understand that they are not really hurting you?

K: *I realise that they have their own problems. And they are just trying to get rid of their own anger, to get it out of themselves.*

I: Meditation helps you to see that they are acting out of anger. That it's nothing personal?

K: *Yes.*

5.4.3.3.3   A Mother Feeding her Baby

In her first conversation, Pamela (11,X) was asked if she thought meditation brought a person deeper inside themselves:

P: *Yes, I would say so. Because meditation is kind of a religious thing and it brings God inside you; it puts spirit … like …*

I: It nourishes the spirit? Is that what you mean?

P: *Yeah*

I: Will you say a little bit more about how, in your experience, meditation nourishes your spirit.

244

> P: *Well, if someone has said something to me and it has hurt my feelings, and if the school is not doing meditation that day, I would try and do it myself during lunchtime.*
>
> I: And how does that nourish your spirit? Talk to me about that sense that you have of meditation nourishing your spirit?
>
> P: *It's hard to explain.*
>
> I: It is very hard to explain. But you're doing really well, so please just do your best to describe it.
>
> P: *OK. ... It's kind of like ... Someone feeding a baby ... you know ... It's like nourishing a baby ... but your spirit is the baby... And God is the mother.*
>
> I: And do you get a real sense of that in meditation?
>
> P: *Yes.*

In the second conversation, I asked Pamela about her metaphor:

> I: Do you remember I asked you the last day how meditation nourished your spirit?
>
> P: *Yeah.*
>
> I: And do you recall what you said?
>
> P: *Yeah. I said it was like a mother feeding her baby.*
>
> I: Can you tell me where did that image comes from?
>
> P: *em ... (pause) ... I think it came from my little brother. When he was very small, I used to hug him all the time. I used to squeeze him* (chuckling). *He probably hated it But I remember I loved him the most when I was younger. And I used to think that my hugs would ... nourish him. And help him to be a happy baby. But it probably didn't because I squeezed* (laughing) *so hard! That's where it came from.*

Section 5.4.3.3 has demonstrated how the ongoing practice of meditation seems to generate in children an ever-deepening sense of connection with the divine. Their use of metaphor to describe what they had come to know perceptually truths which are beyond conceptual knowledge, is a remarkable feature of this study. There were many rich examples including sensing 'God in the flame of a candle' watching over a child as she meditates, feeling that one is 'surrounded by a circle of love' as one meditates, a sense that every occasion of meditation is 'like a journey down to God,' meditation compared to 'a red rose being watered by the rain,' a 'mother feeding her baby,' and the 'blossoming branch' of a tree. Others referred more directly a experiencing 'their inner God' who resides in everyone. All of these are indicative of a deepening perceptual knowledge about the truth of who one really is and of an intimate, almost inexpressible, connection with the transcendent. These accounts suggest that meditation helps children to begin to trust in that perceptual knowledge, to appropriate its deepest meanings at a non-conceptual level, deepening their own sense of being connected to God.

5.4.3.4 Meditation Inspires Children to be Better Persons

I explored, above, how meditation helped children to become more aware of the innate goodness inside themselves and others and how they experienced nourishment of the true-self as a fruit of meditation. Many also spoke of how they experienced meditation as a form of guidance, bringing them more deeply into themselves, leading them to an ever-deepening sense of God's presence within and impelling them in the direction of acting responsibly and doing the right thing. They had a sense of accessing an inner wisdom, of finding an inner truth and allowing themselves to be guided by it. In this section I explore their growing awareness of an inner dynamism that guides them as they seek to live authentic and meaningful lives in relationship with themselves, others, and the Source of all. I will describe in a moment how Aideen listened to her inner voice to rescue a girl who was being bullied, even though she was aware she might then become the subject of the bullying. The idea of meditation as a source of inner guidance, of being guided somehow by this perceived transcendent Presence, arose quite strongly across the conversations with the children. Grace (9,X), for example, chose an image which showed sunlight shining down onto a grassy area and she imagined that

> It's as if an animal had been there and God was showing the way for it to go, pointing the way where happiness is. And I feel God is guiding me the right way in meditation. He's guiding me to say 'Yes' or to say 'No.'

Later on Grace commented that she felt meditation made her more honest as a person.

> G: *I think you wouldn't be as honest as you would like to be, if you didn't do meditation.*
> I: Can you say a little more about that?
> C: *Before I came into the senior school, I didn't do meditation and I wasn't as honest as I am now. I wouldn't have been as honest with my friends as I am now. During meditation, if I realise I haven't been totally honest with one of my friends, I feel after meditation that I should tell them. So I would tell them what I've done and I wouldn't feel worried any more.*

Later still, Grace mentioned that she felt close to God in meditation. I asked her how she would describe that closeness, how she sensed it. She replied:

> I feel like he's right beside me telling me the right choices and the wrong choices. Like I said a little while ago, if I'm wondering whether to tell my friend and not to tell my friend, I feel he's beside me telling me that I should tell my friend; that I should be honest with her.

246

She gave the following simple, albeit child-like, example:

A few days ago we were playing a game on the yard and, I felt like cheating in the game, because I was 'caught' and that meant I was 'On,' that I would have to be the one chasing them. I denied it; I said I hadn't been 'caught.' But then I went away for a minute because I wanted to go over it by myself; I asked God if I was right or wrong and what should I do. And he helped me make a good decision. And then I came back and I said I had made a mistake and I was actually 'On' and then I played the game properly.

During our second conversation she returned to the topic of honesty when she chose from the Selection Box the comment card 'Meditation helps me to be myself:' "*Meditation helps you be honest with yourself and be honest with your friends and everyone around you, because if you're not honest with yourself you can't be honest with anyone else.*" When, a moment later, she chose the comment card 'Meditation helps me to open my heart' she observed that "*a lot of these cards are connected with one another. For example, the reason I am able to make the decision to be myself, to do the right thing, is because my heart is open.*"

When I asked David (10,X) how meditation had helped him to open his heart he said it was hard to put it in words but

D: *When I saw 'to open my heart' I thought it was more or less to God or Jesus. To try and be more like them. And if they tell you 'Don't do this, do this instead,' you should do it because they know more than anybody else.*
I: So if they tell you 'Don't do this, do this instead,' how do they tell you that? How do you sense what it is they are telling you?
D: *Say, if I have a choice to make. And, it's a Yes/No choice. I might pick one at the start but then I might start to get a bit 'edgy' about it and then I think again and start out fresh and that way I get to see which is probably the best one to pick.*
I: And you feel meditation opens your heart to those possibilities? And it would lead you in the direction of the right decision?
D: *Yeah.*

Lena (11,E) was familiar the concept of the 'third eye' in Buddhism which alludes to a capacity perceive the reality that lies beyond ordinary vision and ordinary consciousness. She perceived it as a form of inner guidance.

L: *Buddhists say that we all have a third eye. We all have two eyes and that's how we see things, but they say that our 3rd eye is the one that leads the way actually. I think of it as being like a ship where there are two people on the bridge of the ship, keeping a lookout, but it's actually the captain who leads the way; he decides where to go.*
I: So how does your 3rd eye show the world differently?
C: *That's kind of a tough question!*

I: It is a tough question! But that's why we are here. (*Both laughing*) So struggle with it, if you don't mind. I'd like to understand what you mean by that 3rd eye and whether you live your life any differently because you use your 3rd eye?

L: *It doesn't make your life any different, because you don't know about it. It's there but people don't know that it is there.*

I: But do you believe that your 3rd eye is somehow guiding you?

L: *I believe it guides the way to your achievements.*

Aideen (11,P) described her intuition of inner guidance in terms of what she called her 'inner eye.' Responding to the question 'If meditation was a colour, what colour would it be?' she replied that it would '*black with a kind of grey outline.*'

I: And why do you think that image comes to mind?

A: *Because I'd have a hazy kind of picture and the grey outline would be the light coming into my eyes … to my inward eye. And the black would be because my eyes are closed.*

I: OK, so talk to me about your inner eye. Where did you come across the expression 'my inward eye'? I love it. Where did that idea come from?

A: *I heard it in a poem.[855] My teacher explained it and I understood it. I understand it.*

I: So it's one of those things you know you understand what it means but it's hard to explain?

A: *Yeah*

I: I appreciate that, but will you do your best to explain what you understand by your 'inward eye'?

A: *The inward eye to me is … well, I only really use the expression for meditation.*

I: Has your inward eye ever revealed something to about your inner self?

A: *It makes me realise that I'm not perfect but I'm as good as going to get.*

I: And that you can be happy with that?

A: *Yeah*

I: It helps you to realise and accept who you are?

A: *Yeah*

She went on to say that "*meditation brings us more in touch with our inner God that is inside us all.*" Because she had referred variously to her 'inner eye' and her 'inner God,' I asked Aideen if there was any connection between her 'inner God' and her 'inner eye.' She responded:

A: *Sometimes but not always. Because sometimes our inner eye, sometimes it might be our imagination as well. Sometimes your imagination can run wild and just imagine something that wouldn't be very good. So, it can be God, but it might also not be.*

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[855] William Wordsworth, *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*. The fourth verse reads: "For oft, when on my couch I lie/ In vacant or in pensive mood,/They flash upon that inward eye/ Which is the bliss of solitude;/ And then my heart with pleasure fills,/ And dances with the daffodils."

I: So how do you tell the difference? Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you wondered am I really close to God here or is it just my imagination?

A: *I was once doing rehearsals for a panto. One girl was picking on another girl and I knew I didn't want to get involved. But I knew I couldn't just leave her there. For a while I really struggled to know what to do - my mind was trying to fight something though I don't know what it was but it was fighting something. I was caught between wanting to help and feeling I should stay out of it.*

I: What did you do with the end?

A: *I went over and I did stand up for her and although she is younger than me she is now one of my best friends.*

It would seem that Aideen experienced a call from within to help the younger girl and experienced a real tension between doing the right thing and protecting herself by staying away. Although she doesn't develop it explicitly, it seems clear from her response that she experienced the desire to intervene as a call, arising from the innate goodness within. Many others commented as well on the fact that they experienced meditation as motivating them to be nicer to others. Responding to the comment card 'Meditation opens my heart' Andre (10,X) said that for him it meant:

A: *To let all the goodness that God gave me into my heart. To take away all the worries and to put good things in their place in my heart.*

I: And how different are you when your heart is open?

A: *I'm a much better person. I feel much freer and happier.*

I: How would I notice that if I was in your class? If I was another child in your class how would I notice that your heart was opened today?

A: *Because I would be nice to you and all.*

I: So it makes a difference in your behaviour and in how you get on with people?

A: *Yeah*

Leanne (9,N) also commented that meditation had inspired her to be nicer. Having finished with the comment cards at the end of her second conversation, I asked her if she felt there was anything missing from the cards? Was there something she felt meditation had helped her with but wasn't mentioned in the cards and she replied:

I think meditation has helped me to … (pause) … to have a better attitude about stuff. Say if I was just watching my favourite programme on TV and my mum asked me to do something, I would have said 'No.' But now I'm able to think 'It's just a TV show, it will be on again' and I do what my mum wants me to do.

Emelia (9,E) commented that meditation made her feel grateful for all that she had and inspired her to be true to herself:

I:	You say that after meditation you are 'more myself'? Will you tease out for me what that means to you, to be more yourself?
E:	*It means that I'm nicer to other people., I'm kinder … (pause) … and I behave more nicer (sic) …*
I:	So is it a little bit like we said about the goodness inside? That there is a real you inside? And that you feel really good when you can be that person?
E:	*Yeah. I always feel that I am good inside. But I don't feel it's outside. And then when I meditate it does feel outside as well.*
I:	So you are able to reveal who you really are? You are able to just be yourself?
E:	*Yeah.*

Meditation was important to Grace (9,X) because it "*helps you to be the best that you can be:*"

> Say if someone tells you to do something that you don't want to do, meditation helps you to make your own decision. It helps me to think about it for myself because I think that the real me is when I'm in meditation. I don't have to think about anyone else and I don't have to say anything I don't want to say. I can just been me in meditation. And when I'm talking to God I can be honest, the most honest I want to be. I don't have to pretend or hide anything from anyone when I'm in meditation.

Barry (10,X) described his sense of being guided in meditation in terms of light:

I:	I note that every time you spoke about God, you mentioned light. For example you said to me the last day '*Your light is like a good power that helps things to see through the dark and all.*' Can you say any more about that, what you meant by that?
B:	*When I'm meditating, I see darkness. And then when I say Maranatha, it just comes to light. And I think that is God controlling the light, making it brighter and all of that.*
I:	So, there is a sense in which you feel that God is at work within you in meditation?
B:	*Yeah*
I:	And what is happening? What kind of work is being done on you?
B:	*It's kind of hard to describe. Say, if you're thinking something about bullying, he'll take that out of your mind and put in light and he'll tell you, in your mind, where he is showing light, he'll tell you to tell the teacher (about the bullying).*

Lena (11,E) also experienced a sense of being guided in meditation. At a somewhat superficial level she noted that she is usually very grumpy when she wakes up in the morning but that after she meditates she is in better form. Asked if it had changed her in any deeper way, she added

> Yes. It has changed me because meditation relaxes you and you are able figure out what to do and what not to do. Meditation tells you … it

doesn't tell you but it suddenly comes to mind that I shouldn't be doing
this, I should just say 'You know what, we need to talk this through.'

Her language here is revealing and matches what many of the other children
said. Meditation seems to lead the children to a kind of insightful knowledge, which
seems to come from nowhere but which they attribute to the practice of meditation. It
is not that they have come to a conclusion having carefully considered the pros and
cons of a situation and worked out what is best for them when faced with a challenge
or a dilemma. Instead, it is as if they are inspired to respond rather than react; as if
somehow, deep within the psyche, they have come to understand what response the
particular situation calls for and they are inspired to act on it.

Pamela (11,X) articulated this sense of responding to that inner guidance as
follows:

> It's a little bit like this – as if God is like your mother and does
> everything for you. It's as if God puts a path ahead of you so you can
> follow it. He picks you up when you fall or when something happens.
> Say, when you're older, if something happens your business, God won't
> solve it for you but he will tell you 'You have to get up now. You can
> fix this on your own. You don't need me to fix this because you're old
> enough now. You have the maturity to do things on your own and not
> have me helping you all the time.'

From the examples quoted in this section it is clear that the children did not
merely experience spiritual nourishment as a fruit of meditation but it went on to
impact on their daily living. Grace felt meditation kept her honest while David, Lena
and Aideen sensed that meditation somehow guided towards making better decisions,
including doing the right thing when doing so might have negative consequences for
themselves. Others spoke of how meditation made them kinder, more appreciative of
the point of view of others and generally to be the best person they could be. I
interpret this as a deep desire to live out the values of the true-self which they
discerned deep within themselves, however vaguely.

5.4.3.4.1 Meditation as a Map

I conclude this section with a final, very rich metaphor. Earlier in this chapter
(pp184-190) I explored Jason's (12,E) interview in considerable detail, in an effort to
describe one child's experience of the practice. The reader may recall that he
concluded his interview with the remarkable metaphor of meditation as a map. In

many ways, that single metaphor summarises the four themes of the fruits of meditation. Jason observed:

> Meditation pulls you … Meditation is like a map and the destination is who you really are and it's pointing you in directions … it's pointing you towards … the destination is your inner person and it makes you want to be a better person than what you, like how you act now … It's pulling your towards … it's like it's pulling me towards … to be a better person.

I asked Jason where he had come across the idea of meditation as a map and he said he had never come across it before, it just came to him as we spoke. His concept of meditation as a map captures beautifully the journey from the head to the heart, from an ego-centric way of seeing to a God-centred way, from a focus on the egoic self to seeing the world from the perspective of the true-self.   It captures how meditation nourishes the spirit and inspires one towards contemplative action, towards living life with ever-greater authenticity: impelling the individual to search for truth and to live by what he or she finds. It captures the essence of what very many of the children were pointing to: that meditation gives rise to a deep inner experience, a search for ultimate meaning and value, for an authentic, subjective compass to guide how they engage in all of their relationships - with themselves, one another, all of creation and the Source of all.

5.5   Concluding Remarks

This chapter has presented an analysis of the data from this study and the key insights arising from that analysis.[856] I began with a brief reflection on the method of analysis. I then set out a short phenomenological description of the child's experience of meditation which aimed to describe what is like for a child to meditate. This was followed by an explication of the four key themes of that experience: simplicity, serenity, self-awareness and heart-awareness.

I then explored the child's experience of the benefits and fruits of meditation. I discerned three themes arising as benefits: that meditation calms and restores, generates energy and confidence, and improves decision-making. In the section that

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[856] While van Manen's suggestion to reflect on the emerging themes using the life-world existentials was followed, the insights arising from that reflection were incorporated into the descriptions of the emerging themes rather than using the existentials themselves as headings, as some authors have done.

followed, I outlined four themes arising under the child's experience of the fruits of meditation viz. that meditation deepens self-awareness, awakens the heart to the innate goodness within, helps the children to connect with God and inspires them to be better persons.

Experience	Benefits	Fruits
Simplicity	Calms & Restores	Deepens Self-Awareness
Serenity	Generates Energy & Confidence	Awakens the Heart to the Goodness Within
Self-Awareness		Connects Children with God
Heart-Awareness	Improves Decision-Making	Inspires Children to be Better Persons
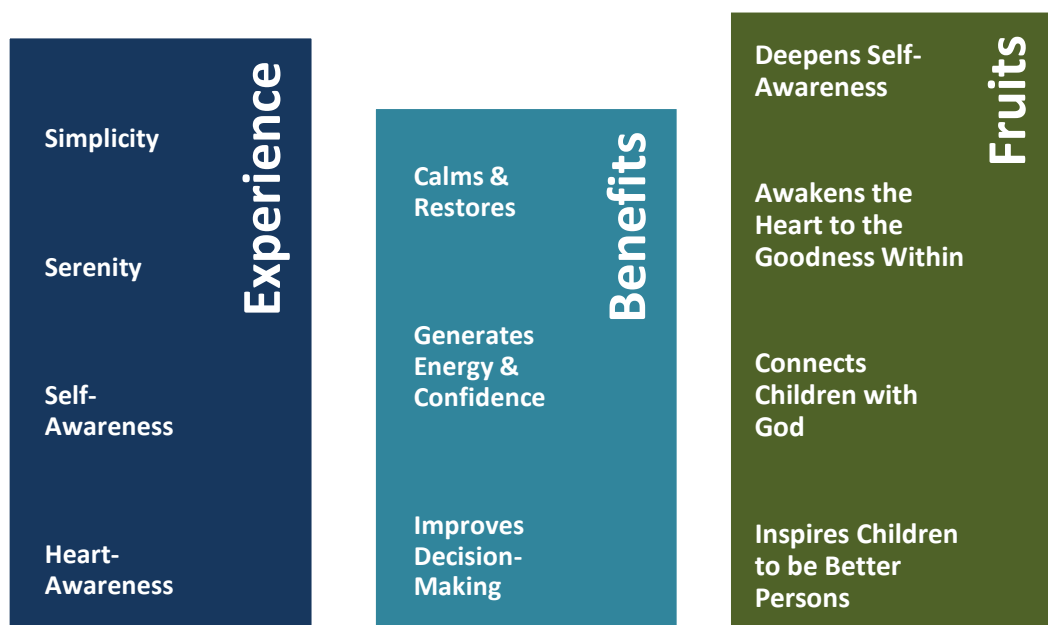
Figure 5.1 (Reproduced here for the reader's convenience)

It is clear that, for the children who participated in the research, the practice of meditation does bear rich spiritual fruit in their lives and they experience those fruits. However, it is not always easy for the children to give voice to them. Their doing so is hindered not just by the challenge of verbalising such primordial experience but also by their stage of cognitive development, as we learned from the Wilber-Combs lattice in chapter three.

It is worth recording that many of the children said they were very pleased to have had the opportunity to participate in the research study. Some, like Tara (11,X), because, as she expressed it "I now understand more about meditation." Many said they were glad because there was no one else to speak to about it. Derek (9,X) said he participated in the study "because I really think that meditation is a good idea. And I wanted to give others knowledge about what it feels like." While Olivia (11,E) wanted to help me write the book I had told them I was writing. And Jason (12,E) said that

> Ever since our teacher started talking to us about meditation and that a
> man would be coming in to learn what we thought of it, I started to feel

happy that I could express my feelings on meditation and that they wouldn't laugh. I was glad I could talk to someone who would take it seriously. I'm glad to know I'm helping; it makes me feel good that I know I'm helping someone.

In naming the four themes of the spiritual fruits of meditation, as experienced by the children, I used the language of the children as shown in **Figure 5.1** above and in the left-hand column in **Figure 5.2**; in the right-hand column I have renamed those themes to capture their essence more broadly and to make connections with concepts from the literature review. For example, 'Meditation Awakens the Heart to the Innate Goodness Within' is re-worded as 'Meditation Awakens the Heart to the True-Self,' 'Meditation connects children with God' becomes 'Meditation Nourishes the Spirit' and 'Meditation inspires children to be better persons' now reads 'Meditation inspires authentic living.'

Figure 5.2: Fruits of Meditation Re-Named

In the next section I reflect more deeply on the spiritual fruits of meditation and I develop a heuristic model which endeavours to describe how meditation leads the children to a more contemplative way of seeing and being in the world.

As this chapter draws to a close, the eleven themes presented in it are represented metaphorically in **Figure 5.3** below. The themes of the experience are depicted as the roots of a tree and the benefits and fruits as bursting forth in its crown, which is deliberately shaped in the form of the two hemispheres of the human brain. The psychological benefits of meditation are shown as leaves on the left-hand side of the crown, corresponding to the pragmatic left-hemisphere of the brain, the centre of conceptual knowledge; and the deeper spiritual fruits are shown as fruit on the right-hand side of the tree corresponding to the more creative right-hemisphere of the brain, the centre of perceptual knowledge. This image picks up on Kate's image of the blossoms budding on a tree as representing the flourishing of the human spirit.
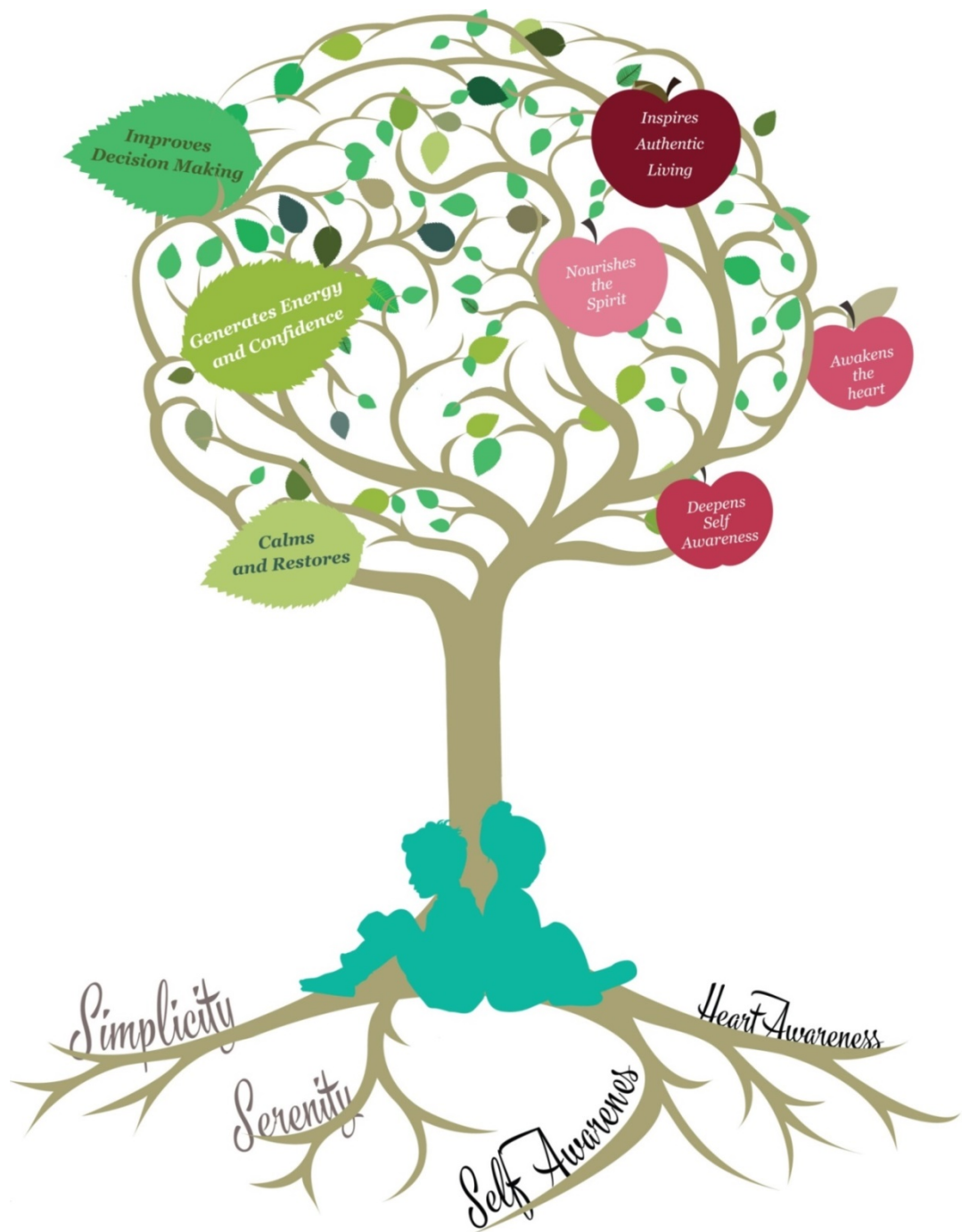
Figure 5.3: Themes of the Experience, Benefits and Spiritual Fruits of Meditation (Tree Diagram)

Chapter 6

Reflection on the Insights Arising from this Study

To have humility is to experience reality, not in relation to ourselves, but in its sacred independence. It is to see, judge and act from the point of rest in ourselves. … The life of simplicity is simple, but it opens to us a book in which we never get beyond the first syllable.[857]

6.1   Introduction

The final task of a researcher is to "return to the literature and the larger world in order to explicitly identify the fruits of the research."[858] The hermeneutic, phenomenological, mystagogical methodology used for this research is especially suited to a study of this kind which seeks to explore the mystical processes of knowing and to understand "what happens with this knowing when it approaches the unsayable truth?"[859]

I outlined in the previous chapter how the data from this study identified four themes associated with the practice of meditation – simplicity, serenity, self-awareness and heart-awareness - and I explicated those themes by developing a rich, deep phenomenological description which was presented in the last chapter. I also set out three practical, pragmatic benefits of meditation, physiological and psychological, for children – meditation calms and restores, generates energy and confidence and leads to improved decision making - which mirror the findings of a broad range of previous research on adults and adolescents. Because these benefits have been so well documented in the past, I simply observe here that this study demonstrates how they are replicated for the children who participated in this research. These practical benefits, which contribute to the well-being of the children, found expression consistently across the participants in the study. The practical benefits of meditation might be said to relate to psychological self-knowledge and the fruits to spiritual knowledge of the true-self.

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[857] Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (New York: Random House, 1982), 152.
[858] Wertz et al., *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research and Intuitive Inquiry*, 94.
[859] Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 400.

The discussion in this section is therefore focused primarily on exploring the fresh, original insights arising from this study in respect of the *spiritual fruits* described by the children, which was a core aim of this research. The data gathered and analysed in this research demonstrate that there is more at work in children who meditate than has been attended to before. The findings of this study mirror Hart's observation that spiritual experiences, such as meditation, "often have the effect … of waking us up and expanding our understanding of who we are and what our place is in this universe."[860] The insights arising regarding the fruits of meditation, which were presented under four essential themes in the previous chapter, are reflected upon here in light of the literature reviewed earlier. These themes are drawn together in a heuristic model which endeavours to describe how meditation seems to impact on the children, leading them to a more contemplative way of seeing and being in the world. The reflection also explores some implications arising from a consideration of this model. It reflects also on the potential value of providing children with opportunities for personal spiritual experience, suggests that meditation provides an opportunity for doing so and considers what additional value is generated when meditation is practised on a whole-school basis.

6.2   A Heuristic Model of the Contemplative Way: A New Way of Seeing & Being

A core question for this study was "Does the practice of meditation impact on the spirituality of children and, if so, what is the nature of its impact on children's spirituality?" I conclude, from the analysis of the data in the previous chapter, that meditation does indeed give rise to spiritual fruits in children. It is clear from the children's descriptions that the practice of meditation deepens their self-awareness, awakens them to the innate goodness within, helps them to connect with God and guides them toward better behaviour, toward being better persons. In **Figure 6.1**, below, I posit a heuristic model which draws these themes together suggesting key elements of the child's spiritual experience on their journey as they practice meditation regularly in a whole-school context. I am not suggesting that the children

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[860] Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, 8.

are necessarily conscious of these as separate elements of their experience;[861] nonetheless, they appear to have appropriated aspects of the wisdom that these elements represent.
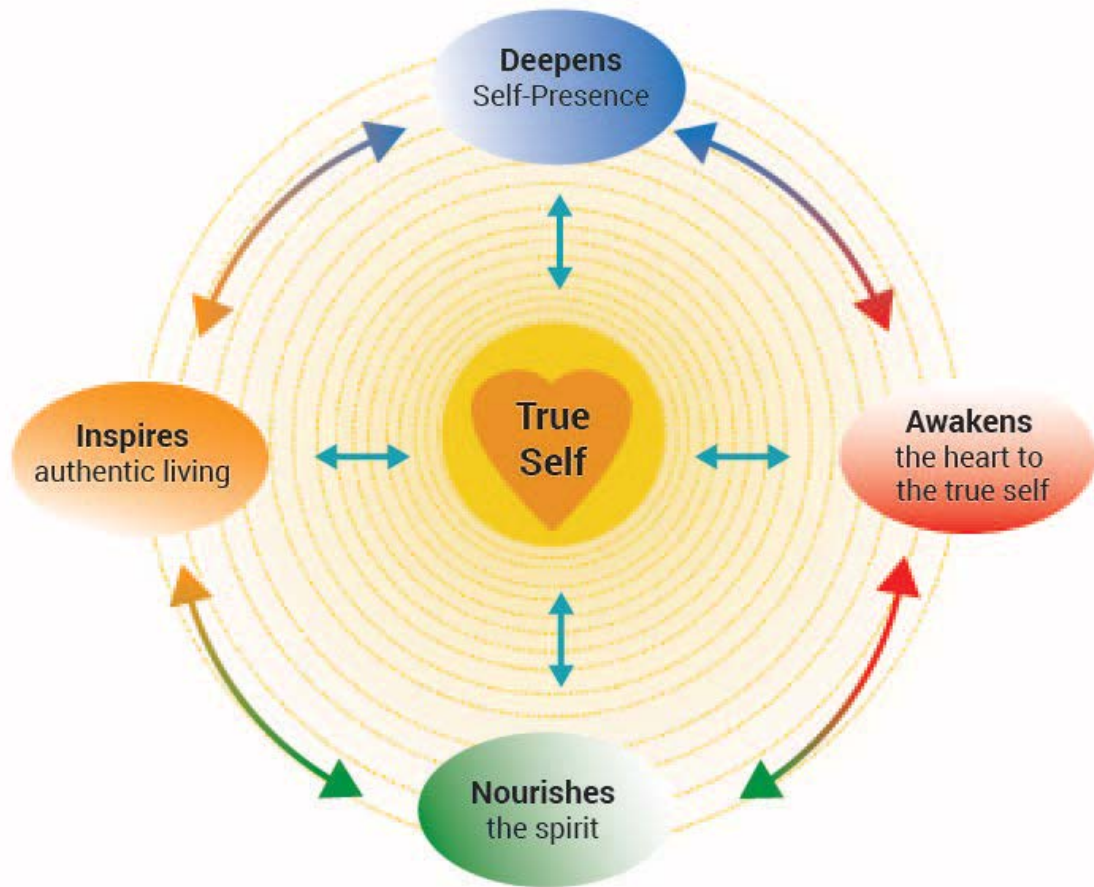
Figure 6.1: Structure Depicting the Themes of the Fruits of Meditation

This model is a helpful way of portraying the children's experience of the fruits of the practice, which seem to be profound. I suggest that the model illuminates the child's "psychological experience in the light of spiritual insight"[862] and provides a framework for understanding the child's experience of meditation and its fruits, for appreciating how they "find [their] way into … deep connection and communion"

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[861] As Martin Buber wrote: "All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveller is unaware." Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, trans. Maurice Friedman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 36.

[862] May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*, Kindle location 60 of 7084.

with all of creation.[863] The model depicts the themes as four key elements of a process or matrix of deepening relational consciousness.

This study suggests that meditation enkindles this matrix of elements, enriching the life of the meditator, enabling him or her to draw from a deep well of inner wisdom. In retrospect, I find this matrix model is compatible with my own experience of meditation practice and I offer it as a heuristic model that may have application for adults and children alike.

These themes would appear to be inter-related and contribute to the growing awareness of the true-self and the consequent impact on authentic living which such awareness brings about. There is insufficient information to be certain how these themes inter-relate, so they are presented diagrammatically in **Figure 6.1** above, in the first instance, as located around the emerging true-self with potential lines of linkage indicated, all reciprocal. Alternatively, these elements might be represented as stages along a continuum of relational consciousness as depicted in **Figure 6.2**, below. This linear configuration suggests itself as a logical sequence, where each element ultimately leads to the next. It is a coherent possibility but it must be stressed that there is insufficient evidence in the data from this study to fully justify the linear model. Nonetheless, it is presented here as a real possibility that may benefit from further research. This linear, sequential model would suggest that the process of 'true-self unfolding' begins with a deepening awareness of attentive self-presence; in time this growing awareness seems to enkindle an awakening of the heart to the nature of the true-self, to intimations of the Divine-Presence within. As this deepens, the practice of meditation nourishes and enriches the spirituality of the children and seems to inspire them to live with greater authenticity, more in tune with their deepening understanding of their true spiritual nature, their true-self.

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[863] Tobin Hart, *The Four Virtues: Presence, Heart, Wisdom, Creation* (New York, NY: Atria Paperback, 2014), Kindle location 135 of 5160.

DEEPENS	→	AWAKENS	→	NOURISHES	→	INSPIRES
awareness of self-presence		the Heart to the True-Self		the Spirit		more authentic living

A New Way of Seeing → → → *A New Way of Being*

self-centred → → *other-centred* → → *God-centred*

Wilfulness → → → *Willingness*

→ → → *Cleansing the lens of perception* → → →

Figure 6.2: **Linear Structure Depicting the Themes of the Fruits of Meditation**

Figure 6.2 incorporates insights from the literature reviewed in chapters two and three. In this linear model the first two themes – that meditation deepens self-awareness and awakens the heart to one's true-self, to one's innate spirituality – constitute the development of a new way of seeing the world while the final two themes – that meditation nourishes the human spirit and inspires children towards more authentic living – constitute a new way of being in the world, which flows from the new way of seeing. Over the coming pages as I link these findings to some of the themes that arose in the literature review in chapters two and three, I may draw on examples from the Christian tradition in particular. I will do so because the practice that prompted this study is being promoted primarily in Christian schools and because that is my own tradition and the one with which I am most familiar.

The models represent the structure of growth in wisdom that meditation inspires.[864] These models depict the key elements, perhaps stages, of a journey from the head to the heart. They clarify how meditation impacts on lived experience and how it transfigures the person. The linear model in particular depicts a movement from egoic self-centredness to other-centredness to God-centredness, a movement from wilfulness to willingness, from longing to belonging, as the lens of perception is cleansed by the regular practice of meditation.

There is a correspondence between the key elements identified in this model and the four virtues of classical antiquity, later the cardinal virtues of Christianity:

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[864] According to Giorgi, "Structures can be understood as essences and their relationships. What is important about structures is not so much the parts, as such, but the interrelationship among the parts." Amedeo Giorgi, "The Theory, Practice, and Evaluation of the Phenomenological Method as a Qualitative Research Procedure " *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 28, no. 2 (1997): 248.

Temperance, Prudence, Fortitude and Justice. Tobin Hart describes these as the key virtues of humanity that characterise wisdom living, and names them as Presence, Heart, Wisdom, and Creation. Hart describes these as essential "inner virtues or capacities that … [when activated] … open consciousness and thus enable us to contact and understand the world. The world opens and is revealed to us to the extent that we can open [ourselves] and receive it."[865] Hart goes on to describe this process as "a kind of physics of the unfolding mind ... which requires both the psychological and [the] spiritual." Furthermore, he too presents the four virtues as "a developmental progression in which each virtue builds on the preceding one."[866] His thinking mirrors that of Gerald May in suggesting that the psychological develops the will and one's sense of self while the spiritual calls, at the same time, for willingness in place of wilfulness. I suggest too that this model may represent a cyclical dynamic in life as one moves upwards through increasing stages of consciousness development, along the vertical axis of structure-stages and the horizontal axis of state-stages described by Ken Wilber, which I discussed in chapter three.

It may be the case that as one's life unfolds through the structural-stages and state-stages, one begins again at each threshold the journey from the head to the heart, each time at a deeper level of human understanding and consciousness, each time from a heightened, broadened perspective; at each new level one's awareness of self-presence is enriched and deepened and the heart re-awakened to a deeper, expanded understanding of the true-self, of the kingdom within. As ever-deepening states of consciousness continue to nourish the Spirit, one finds oneself drawn to live life with ever-greater authenticity in harmony with the deepening understanding of what some call the spirituality of being in communion,[867] the co-inherence of the true-self with the Divine. **Figure 6.3**, below, depicts this model as a recurring spiral dynamic at work in the life of the human person. On each cycle, the subject of the previous stage becomes the object of the next, enabling personal growth as the unbounded self identifies with each new, higher level of consciousness – generating a new sense of self, albeit still bounded.[868] On every cycle, as subject is made into

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[865] Hart, *The Four Virtues: Presence, Heart, Wisdom, Creation*, Kindle location 188 of 5160.
[866] Ibid., Kindle location 245 of 5160.
[867] See, for example, http://www.presentationsistersunion.org/spirituality/default.cfm?loadref=217
[868] Wilber suggests this process continues until the pure Self re-awakens as itself. See Wilber, *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*, Kindle location 4523 of 10114.

object, and as one begins to understand, however vaguely, that what had seemed fixed was in fact a temporary stationing of awareness, one inches closer to realising that ultimately, as Gerald May phrased it, it is not so much that one has consciousness but that consciousness has one.[869] This is, of course, the journey of a lifetime.
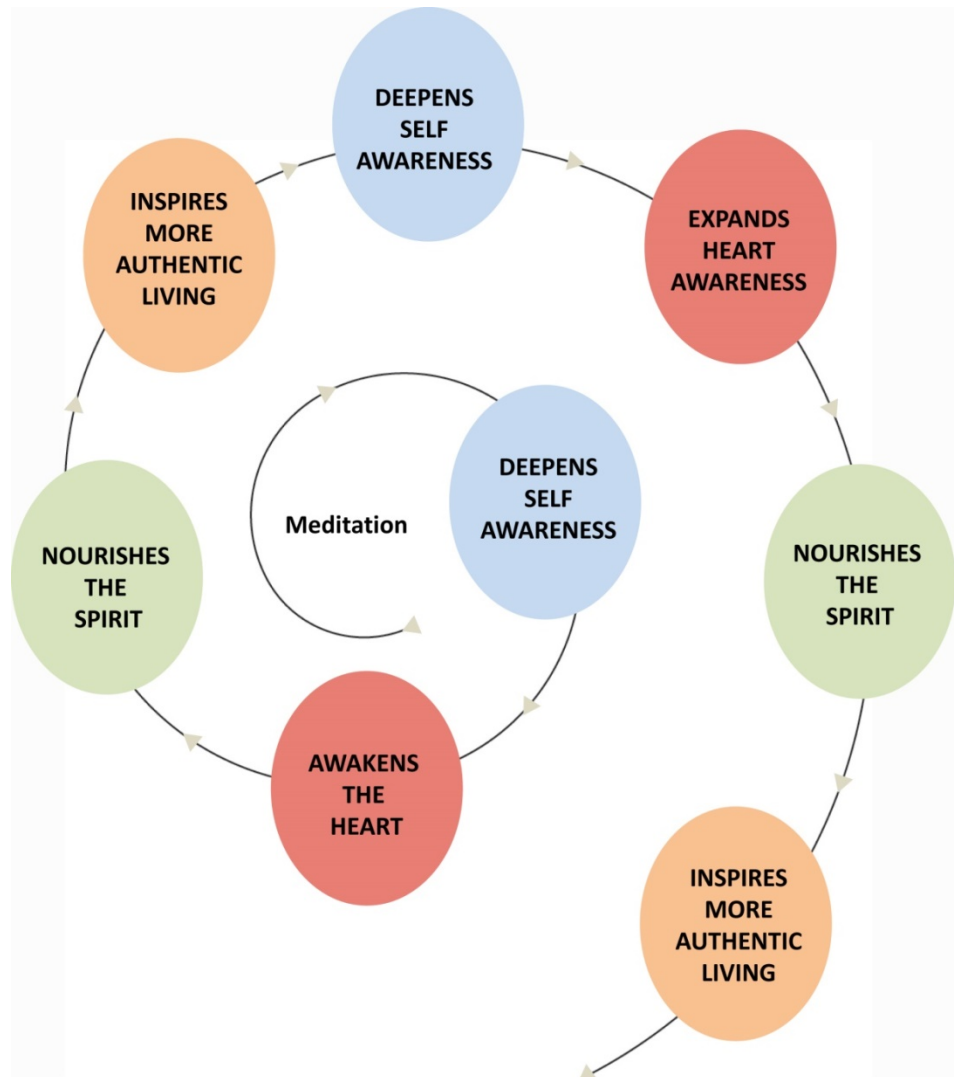
Figure 6.3: Recurring Spiral Dynamic of Deepening Relational Consciousness

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[869] May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*, 45.

The end of every cycle requires a capacity to let go of past certainties and to live on the threshold of change. This is something that comes quite naturally to children as every day brings new discoveries and enormous change.[870]

The regular practice of meditation leads to an integration of conceptual and perceptual knowledge, to understanding that, although they appear to be separate perspectives, they constitute, like the two surfaces of a Mobius band (**Figure 6.4**), a single unity. The transfiguration[871] begins as *a new way of seeing* (as depicted in **Figure 6.2** above) as the practice of meditation cleanses the lens of perception; this leads, in time, to *a new way of being*, as the ever-deepening practice inspires the practitioner to loving, compassionate action.

Figure 6.4: Integration of Conceptual & Perceptual Knowledge

6.2.1   A New Way of Seeing

Meditation ultimately leads to a new way of seeing and being in the world. In children this manifests itself in very simple, practical ways: becoming keenly aware of what they are feeling and how that may cause them to react rather than respond; appreciating the spontaneous sense of gratitude that can arise in meditation and living life with greater generosity as a result; realising that they can overcome the pull to conform to peer-pressure and that they can exercise the freedom to be themselves; having faith in the wisdom that seems to simply arise from meditation and allowing themselves to be guided by such wisdom; and having the courage to be true to their deepest nature, their true-self.   Such deepening awareness leads ultimately to a different way of seeing the world from the perspective of the true-self rather than that of the egoic-self and leads to responsive rather than reactive behaviour. Actions are informed by the heart as well as the head. This new way of seeing affirms the innate, primordial understanding that there is more to the human person than meets the eye; that human beings are truly spiritual beings at heart. In

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[870] Many adults however need to re-learn the capacity to live on the threshold of change; they need to recover the ability to live at the intersections along the way, comfortable with the inevitable ambiguity and lack of certainty that this entails, at home with both conceptual and perceptual ways of knowing. See Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide (Volume 1: Process)*, Kindle location 348 of 5654.

[871] Maggie Ross prefers the word 'transfiguration' to 'transformation' because the person's way of seeing is transfigured. When the lens of perception is cleansed, the practitioner develops a new way of figuring things out. See ibid., Kindle location 648 of 5654.

other words, meditation leads the child to *trust* their own deepest spiritual nature, their true self. This research indicates that although children do not have the language or concepts to describe such deep intuitions, nonetheless through whole-school meditation they can and do develop an awareness of the mysterious communion between the human spirit and the Divine.

The unfolding knowledge of the true-self, this spiritual fruit of meditation, takes time; it does not appear overnight but becomes manifest slowly, just as the petals of a flower slowly but surely open up when the conditions are right. Like the flower, the child doesn't have to *do* anything; the practice of meditation teaches the child that it only has to *be* and its true nature will unfold in the wholeness of time. It cannot be forced. The challenge in the practice is to simply be in the Silence, open and vulnerable to mystery and paradox, without trying to measure progress. Moments of deep consciousness seem to change the nature of time and bring the children into contact with the eternal now.

The language of silence challenges the prevalent discourse of modern society which encourages children to focus on what they *ought to become,* what they should be striving to achieve in terms of power, prestige and possessions, rather than concentrate on simply *being* themselves. Integrating the practice into the daily life of the school reinforces the fact that "the work of silence is not a separate compartment of life called 'spirituality:' it is living the ordinary through transfigured perception."[872] In this new way of seeing, the child looks at the world from the true-centre of reality.

Meditation maintains and develops the child's capacity to live in liminal space, to wait on the threshold of knowing until wisdom makes its presence felt. This liminality is captured beautifully in the Gaelic word for meditation (understood as contemplation), which is "rinn-fheitheamh;" this translates as "on the point (or edge) of waiting." This new way of seeing and being has been described by Cynthia Bourgeault as the 'Third Way,' which generates a synthesis between opposites at a whole new level.[873] Meditation creates the space for such creative possibility.

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[872] Ibid., Kindle location 695 of 5654.

[873] For example, when a seed falls into the ground, its affirming force meets the denying force of the ground. And "nothing will happen until *sunlight,* the third or 'reconciling' force, enters the equation, creating a whole new 'field' of possibility." See Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three: Discovering Radical Truth an the Heart of Christianity* (Boston: Shambala, 2013), 15.

6.2.1.1 Meditation Deepens Self-Awareness

Section 5.4.3.1 demonstrated how the practice of meditation deepens children's self-awareness and their capacity for attentive self-presence. Meditation teaches children about themselves; they often used the phrase 'meditation tells me …' as they described its impact on them. It makes them keenly aware of their preoccupations and the state of their relationship with significant others in their lives. It heightens their awareness of desiring to fit in. The conversations revealed relationship as a key aspect of their lives and uncovered their deep desire to be accepted for who they perceive themselves to be. They disliked their own tendency to want to conform to other people's opinions in order to fit in. The practice seems to build a capacity to stand back from their worries and pre-occupations and observe them more objectively and non-judgementally. In other words, the children found meditation helped them to detach themselves from being imprisoned by their conditioning, emotional states and worries. Leanne (9,N) was one of many children who used the metaphor of chains to describe being held captive by her preoccupations and everyday concerns and her sense of having been freed of them, and of the need for pretence, after meditation. Rather than describe the outcome as '*detachment*' I will use the expression '*non-attachment*' because "detachment," might seem to indicate a cutting off, an absence of awareness; "non-attachment" signifies more clearly that one is aware of one's emotional states, worries and desires but is not chained to them – they become less and less the (unconscious) driving force of one's decision making.[874] One is keenly aware of them but also aware of their passing nature so that one is neither clinging to nor avoiding anything; one is aware of and accepts what is. This non-attachment gives rise to a growing awareness of the tendency of the ego to locate itself at the centre of one's self-identity and leaves the child open to seeing their own imperfections and conditioning without self-judgement, better able to acknowledge their capacity for change and empowering them to move on. Thus the children discover for themselves what the wisdom traditions claim: that meditation helps one to see how one's thinking makes one the author of one's own 'reality' and one's conceptualised experience is instantly seen for what it is and its power to direct

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[874] This clarity of perception, this shift in perspective, is described by Shapiro *et al* as 're-perceiving.' They suggest that this shift occurs naturally in the developmental process but that mindfulness practice accelerates it. See Shauna L. Shapiro et al., "Mechanisms of Mindfulness," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 62, no. 3 (2006): 377-78.

or rule one's life is removed.[875]As this capacity strengthens, the child is enabled to see more clearly – perceptually if not conceptually –that their current way of understanding and being in the world is linked to their temporary stationing of awareness. Although they may not cognitively comprehend the process at work or be able to verbalise it, nonetheless they can perceive more accurately, with greater authenticity, what is really happening in any given situation and their actual and potential contribution to it. Ultimately, meditation gives rise to greater "clarity of perception and accuracy of response."[876]

The growing awareness of this capacity for non-attachment is a very important and deeply spiritual learning, although at first glance it may appear to be merely psychological in its extent.[877] The natural inclination of the egoic-self is to protect itself so as not to be hurt again. Richard Rohr suggests that it is normal for negative and critical thoughts take hold in the brain and attach themselves very strongly to the psyche, while positive and joyful thoughts, by comparison, are less likely to adhere for long.[878] The practice of meditation draws one's attention to this, through the thoughts and emotions that arise spontaneously when one chooses to become still and silent. It seems clear, from what the children say, as they settle into the peace and quiet of meditation, their psyche is able to let go of such negativity so that they develop a new way of seeing and their capacity for joyful acceptance of all that is increases. Meditation enables children to face rather than suppress their preoccupations and attachments and, having faced and acknowledged them, they learn that they dissolve in the silence and clarity arises. Metaphorically, after meditation the itch no longer needs to be scratched.

In meditation children discover an inner space where they feel secure and safe, a space where they can be themselves, without pretence. Such security engenders the courage to step beyond the threshold of their private inner space to encounter the other with eyes wide open. As they do so, their awareness grows that

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[875] de Wit, *Contemplative Psychology*, 98.

[876] de Mello, *Awareness*, 131.

[877] Likewise, John Kabat-Zinn has observed that patients who availed of MBSR had received a universally applicable foundation in moment-to-moment awareness, which he and his colleagues believed "to be at the most fundamental level of learning, growing, and personal/transpersonal transformation." Kabat-Zinn, "Some Reflections on the Origins of Mbsr, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps," 287.

[878] Richard Rohr, Daily Meditations, 18 February 2016. Accessed on 18 February 2016. Accessible at http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=0584fe66-fe68-43f0-8232-e967b6fe1581&c=d0f9f250-eef0-11e3-b5ea-d4ae529a826e&ch=d1cc8490-eef0-11e3-b63b-d4ae529a826e

others have feelings and aspirations just like them and are equally imprisoned by their own conditioning, desires and needs. They cease to see themselves as the reference point for all action.

These findings accord with the assertion of the wisdom traditions that meditation enables one to witness the contents of one's consciousness and to recognise, interrupt and dis-identify from habitual patterns of mind and action. As awareness grows, one's attachment to one's conditioning begins to dissolve. One becomes mindful – one discovers through awareness how to use the mind responsively, rather than being held captive by it.[879] Clearly, children are at an early stage of development along all lines of development; nonetheless, I suggest that their conversations offer clear evidence of their capacity to move from a subjective stance (where they are in thrall to their basic needs and desires) to a more objective stance where they can witness how their needs and desires tend to direct and control their reactions, enabling them to choose to be free from them. Their conversations describe an ability to act out of a discriminating awareness, which they attribute to their meditation practice. In other words, children come to know, perceptually, that their experience is in fact 'conceptualised experience'[880] and they learn not to confound it for reality. This insight, that meditation deepens self-awareness, and the benefits that flow from such awareness, is in harmony with the literature from the field of contemplative psychology which was referenced in chapter 3.

6.2.1.2   Meditation Awakens the Heart to the True-Self

In saying that meditation awakens the heart to their innate goodness, to the true-self, I am not suggesting that children who do not meditate are unaware of their innate spirituality but that the practice of meditation enkindles and fans the flame of that awareness; it draws attention to the spaciousness within the human person where that innate goodness resides and it enables each child to access that resource more readily, simply by dwelling in Silence. They experience this awakening as a form of perceptual knowledge in which they can trust. Children realise very quickly that meditation is neither competitive nor acquisitive. The dynamic of meditation is not

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[879] Hart suggests likewise. See Hart, *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, 200.
[880] I referenced the concept of 'conceptualised experience' in chapter 3 (pages 47-50), quoting de Wit, *Contemplative Psychology*, 111.

trying to gain anything but to simply be. Although children will not be able to articulate it, they discover that it is by letting go that they find their true freedom, their true essence. For an adult, it takes a leap of faith to believe that, as the ego-self is left behind, the true-self will unfold, but children have no such concerns. Over time, they discover that meditation is a pilgrimage to their own centre where they are restored to harmony. Although many of them will not be able to name it, they nonetheless experience Love at the heart of the Silence, at the centre of their being. The children become less and less of a mystery to themselves as they intuit the value of direct, perceptual self-knowledge.

While this is normally a gradual process, it may occasionally arise as a flash of insight. Recall, for example, how Doireann described (page 232) that meditation helped her to discover things she didn't know she knew, using the metaphor of a secret garden deep within herself. It was clear that she had a strong sense that it contained something important, something valuable but she struggled to describe what she had intuited; then suddenly, in a moment of realisation, she blurted out "*Oh, wait! I have it now. It's all the love ... and hope that I have. It fills everything with love and hope.*"[881] Either way, as the heart awakens, the continued practice of meditation enables children to dwell in and ultimately harness their innate spirituality, their ever-present spiritual potential.

Adams observes that what constitutes spiritual experience depends on the personality of the individual.[882] While many of the children in this study may not have named their own experience as spiritual, nonetheless their descriptions, in particular their use of metaphor, made it clear that they bore the hallmarks and characteristics of spiritual experience outlined in chapter two. Meditation seems to help children to explore their relationship with their own deeper self, helping them to discover their true-self deep within and allowing them the freedom to honour their own uniqueness, their own 'shine' as Kate (11,N) observed (page 242). They grow in relational consciousness as they relate to others, to God, to the world and to their

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[881] I was reminded of Waaijman's comment (see page 209) that the most successful research interview is one "in which a respondent puts into words something he or she had not expressed or even known before" and of Nye's comment about the powerful ways in which spiritual insight can come to us non-verbally. Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 725 of 2696.

[882] Kate Adams, "Seeking the Spiritual: The Complexities of Spiritual Development in the Classroom," in *International Handbook of Education for Spirituality, Care and Wellbeing*, ed. Marian de Souza, et al., (New York, NY: Springer, 2009), 812.

own deepest inner-Self in light of this growing understanding of who they really are.[883] Meditation reveals and enkindles the Divine spark inside. It teaches them who they are, from the inside out; it uncovers an inward eye, the 'eye of the soul' that exposes the sense of separateness from other and from all of creation as an illusion.

It is very clear from the conversations with the children in this study that they have an intuitive perceptual knowledge of their capacity for relational consciousness. Their conversations indicate that they experience the transcendent, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously; and they remain comfortable with the fact that their words are often inadequate to describe their intuitive apprehension of it; because they are always learning, they readily accept that the real worth and importance of something is often beyond their comprehension or their ability to put into language.[884] This study suggests that meditation helps children to deepen and trust their sense of relational consciousness; including their sense of being part of the mystery of inter-being with all of humanity, all of creation and its Source. Their conversations embodied the understanding that "mystery can indeed be known without being solved … without being understood."[885] Meditation seems to nourish their intuitive but deep sensitivity to the relationship between all creatures and the Divine. They seem to have deep intimations of that ineffable co-inherence; although they lack the language or concepts to describe it, many of the children were able to give metaphorical expression to it through the process of photo-elicitation.

Typically, children described the dynamic of relational consciousness in terms of a dawning realisation of the innate goodness within themselves and others. Having experienced the goodness deep within themselves they were moved to understand that the same goodness inhabits others too; they discovered intimations of their true-self in the other. This deepening sensitivity points to a growing awareness of the fundamental essential similarity buried deep in the uniqueness of the other. Their growing relational consciousness develops their capacity to see things from the perspective of others and to live life informed by that perspective. This involves a movement from seeing others as objects who help or hinder as they seek to achieve their own satisfactions (*I-It* encounters), to seeing the other in their otherness (*I-Thou* encounters). This deepening relational consciousness also helps children to cope with

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[883] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle Location 290 of 2696.
[884] Ibid., Kindle Locations 339-60.
[885] May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*, 30.

the inevitable ambiguity that arises in all relationships and prepares them for a growing relationship with the ambiguous, sacred Other.[886] It leads to a growing intuitive apprehension of inter-being and divinisation, without needing to make conceptual sense of it. It awakens a desire to experience the Divine presence ever more deeply;[887] and it plants the seeds of understanding for equality and justice.

6.2.1.2.1   Expansion of Being

Meditation enriches their sense of relation to self and gives them a taste of the mystery of their true-self. Many of the children seemed to experience this as an expansion of being.[888] Children discovered that the letting go did not result in a loss but had the potential to take them beyond their normal boundaries; to intuit, that they are, in the words of Heidegger, "already immersed in Being."[889] They come to understand this intuitively, perceptually, although they may not be able to describe that understanding in words or concepts; the true-self is discovered inceptually in the silence - first in oneself and later in others and ultimately in all of creation. Of course, they experience difficulty in giving expression to such perceptual knowledge but, as this study shows, they can do so through metaphor and symbol. Any attempt to describe it in words would be limited, as Wilber and Combs have observed, by their current stage of along key lines of development. But they discern nonetheless

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[886] The Christian tradition holds that the call of the Other is always felt in the human heart. Martin Buber, the twentieth century religious existential philosopher, has written a great deal about interpersonal relations and sacred consciousness. He introduced the relational concepts *I-Thou* and *I-It:* the *I-Thou* encounter represents a sacred form of relationship while the *I-It* represents a more common, secular variety. In later years he introduced the concept of the *interhuman* as a dimension which is generated by the meeting of a conscious self with a conscious other.[886] This involves relating to others as partners in a living intersubjective event, creating the potential for an *I-Thou* relationship to emerge. Inter-subjectivity not only results in the experience of the original 'strangeness' of the other, but also carries within itself the 'we'-experience in which the world is experienced inter-subjectively as a reality for all. See Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor-Smith (London: Routledge, Keegan and Paul, 1965), 202. See also Olen Gunnlaughson, "Establishing Second-Person Forms of Contemplative Education," *Integral Review* 5, no. 1 (2009): 29.

[887] Perhaps this sense of God's presence might be described in a phrase from Bernard McGinn: "there is no loving God [here] as an object of desire, but only as a co-presence of infinite divine love." See Bernard McGinn, "Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 8, no. 1 (2008): 51.

[888] Schneiders notes that "understanding involves not only intellectual deciphering of a phenomenon but appropriation that is transformative of the subject, what Ricoeur calls expansion of being of the subject." Sandra M. Schneiders, "A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality," in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elzabeth A. Dryer and Mark S. Burrows, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Universtiy Press, 2005), 57.

[889] Quoted in Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 1592 & 605 of 2836.

that this expansion of being is the inner space in which their fundamental humanity is grounded and that is it a deep spiritual reality; it is deeply inspiring because it is a space "based not on hope but on experience." [890] This expansion of being is reminiscent of the formless state of consciousness of the wisdom traditions, described by Gerald May as 'consciousness without content.'[891] This is the space referred to in **Section 3.2.2** in which one's fundamental humanity is grounded and which gives access to a rich and deep reality. [892]

Many of the children expressed this expansion of being as a deep sense of connection with the Divine, most often expressed in terms of feeling closer to God or connected to God in meditation. When Alex (13,E) was asked if meditation brought her deeper inside herself, she answered "*It feels like something came into me like … happiness or something like that.*" Derek (9,X) felt that in meditation he is filled with light and "*a certain kind of emotion comes into me*" and elsewhere commented that in meditation "*I feel that there is something like a certain stretching of me.*" Many of the children spoke of a movement of consciousness inside themselves to a place where goodness resides, where it wells up and overflows into ordinary life. As the understanding deepens that their true self is who they are in God and who God is in them, this sense of spaciousness expands, but mysteriously if not paradoxically, inwards. The most common expression to describe its location was the heart. This inner space was felt to be voluminous and was the place where children felt the spirit had room to grow. Although not always named by the children as sacred, it was experienced by them as a place where the Divine is encountered. This connection with God was experienced by some as a sense of being touched by God. Touch is a pre-verbal form of contact; people often say that they were 'very touched' by something another person said or did, even if there is no physical contact involved. In this sense, several of the children experienced a sense of being touched by God in the practice of meditation and many others sensed the presence or touch of a loved one who had passed away. This points to a transcendental relationality which is timeless, as children encountered relatives they had never known but whose presence was keenly sensed in meditation. Although they were long gone, at times children

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[890] de Wit, *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 228-29.
[891] Wilber, *The Integral Vision: A Very Short Introduction to the Revolutionary Integral Approach to Life, God, the Universe, and Everything*. 56. See also May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*, 44.
[892] de Wit, *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*, 228-29.

felt intimately connected to them through what might be described as an experience of the eternal now.

In other words, meditation has the capacity to move an individual from a state of unreflective, unconscious conditioned behaviour to a more thoughtful, considered, responsive, freer way of seeing and being in the world – by awakening their inherent spirituality, bringing to consciousness their inherent primordial knowledge of their relationality to all of creation.

6.2.2 A New Way of Being

While the first two themes of the fruits of meditation comprise *a new way of seeing* the world, the second two themes constitute *a new way of being* in the world, as the ongoing practice leads to ever-deeper spiritual nourishment which in turn inspires the practitioner to loving, compassionate action. In meditation, the meditator remains receptive to the Silence and the regular practice of meditation seems to promote an expansion of such receptivity into one's everyday lived experience. The practitioner becomes a true see-er (in time, perhaps a seer) whose compassionate actions are inspired by his or her clarity of perception, by their growing awareness of the sacramentality of the present moment. Gardner suggests that for Thomas Merton meditation led to a "change of consciousness, or rather a return as an adult to an earlier [child-like] state of consciousness that is actually known to everyone from infancy."[893] The discussion now turns to these two themes, which are represented on the right-hand side of the continuum in **Figure 6.2** above.

6.2.2.1 Meditation Nurtures the Spirituality of the Child

The literature indicates that childhood spiritual experiences have life-long impact.[894] This underlines the importance of finding ways to nourish the innate spirituality of the child. It is clear from the analysis of the data in this study that meditation has considerable potential for nourishing the spirituality of children. It awakens and

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[893] Fiona Gardner, *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), Kindle location 199 of 5784.

[894] See, for example, Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 563 of 2696. See also Michael O'Sullivan, "Spiritual Experience and Religious Socialisation in Childhood as Foundational in a Life," in *unpublished paper delivered to the Spirituality Interest Group, Trinity College, Dublin on 26 November 2015*.

enkindles their sense of connection with that which transcends them. It leads to an integration of mind, body and spirit as the child discerns, perceptually, that their true-self is in intimate yet inexpressible communion with Source of all in a mysterious co-inherence of Being. The children's experience of the inherent goodness deep within themselves and others and their experience of delight and joy in meditation is evidence of this. Many children spoke of the sense of joy they felt after meditation and others described it as a very important part of their day, in at least one case as the highlight of her day, reflecting Cavalletti's observation that deep joy and a sense of pure wonder were core strengths in the spiritual capacities of children. Accessing this wonder and joy creates energy – as the children have attested: Olivia (11,E) commented that "the next day it feels like I still have the meditation inside of me" while Lena (11,E) said "When I meditate, I feel more 'me' than I ever did before.

Hession stresses the importance, in the context of secular Irish society today, of drawing children's attention to the spiritual dimension of their being:

> This involves developing the basic awareness that to be human is to be spiritual and that spiritual experience is ordinary human experience … [through which they may become] attuned to the presence of God in their everyday experiences.[895]

Nye suggests that "children especially need help to value the often quiet, slow, iterative qualities of 'processing' since so much else in their lives does not."[896] She offers six principles (space, process, imagination, relationship, intimacy and trust – under the acronym SPIRIT) for supporting and nourishing children's spirituality.[897] It is clear from the children's accounts above that the practice of meditation embraces these principles. The insights presented in the children's own words in the last chapter, and drawn together in the heuristic model above, demonstrate the importance of personal spiritual experience and of ensuring that children have opportunities to recognise and value it. This study suggests that meditation has very rich potential for enabling such rich and deep experience of the transcendent. In the next sub-section I reflect on the vital need for such opportunities in the lives of children.

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[895] Anne Hession, *Catholic Primary Religious Education in a Pluralist Environment* (Dublin: Veritas, 2015), 176.

[896] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 1154 of 2696.

[897] Ibid., Kindle location 1028 of 2696. See also Adams, "Spiritual Development in Schools with No Faith Affiliation: The Cultural Ambivalence Towards Children's Spirituality in England," 24.

6.2.2.1.1   The Importance of Personal Spiritual Experience

Fowler's model of faith development downplayed the importance of personal spiritual experience as an aspect of children's spirituality; instead, he stressed the need for the development of intellectual and moral reasoning in children and the importance of identifying with a specific belief system. In such a paradigm of spiritual development, beliefs rather than experience take centre stage and spiritual development is understood to be primarily a matter of indoctrination from without. Such an approach is more likely to be responsive to the needs of religious institutions than the needs of children.[898] Erricker raised a series of pertinent questions for religious educators, urging them to explore whether religious education necessarily nurtured spirituality or if it might indeed, stifle a person's spiritual voice.[899] He questioned whether the concepts of spirituality and religious education were truly mutual partners.[900] Cathy Ota explores the tension faced by Catholic schools between nurturing children within a faith tradition while also seeking to enable and facilitate their spiritual development.[901] Hyde notes that

> The danger to which Erricker (2001) rightly alludes is one in which religious education loses sight of the learners – children who, while they may not have a language to express it, come to school with a deep and profound spirituality – and instead becomes concerned only with the transmission of its own sets of belief and values. This is a very real danger.[902]

Indeed, Ota argues that for religious education to contribute in a meaningful way to childrens' spiritual growth may require it to "engage with pupils, allowing them to share their stories and to contribute to the community's story."[903] This research into children's spirituality and the practice of meditation also points to the significance and vital importance of enabling the child to experience their innate spirituality and enabling them to speak about it. Gallagher has written that

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[898] Annemie Dillen, "Foundations of Responsibility for Children," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 13, no. 1 (2008): 59.

[899] Clive Erricker, "Shall We Dance? Authority, Representation, and Voice: The Place of Spirituality in Religious Education," *Religious Education* 96, no. 1 (2001).

[900] Ibid., 20.

[901] Cathy Ota, "The Conflict between Pedagogical Effectiveness and Spiritual Development in Catholic Schools," in *Spiritual Education - Cultural, Religious and Social Differences: New Perspectives for the 21st Century*, ed. Jane Erricker, Cathy Ota, and Clive Erricker, (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press 2001), 260.

[902] Brendan Hyde, "An Obvious Pairing of Dancing Partners or Strange Bed-Fellows? Children's Spirituality and Religious Education," *Journal of Religious Education* 58, no. 3 (2010): 3.

[903] Ota, "The Conflict between Pedagogical Effectiveness and Spiritual Development in Catholic Schools," 271.

"Spirituality comes before theology: If faith is not an experience of encounter, we have little to reflect on except the words of others. And they will ring hollow unless touched by personal fire."[904] While it is undoubtedly true that children may encounter Jesus through bible stories presented in language that is age-appropriate, nonetheless the practice of meditation offers a different form of encounter through the language of silence; as Thomas Keating wrote, "Silence is God's first language; everything else is a poor translation."[905] Bible and Gospel stories and the practice of meditation are complimentary disciplines, each supporting the experience of personal encounter with the Divine in very different ways. I suggest that neither form should be neglected but that there is a need to find space within the curriculum, ideally on a daily basis, for children to experience the deep connection between the true-self and the Divine through the practice of meditation.

Dillen stresses the need to operate from a pedagogy of 'power with' and 'power within' – as distinct from 'power over' - in the process of nurturing children's spirituality.[906] Meditation with children is a very good example of both 'power with' and 'power within.' Berryman describes this same need, stressing the primacy of *showing how* over *talking about*.[907] Such 'showing how' is particularly important in light of Adam's observation that an Ofsted study in 2010, into the strengths and weaknesses of RE in primary and secondary schools in England, concluded that in many cases Religious Education "made little contribution to students' spiritual development."[908] Cavalletti too believed in the primacy of personal spiritual experience; she considered that nurturing the spirituality of children involved looking after *what the child already had* rather than rushing to pour into them what they appear not to have.

Just as Rahner's theological anthropology embodies the concepts of 'power with' and 'power within' rather than one of 'power over,' children and adults alike need opportunities to experience that reality in their relationship with the Divine.

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[904] Michael Paul Gallagher, *Into Extra Time: Living through the Final Dtages of Cancer and Jottings Along the Way.* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2016).

[905] Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 90.

[906] Annemie Dillen, "Empowering Children in Religious Education: Rethinking Power Dynamics," *Journal of Religious Education* 59, no. 3 (2011): 10.

[907] Jerome W. Berryman, *The Spiritual Guidance of Children: Montessori, Godly Play, and the Future* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013), Kindle location 182 of 3498.

[908] Adams, "Spiritual Development in Schools with No Faith Affiliation: The Cultural Ambivalence Towards Children's Spirituality in England," 28.

This study suggests that meditation is one key method of *showing how* by offering the child the opportunity for direct personal experience of the mystery that is the true-self. The introduction of the regular practice of meditation on a whole-school basis offers the possibility of a deeply meaningful way of delivering on that goal on a personal and communal level simultaneously. In a society that has become increasingly secular, such a counter-cultural practice, common to so many wisdom and religious traditions, can enable children to recognise and attend to their innate spirituality and develop their capacity for relational consciousness.

Addressing the need to adapt to the needs of the child in the RE classroom, Gellel recalls that the biblical prophets proclaimed a God based on their personal intimate experience of God, through which they attained a new consciousness of the true Self.[909] This study indicates the potential of meditation to animate and empower the agency of the children, trusting in their capacity to access the wisdom within, the 'power within,' instilling in children trust in the integrity of perceptual knowledge. However, one of the difficulties which teachers face, is that it is not easy to see into children's spiritual lives.[910] This calls for teachers to explore their own understanding and experience of spirituality and to learn about children's spirituality. This study points to the rich possibilities for evoking 'power with' through engagement between children and teacher regarding their experience of meditation. Creating opportunities for discussion could enable teachers to affirm the spiritual nature of the child's experience in meditation and to underscore the importance of the practice as a key means of coming to know who they truly are.

I noted in Chapter two that many studies suggest that in Western culture, as children pass the age of eight or nine years, their innate spiritual potential begins to be repressed by the dominant secular norms of modern society. I suggested that this dis-ease of the modern world might be called '*true-self denial*.' This study indicates the capacity of meditation to counter *true-self denial*, enabling children to discover their true-selves below the surface of their everyday awareness, and to recognise and honour their true nature, the whole of their being. Hay has written that "relational consciousness is so deeply a part of being human that … it merely requires someone

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[909] Adrian Gellel, "Adapting to the Requirments of the Individual in the R.E. Classroom," in *International Handbook of the Religious, Moral and Spiritual Dimensions in Education*, ed. M. de Souza, et al., (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 1096.
[910] Adams, "Seeking the Spiritual: The Complexities of Spiritual Development in the Classroom," 813.

to direct our attention [to it] for it to become obvious."[911] This suggests the importance of creating opportunities not just for meditation but also to engage with children about the experience of meditation, the spiritual nature of the experience and how their spirituality is nurtured through the practice. Such opportunities would enable their spiritual experience to be affirmed so that children can have real confidence in the truth of their own inner wisdom. Children need such opportunities if they are to fully appropriate for themselves that which cannot be expressed in words, to make the connection between conceptual and perceptual knowledge, which complement and support one another, helping the integration of body, mind and spirit. Any such conversations would need to be in language appropriate to their age and understanding and would need to be informed by an understanding of the nature of the spirituality of children, in particular its non-verbal expression.

Kate Adams has written that "given that serious discussion of spiritual experiences is not common in daily discourse, children often feel a fear of ridicule or dismissal, and for that reason retreat into silence."[912] The conversations with the children in this current study accord with this view and show that they were not in the habit of speaking to one another about meditation and were reluctant to do so.[913] Sometimes the reason offered was very straightforward as, for example, when Frances (11,N) commented simply that "*It's not really one of those things that crops up in conversation.*" When asked why children didn't speak to one another about meditation, Frank (9,X) explained that "*We don't want to be thinking about meditation when we are playing outside.*" A number, however, expressed the view that it was a deliberate choice not to talk about it. Pamela (11,X), for example, explained that she was very glad she came to speak with me because "*You are the only one that understands meditation the way I do,*" adding "*I don't say it to anyone, because I'm afraid they might think I'm weird.*" Natalie (11,X) observed that "*I think*

[911] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 1852 of 2836.

[912] The quote was made by Dr. Kate Adams in a paper for the British Educational Research Association in 2009. See Christopher Lamb, "Children's spiritual needs neglected", *The Tablet* (5 September 2009), 36.

[913] Mata, who researched how four kindergarten children experienced and expressed spirituality, challenged Tobin Hart's depiction of children's spiritual lives as 'secret spiritual lives.' The difference may well be a function of age. However, in Mata's case, she was not attending to how children communicated with one another and the significant adults in their lives about their spirituality, rather she focused on how their innate spirituality found expression in their ordinary daily lives, expressions to which adults may have been insensitive.

if I told anyone that I sensed God or that I was closer to God when I do meditation, I think they would laugh. So I just do it by myself."

Gellel *et al.* suggest that one of the aims of Religious Education (RE) is about "equipping the student to live the transcendental dimension in the context of a learning community;"[914] indeed, within a 'community of meaning-making' because, in the words of Lave, "meaning is not created through individual intentions; it is mutually constituted in relations between activity systems and persons acting and has a relational character.[915] Elsewhere he points out that this implies RE "should offer an intellectual approach to the content and the various expressions of the Christian faith, as well as provide students with the language skills necessary to access, comprehend, express and evaluate their religious, moral and spiritual dimensions."[916] He argues that such an approach paves the way for a less doctrinal approach to RE, while acknowledging and valuing spiritual education as an integral part of RE. It is possible that, even if opportunities were created for discussion, children might still find it difficult to contribute because it is a deeply relational and personal matter and it is very difficult to translate what one has come to realise into words. It will be necessary to reflect on an appropriate language and process for such engagement. Adams stresses the importance of creating "an ethos of openness and respect in which children who wish to share their experiences feel safe to do so, and those who choose not to share are given a right to privacy … [and an environment which is] non-judgemental and non-self-conscious … [where children can have access to] an interested and understanding person who is sincere about hearing their experiences and reflections."[917] It is, I believe, important in any case to create opportunities where children can consciously explore the rich potential for personal spiritual experience of the transcendent through the practice.

O'Higgins, Norman and Renehan observe that historically, in Ireland, spiritual development was conflated with religious knowledge and this continued

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[914] Adrian Gellel et al., "Religious Education in Malta: Reflections by the Catholic Community," (Malta: Archdiocese of Malta, Secretariat for Catechesis, 2008), 28.

[915] Gellel, "Adapting to the Requirments of the Individual in the R.E. Classroom," 1104

[916] Gellel, "An Emerging Approcah to Spiritual Development through Religious Education in Maltese Schools," 65.

[917] Adams, "Seeking the Spiritual: The Complexities of Spiritual Development in the Classroom," 816. See also "The Rise of the Child's Voice: The Silencing of the Spiritual Voice," 118-19.

after independence. Indeed, it was not until the Education Act (1998) that spirituality *per se* is mentioned in the context of the purpose of schools.[918] They add that

> this failure of the education system in Ireland until recently to acknowledge that spiritual development and religious education are not synonymous means that we are only now beginning to consider what the implications of this reality are for children, families and wider society."[919]

They go on to suggest that it is "timely for those interested in the spiritual education of the young to revisit the essential dynamic at play between spiritual and religious education and to give equal and specific attention to these essential aspects of human life."[920] Gellel offers a similar reading of the process in Maltese schools where "preference is given to religious knowledge, with affective and spiritual education occurring only sporadically, or by inference, through moral stories, through para-liturgical celebrations and/or religious information."[921] Their comments mirror those of Boyatzis who suggested that the process of being acculturated into a specific religious tradition may "narrow intuitive spiritual dispositions."[922] Schools in Ireland have been encouraged by their patron bodies in recent years to develop a written school policy on Religious Education. I suggest that children and society may benefit if instead such policies addressed the broader question of Spiritual Development and Religious Education and if existing Religious Education policies were reviewed to take account of this distinction.

At the very least children should be made aware of what the different faith traditions say about the practice and, in particular, to have an understanding of what their own faith tradition has to say about it. All of the wisdom traditions express the view that the deeper, long-term fruits of the practice arise from the *discipline of daily meditation* and this too should be explained to children; they should be encouraged to meditate outside of the context of school also so they may come to appreciate meditation as a gift that can be accessed at any time, at any age and at will.

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[918] James O'Higgins Norman and Caroline Renehan, "The Custody of Spiritual Education in Ireland," in *Global Perspectives on Spirituality and Education*, ed. Jacqueline Watson, Marian De Souza, and Ann Trousdale, (New York,NY: Routlledge, 2014), 35.

[919] Ibid., 36.

[920] Ibid., 37.

[921] Adrian-Mario Gellel, "An Emerging Approcah to Spiritual Development through Religious Education in Maltese Schools," ibid., (New York, NY: Routledge), 63. The National Curriculum Framework for RE published by the Ministry of Education and Employment in 2012 s determined that the Catholic Religious Education programme would be developed under four strands, one of which will be 'Spiritual Dimension,' which will include "educating connectedness with oneself, others, all creation and God." Ibid., 66.

[922] Boyatzis, "Examining Religious and Spiritual Development During Childhood and Adolesence," 53.

Resources for children and parents will also be needed to prompt and support discussion between children and their parents about the practice and to encourage them to meditate together.

This study suggests that meditation as a whole-school practice, directs their attention, silently and freely, toward the ineffable truth that is the true-self. It indicates that meditation has the capacity to awaken and enrich the innate spirituality of children enabling them to recognise their original unity and rekindle "the immediacy which was once their permanent possession,"[923] by creating opportunities that can give rise to deeply meaningful personal spiritual experience.

6.2.2.2 Meditation Inspires More Authentic Living

This reflection on the children's conversations has so far explored the first three themes uncovered: that meditation deepens self-awareness, awakens the heart to an experience of the true-self and nourishes the innate spirituality of the child. Together these lead to greater clarity of perception which ultimately leads to responsive, as distinct from reactive, engagement with the world. I have noted that Mary Frohlich, Richard Perrin and others contend that central to the study of spirituality is that it focuses on how the object of the study is linked to the process of deep inner transformation.[924] The analysis of the data in this study suggests that, in the experience of many children, the practice of meditation was deeply transformative. Many children described how meditation made them see things differently, making them more conscious that often they react instinctively and defensively, rather than respond appropriately, to events. The data suggests that meditation helps make children aware of those things in their lives which prevent them from seeing clearly; the practice seems to teach them how they often react out of their blindness without their being aware of it; that their actions can be tainted unknowingly by such blindness and by ego-centric motivations.[925] They seemed to have discovered that "the beauty of an action comes not from its having become a habit but from its

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[923] Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, Kindle location 1870 of 2836.

[924] Frohlich, "Critical Interiority," 79. Richard Perrin considers that "transformation or conversion is the very heart of the enterprise of Christian spirituality. It provides the perspective from which all truth is finally discerned." Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 12.

[925] The trouble is, as Waaijman notes, that "I-centeredness is as invisible as an ant on a black stone in the dead of night." See Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 889.

sensitivity, consciousness, clarity of perception, and accuracy of response."[926] Meditation awakens the heart to this truth, cleaning the lens of perception. In the words of Meister Eckhart, one begins to act, to respond, without any compulsion.[927] When children have faith in the knowledge that their true-self is who they are in God and who God is in them, however ambiguously understood, this knowledge frees them to respond rather than react to circumstances in life.

The conversations with the children revealed a strong sense of being guided by an inner wisdom which they accessed through meditation: they indicated that meditation made them nicer as persons, helping them to be their best selves. Many children used expressions such as 'Meditation tells me …' indicating how it acted as a source of inspiration for them, without being able to say why that was so; they simply became aware of an inner compass indicating the right way to proceed. And they listened to that inner voice so their own experience became for them a mystical text and inspired them to give expression to it in their lives. Janet Ruffing captures the importance of willingness in the process:

> In some sense, the truth disclosed in a mystical text can be appropriated only if the reader is willing to allow the text to evoke a response – a response that entails a changed view of reality, a willingness to try out through participation his or her own understanding of the text as a guide for his or her own living."[928]

The new way of being in the world which meditation inspires prioritises willingness over wilfulness. This study suggests that a child who practices meditation becomes, through the regular practice, rooted more readily in the innate human dynamism for authenticity that has variously been described as critical interiority and authentic subjectivity and which is based on the generalised empirical method of Bernard Lonergan.[929] The practice draws them into an ever-deeper understanding of self-presence, of the true-self, of the Spirit within. This growing realisation manifests itself as a call to action and develops in children a capacity to discern what response is called for in any given situation. They are able to observe and over-ride their own egoic concerns and respond with authentic subjectivity as the circumstances warrant. As de Wit described it, the spiritual fruits of meditation are

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[926] de Mello, *Awareness*, 131.

[927] Quoted in Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide (Volume 1: Process)*, Kindle location 874 of 5654.

[928] Janet K. Ruffing, "Introduction," in *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. Janet K. Ruffing, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

[929] Frohlich, "Critical Interiority," 77. See also O'Sullivan, "Spiritual Capital and the Turn to Spirituality," 44-47. See also Lonergan, *Insight: An Introduction to Human Understanding*.

ultimately made visible in an inner flourishing which manifests itself in one's action and speech. As the person becomes more vulnerable, open, and receptive to this inner guidance, this disposition becomes the ground-note of their way of being in the world.

This transfiguration is not normally a once-off extraordinary event but happens slowly, subtly and over time and one is generally at a loss to explain it. Like the paradox of intention, one 'knows' that something has happened in one's deepest consciousness, without understanding how it has come about.[930] While meditation is a commitment to attentive and responsive receptivity, the focused attention subverts the mind so that self-consciousness is gratuitously elided and experience recedes, leaving only the vaguest traces behind when self-consciousness returns.[931] But the fruit of meditation is made visible in the world because it inspires authentic living and responsive, compassionate action in the world as the egoic self becomes subordinate to the true-self. For these children, personal transformation was not the intended purpose of their meditation, yet that was its ultimate impact.

Jason expressed it in his own unique way: "*Your mind and your heart and … your body are telling you that what you are dreaming is what they want you to be.*" He struggled to capture what he really meant saying "*It's more or less exploring what you really are, trying to find out who you really are.*" Meditation made him feel "*like the spirit of the person you are not yet … but the person who is trying to get released inside you.*" His language suggests that he felt drawn to honour his true-self as distinct from the person he became when he tried to fit in with the expectations of others. It is not so much that the child is transformed, but their way of seeing is transfigured at a very deep level so that they begin to figure things out differently. It also generates and sustains a growing capacity for non-dual consciousness and they begin to see the world through the eyes of the Good Samaritan and to respond appropriately to life's challenges, from that transfigured perspective - rather than react from their conditioning, needs and desires.[932] Victor Frankl developed the

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[930] The paradox of intention states that the only way to recall something that is on the tip of our tongue is to forget about it!

[931] Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide (Volume 1: Process)*, Kindle location 521-67 of 5654.

[932] As Gerald May expresses it: "As attachment ceases to be your motivation, your actions become expressions of divine love." May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*, 238. Or in the words of Thomas Merton: "What is the relation of [contemplation] to action? Simply this. He (*sic*) who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity, and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-

concept of 'spiritual freedom' to describe the freedom to choose how human beings relate to their existence rather than defining what their existence is through their unconscious conditioning.[933]

In other words, meditation and action go hand in hand because meditation awakens and reveals the true self from which all authentic action arises. Ultimately, such authentic action is free of all authority[934] including the authority of past experience and tradition but is instead rooted in the innate human dynamism for authenticity.

6.2.2.3   Not about Achievement, but Being

Spirituality is more about process than product.[935] Perhaps one of the really important aspects of the practice of meditation as it has been exercised in these schools is that there is no expectation of product; the teachers were not looking for specific outcomes nor were they attempting to measure 'progress.' The children understood it was not about achievement but about being. The children discovered many things through the practice; most importantly they began to discern their true nature. They learned perceptually that meditation is a process, not an end; that it is about being fully present in the moment. Although they might not have been able to express it conceptually, they perceived too that the after-traces of meditation helped them to be more fully present in every other moment. I suggest that the quality of their lives may be intimately related to the degree to which they develop the capacity to live in, and out of, the habitual awareness of being fully present in each moment. As a whole-school practice, the children also seemed to discover something important about being-in-community; the whole-school practice of meditation seems to contribute to building or reinforcing a strong sense of community self-presence.

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centered ambitions, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas. There is nothing more tragic in the modern world than the misuse of power and action." See Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master, the Essential Writings* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1992), 375.

[933] Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press Publications, 1984), 67. Frankl also wrote that one's personal identity is "available only through responsibility, through being responsible for the fulfilment of meaning"- in other words, only by relating responsibly to one's purpose for life. See *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Publishing, 2000), 84.

[934] Jiddu Krishnamurti, *The Collected Works of J. Krishnamurti, Vol. Xii, 1961: There Is No Thinker, Only Thought* (Ojai, Ca.: Krishnamurti Foundation America, 2012).

[935] Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Kindle location 1148 of 2696.

6.2.3 Meditation, as a Whole School Practice, Builds Community Self-Presence as a Faith Community

I have noted that one of the themes of the experience of meditation, and also of its fruits, is a deepening awareness of attentive self-presence. But this study suggests that meditation also deepens *community-self-presence* on a number of levels. On a very practical level, Jessica (9, N) observed:

> We are all the same in meditation. It doesn't make me think 'Well, that person is better than me' and it doesn't make me feel like I'm better than anybody else. It makes me feel that I fit in with everybody else. Sometimes at break-time out of the yard it might happen that nobody wants to play with me. If that happens I feel very alone. But then when we go back into class and we do meditation, I just feel like I fit in again with everybody else. I just 'fit in' in meditation because everybody does meditation.

Whole-school silence also gives expression to the mysterious unity of the practice at a deeper level. Freeman suggests that there are many layers of silence in meditation: silence of the tongue, the whole body, the mind and the spirit.[936] The first kind of silence arises as the practitioner chooses not to speak or do anything to disrupt the silence. Such a silence creates a valuable space, especially when one is in danger of becoming caught up in one's emotions.[937] The conversations with the children show that meditation makes them mindful not alone their own hurts and worries, but also their own transgressions, times when they have caused offence or hurt another's feelings. Practicing silence alerts one to the possibility that silence may be the most suitable response in some situations. The second layer of silence is that of the whole body, as the practitioner commits to be still for the length of the meditation. Meditation, often quite quickly, leads to body-consciousness as the mind becomes more still. For example, children experienced a desire to scratch an itch but they also learned that such desire can be resisted and that not every itch needs to be scratched. As Norah (10,X) observed: "I learned that if I don't scratch it, it just goes away." An 'itch' may be metaphorical as well as physical and children realise that most desires are temporary and will disappear if ignored; on the other hand, they come to realise too that desire can be stoked by feeding it with attention. The fact that they practiced meditation in class-groups on a whole-school basis also helped them to resist such 'itching' because they were aware they would be disturbing

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[936] Laurence Freeman, Lenten Reflection, 1st March 2016. http://us4.campaign-archive2.com/?u=c3f683a744ee71a2a6032f4bc&id=27491f01f1&e=b69624270f
[937] Thoughtlessness seems to find particular expression, often hurtful and damaging, in social media today.

others if they gave in and broke the silence. In this way the children come to know, perceptually if not yet conceptually, that the self-restraint involved in physical stillness can be a first step in transcending desire. It also makes a contribution to building a sense of community self-presence.

The wisdom traditions advise that stillness of body promotes stillness of mind, which is the third layer of silence referred to by Freeman. At the same time, feelings find expression through the body, they become embodied. Many children in this study spoke of how in meditation they "feel more" what they are feeling. Physically such knowledge is manifested in terms of the right hemi-sphere of the brain which is associated with abstract thought, non-verbal awareness, visual-spatial perception, and the expression and modulation of emotions.[938] The left hemisphere is associated with analytical, rational and logical processing of thoughts. The two hemispheres offer two different modes of thinking and perceiving and studies have shown that the practice of meditation builds greater connectivity between the two hemispheres.[939] The fact that a whole school community chooses to sit together in silence creates a communal mind-set which promotes a sense of stillness, as it were, in the body of the whole school community. Stillness and silence hold special significance as a group meditates. The more silent each person is, the more everyone is helped to maintain it and the more the silence becomes a communal silence. Communal silence can make a huge contribution to the building of community. As Adrian (11,X) expressed it "*It feels like everyone is one. And God is in the presence.*" So, it is more than merely building a sense of community but it builds an awareness of the school as a *faith-community* which acknowledges Divine-Presence and its relationship as a community to that Presence. The communal silence arises and deepens as the attention of every child is focused on silently repeating and 'listening to' their sacred word.

Communal silence adds an inexpressible depth to the silence of the mind and is conducive to silence of the spirit, which is the fourth level of silence. It arises from "being able to remain still and silent moved only by silence itself, not by any

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[938] Shanida Nataraja, *Revised and Updated: The Blissful Brain: Neuroscience and Proof of the Power of Meditation* Kindle Edition ed. (London (Amazon KIndle Edition): Dr. Shanida Nataraja, 2014), Kindle location 1173 of 3818.
[939] Ibid., Kindle location 1717 of 3818.

thought, even the most subtle thought about silence."[940] Ultimately, this silence of the spirit has a positive agency. Philip Hove describes this agency as follows:

> It transcends the mere absence of speech to achieve a presence of rich inner stillness. Instead of being yet another element of practice to make effort towards, there is now an effortlessness to it. In this case, the silence achieves an agency of its own; that is, rather than something I am doing, it becomes something I am.[941]

In the context of a whole school community, it becomes something the whole community does, giving expression to what the school is as a community at the very deepest level. Meditation is in essence about effortless intention to simply be what one truly is. Until it is experienced, it is difficult to comprehend how effortless intention can have such rich agency; indeed, it is ultimately something that one apprehends rather than comprehends. To an outside observer, meditation may initially present as a very self-centred activity. However, from a spiritual perspective, it is not a retreat *from* the world, but a movement *towards* something, towards Ultimate Reality. Meditation is, in fact, very dynamic, albeit at a level of consciousness beyond that of ordinary human consciousness. When a whole-class or a whole-school engages in silence together, it generates a commitment to a shared value and contributes to a strong sense of belonging to the school as a community rather than an institution and to understanding the inter-being of all of creation. Popular discourse in post-modern secular society tends to favour the rights of the individual over that of the community; it tends to emphasise the importance of fashioning an authentic life for oneself while a faith-based practice like meditation values just as much the common good of all. Meditation promotes the recognition that the true-self in every individual has a common source in God; meditation, as a spiritual practice, acknowledges the equality of all human beings and values service toward the common good over personal gain.

Some of the children also alluded to the importance of their whole class, even the whole-school, being involved in meditation at the same time. For example, Adrian (11,X) liked that the whole school meditated at the same time because: "*It*

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[940] Laurence Freeman, Lenten Reflection, 1st March 2016. http://us4.campaign-archive2.com/?u=c3f683a744ee71a2a6032f4bc&id=27491f01f1&e=b69624270f

[941] Philip Hove, "Learning Retreat Meditation," in *Writing in the Dark: Phenomenological Studies in Interpretive Inquiry*, ed. Max van Manen, (Walnut Creek, Ca.: Left Coast Press, 2015), Kindle location 4008 of 780.

feels like everyone is one. We're all together and still it feels like there is just no one. It feels like no one is around you, as if everyone is where you are now. And God is in the presence." Adrian's words point very simply and very beautifully to the movement of the psyche from the egoic and dualistic 'I am' to the great non-dual 'I AM' which encompasses all. Through the whole-school practice, each child becomes aware – however dimly - of his or her mysterious connection with everyone else and with the Divine. I found again and again throughout the research that it is a remarkable experience to be present in a school that is voluntarily silent. Adrian's comments, that it feels like "*everyone is where you are now,*" and "*It feels like everyone is one ... and God is in the presence*" capture some of the richness, depth and mystery of the group experience.

Because it has been a feature of all the major religions of the world, and is widely accepted in post-modern society as a practice that promotes holistic well-being, meditation can be promoted in secular as well as spiritual contexts and its capacity for building school community can be easily understood. It also provides a welcome opportunity for inter-religious and inter-generational engagement around a common element of practice.

So far this chapter has reflected on the four thematic insights generated by the study in respect of the spiritual fruits of the practice and presented these through a heuristic model of ever-deepening relational consciousness. In the remainder of this chapter I will describe and discuss briefly an unexpected finding.

6.2.4   An Unexpected Finding

A surprising outcome was that the data indicated there was no discernible difference in the insights offered by the children from the two different types of school in which the study was carried out, the denominational Catholic schools and the multi-denominational *Educate Together* school and their different styles of meditation practice. While it was never the intention to do a comparison between the school types, I was interested to see what difference in outcomes, if any, might arise. The analysis makes clear that the outcomes were very similar and in all four schools the practice awakened (or re-awakened) the children to their innate spiritual potential and nourished their spirituality. The denominational schools had practiced silent

meditation in the Christian tradition of John Main while the multi-denominational had practiced a form of guided meditation which included periods of silence. Both approaches gave rise to similar outcomes, including the spiritual fruits outlined in this study. The reasons why this might be so and the context of the practice in each school type are explored below.

In the multi-denominational school the children listened to a CD where the presenter asked them to imagine they were on a journey through a relaxing and peaceful environment, perhaps climbing a rainbow or resting on a beach; the children were invited to keep their attention on the visualisation - if they became aware that their mind had wandered to everyday concerns, they were asked to let go of their wandering thoughts and return to the visualisation. The guided meditation was interspersed with periods of silence. There was no focus on any particular outcomes, spiritual or otherwise. By comparison, in the denominational schools the children sat in silence and, following the Christian tradition, repeated the word *Maranatha* silently in their minds, attempting to listen to it, as it were, as they did so. The multi-denominational school and one of the denominational schools practiced meditation every day and the other schools did so twice each week. Teachers in the denominational schools had been advised, during the staff in-service, to introduce the practice to their classes, in the first instance, as something that would help them to let go of worries and help them to become calm and relaxed. They were asked to return to the question some time later to explain that meditation had its roots in the religions of the world and was regarded by them as a deeply spiritual practice; and to stress that, in the context of their own faith tradition, Christianity, it was understood to be about sitting in silence in God's presence, simply being with God, with Jesus. However, the interviews with the children and their teachers suggest that, having initiated the practice from a secular perspective, some teachers failed to return to give an account of its spiritual potential and its role in the Christian tradition. Accordingly, although the Principals in the denominational schools may have intended for meditation to become embedded in the ethos of their Christian school as a specifically spiritual practice, many of the teachers had taken a more secular approach to the practice, at the level of the individual classroom. They told the children the practice was being introduced to benefit them in practical ways, giving them time to be quiet and calm in a busy day; in other words, for its practical, pragmatic, personal benefits rather than its deeper, spiritual fruits. Nonetheless, many

teachers did mention that it gave the children an opportunity to be with Jesus or to sit in silence with God. On the other hand, in the multi-denominational school, while the meditation was introduced to the children primarily for its practical benefits, they were also aware, through their moral and ethics programme, *Learn Together,* - which is offered in Educate Together schools in place of Religious Education - that meditation was regarded by the world religions as a common spiritual practice also. It was the case then that the children in both school types would have had a shared understanding of the practice which appreciated above all its potential benefits for holistic well-being, even if they were aware it was regarded by many religions as a spiritual practice. It would appear, in other words, that both sets of children would have had similar expectations about the practice and that these were not strongly linked, in terms of their practice, with the potential spiritual fruits of meditation. Yet, despite the lack of emphasis on the practice as a spiritual one, very many of the children experienced it as profoundly meaningful, as I have described.

The editors of the International Journal for Children's Spirituality recently expressed concern that the spiritual dimension of education is in danger of being excised from the curriculum in schools in the Western world and in Australia, despite the fact that its inclusion if often legislated.[942] They reference Adams who observes that although spiritual development is legislated for in England, that alone has not been sufficient to ensure appropriate high-quality teacher training on children's spiritual development.[943] I suggest that the inclusion of the practice of meditation into the curriculum may be part of the solution. While allowing that faith schools may be an exception, they fear that even there the understanding of spirituality may be constricted and tied to religion. They suggest that the challenge of adequately defining what it means, coupled with cultural ambivalence and political/religious polarisation, is forcing spirituality from classrooms across the Western world. This study suggests that practice of meditation can make a significant contribution to addressing the problem.

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[942] Brendan Hyde, Jackie Watson, and Karen-Marie Yust, "'Brexit Spirituality' – the Complex (and Not So Complex) Withdrawal of Spirituality from the Curriculum," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 21, no. 3 (2016): 2.

[943] Adams, "Spiritual Development in Schools with No Faith Affiliation: The Cultural Ambivalence Towards Children's Spirituality in England," 23.

6.2.5 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have reflected upon the insights that arise from this study: that meditation deepens the child's capacity for self-awareness and attentive self-presence, that it awakens and enlivens the innate spirituality of children, that it nurtures the spirituality of children leading them mysteriously, sometimes unconsciously, in the direction of their true-self; and that it inspires them toward more authentic living, leading them to respond rather than react to life's circumstances.

In children such a new way of seeing manifests itself in very simple, very practical ways: becoming keenly aware of what they are feeling and how that may cause them to react rather than respond, and appreciating the spontaneous sense of gratitude that can arise in meditation. Such heart awareness teaches them that they have the freedom to be themselves; it instils a faith in the perceptual knowledge, the wisdom, that seems to arise as a result of meditation. They discern that their desire to conform is not necessarily healthy and they learn to allow themselves to be guided by their inner wisdom and they develop the courage to be true to their deepest nature, their true-self. Such deepening awareness leads ultimately to a different way of being in the world and they begin to live life with greater generosity as a result, from the perspective of the true-self rather than that of the egoic-self. Actions are informed by the heart as well as the head.

This research indicates that although children do not have the language or concepts to describe their deepest intuitions, nonetheless through whole-school meditation they can and do develop an awareness of their primordial spirituality, of the potential for communion between the human spirit and the Divine. It suggests that meditation practice might be introduced as a daily component of religious education. It highlights also a need for teachers to find ways to talk with children about their experience of meditation and its capacity to deepen their experience of the spiritual. It stresses the importance of affirming children in their understanding of the richness of the practice, honouring doctrine, but without placing undue emphasis on it; highlighting instead the joy of personal experience of the true-self in silent imageless, wordless communion with the Source of all life. Meditation is about teaching children the language of silence so they can speak it for the rest of their lives. That language silently challenges the tendency of modern society to urge children to focus on what they can become rather than concentrate on simply being

themselves. This study suggests too that meditation, even if introduced in a purely secular context, into *secular, non-denominational* schools in any setting world-wide that acknowledges its potential to promote human flourishing and spiritual development - as distinct from religious education - can impact on the lives of children and nurture their innate spirituality and counter the modern tendency toward 'true-self denial.'

Chapter 7

Conclusion

External theological learning moves like a moon and fades when the sun of experience rises.[944]

7.1   Introduction

This chapter recalls the aims of this research and summarises the outcomes of the study in light of those aims. It identifies the core insights of the research before reflecting on the significance of the research. It goes on to look at some implications for practice arising from those insights; it also lists the limitations of the study and suggests some areas for future research.

7.2   The Research Question

The overall aim of the research was to explore "what is the child's experience of the practice of meditation in Irish primary schools, on a whole-school basis and, what is the nature of its impact, if any, on children's spirituality?" In particular it was intended to seek to answer the following questions:

1. How do children perceive and describe their experience of the practice of meditation?
2. What practical benefits, if any, do the children consider they gain from the practice?
3. Does the practice impact on the spirituality of children and, if so, what is the nature of its impact on children's spirituality?

In addition the study seeks to give a voice to children, to present an account of their experience of meditation and its benefits and fruits in their lives, by-and-large in their own words, and to reflect on the usefulness of the chosen methodology as a means of doing so.

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[944] Excerpt from "Naked in the Bee-House" by Hakim Sanai, http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/Poets/S/SanaiHakim/NakedinBee/index.html, accessed 26 November 2012

7.3   Research Findings

Regarding the first question, section 5.4.1 identified four themes linked to the experience of the practice for the children: simplicity, serenity, self-awareness and heart-awareness. In addition, section 5.3.1 contained a rich and deep phenomenological description which captures the essence of what it is like for a child to meditate. That description also makes a significant contribution to the additional aim of giving voice to the children's experience of the practice in their own words. The methods developed for this study enabled them to give expression to the richness and profound depth of their experience, and several children expressed their delight at having an opportunity where they could speak with the researcher about a topic that mattered a great deal to them.

Regarding the second question, section 5.4.2 demonstrates how the children found meditation to be a deeply calming and relaxing practice which they very much enjoyed and would wish to see continued in their school, as a whole school practice. In particular, they identified three practical benefits arising from the practice: meditation calms and restores, generates energy and confidence, and improves decision-making. These mirror the findings of many previous studies on adults and adolescents.

Regarding the third question, which lies at the heart of this study, it is clear from the children's accounts in section 5.4.3 that they found meditation to be a deeply meaningful practice for themselves and a worthwhile communal practice for the school as a whole, contributing to a sense of belonging and self-worth, both at a psychological and a spiritual level. That section identified four themes related to how the practice impacted on the children's spirituality. These were presented in terms of a heuristic model in chapter six.

Firstly, section 5.4.3.1 indicates how the regular practice of meditation deepens their sense of self-awareness and self-presence, of attentive awareness to their own lived experience. While this happens each time they meditate, they develop over time a more consistent pattern of being present to themselves and their circumstances; when facing challenges they more readily seek to bring that attentiveness to bear on the challenge at hand. The ongoing practice of meditation seems to generate a growing capacity to see themselves and the circumstances in which they find themselves non-judgementally and non-dualistically; they learn to

trust in their perceptual knowledge of who they truly are and begin to see others as other selves, not merely as objects.

Secondly, section 5.4.3.2 demonstrates that meditation makes children aware of the innate goodness inside themselves and, likewise, the innate goodness in others. This is re-phrased in section 6.2.1.2 to suggest that meditation helps to awaken the heart of the child to their true nature, their true-self; many of the children used the language of the heart to give voice to the discovery that there is an essence deep within them that captures who they truly are and that meditation helps them to discover their own unique character. In other words, the discovery of the true-self is heart-centred. The ordinary childhood tensions that arise from trying to fit-in and deal with the demands of the peer-pressure form the context of that discovery.

Thirdly, section 5.4.3.3 elicits the insight that the ongoing practice of meditation generates in children an ever-deepening sense of connection with the divine; in other words, meditation nourishes the spirituality of children. Their use of metaphor to describe what they had come to know perceptually truths which are beyond conceptual knowledge, is a remarkable feature of this study. There were many rich examples including the child who senses 'God in the flame of a candle' watching over her as she meditates; another who feels 'surrounded by a circle of love' as she meditates; and yet another who regarded every occasion of meditation as 'like a journey down to God,' and several who referred in various ways to their 'inner God.' Photo-elicitation resulted in some remarkable metaphors also: meditation was compared to 'a red rose being watered by the rain,' a 'mother feeding her baby,' and the burgeoning blossom on a tree in Spring. All of these indicate a deepening perceptual knowledge about the truth of who one really is and of an intimate, almost inexpressible, connection with the transcendent. Meditation helps children to begin to trust in that perceptual knowledge, to appropriate its deepest meanings at a non-conceptual level, deepening their own sense of being connected to God.

Finally, in respect of the spiritual fruits of meditation, section 5.4.3.4 concludes that meditation inspires children to be better persons, drawing them toward more authentic living. Not alone did they experience spiritual nourishment as a fruit of meditation but it went on to impact on their daily living. Many children spoke of how they experienced meditation as a form of guidance, leading them to an

ever-deepening sense of what a situation called for, so they learned they could respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively to situations. Meditation somehow guided them from within and impelled them in the direction of acting responsibly, doing the right thing. They had a sense of accessing an inner wisdom, of finding an inner truth and allowing themselves to be guided by it – even when that might not have been in their own personal interest. Meditation stirred a deep desire to live out the values of their true-self.

It might be said that young Jason's concept of meditation as a map sums of the essence of this study. His suggestion that meditation is a map and that one's destination 'is who you really are' captures beautifully the journey from the head to the heart, from an ego-centric way of seeing to a God-centred way, from a focus on the egoic self to seeing the world from the perspective of the true-self. It captures how meditation nourishes the spirit and inspires children towards kind, responsive action, It captures the essence of what very many of the children were pointing to: that meditation gives rise to a deep inner experience, a search for ultimate meaning and value, for an authentic, subjective compass to guide how they engage in all of their relationships - with themselves, one another, all of creation and the Source of all.

It is a core finding of the research that the regular practice of meditation has the capacity to enkindle the innate spirituality of children and to nurture their spirituality. In addition, as outlined in section 6.2.3, whole-school meditation contributes to a stronger sense of belonging within the school community as a whole, builds community self-presence and has the capacity to deepen the sense of the school as a faith-community.

7.4   The Strengths and Significance of this Study

While much has been written about the physical and psychological benefits of meditation in previous research, this study is original in several key respects. The research paradigm is qualitative while most extant research in this field has been quantitative. Coyle has suggested that using quantitative research may limit the

nature of the research questions addressed in this area of human enquiry.[945] The qualitative nature of this study has enabled the researcher to explore *the child's experience of the mysterious transcendent* through the practice of meditation and has enabled children to give voice, especially through metaphor, to their experience of how meditation has impacted on them at a deeply spiritual level. Although they may not have described it in explicitly spiritual or religious terminology, this study makes clear the nature of the impact on their spirituality. It also confirms that meditation practice is within the reach of children from ages 7 to 12, that they enjoy the experience and would wish it to continue as a whole-school practice.

Qualitative research on lived human experience often draws on a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach. Because of the nature of this study, a mystagogical element was added. This research demonstrates the capacity of a qualitative, mystagogic approach to give voice to the children's spiritual experience. Publication of the results of this research in relevant journals and other appropriate fora can contribute to giving further voice to children.[946] It is intended, in due course, to publish books as resources for children, teachers and parents on this topic and this research provides very useful material for that purpose.

Gellel has written about nurturing spirituality through symbol literacy and has engaged innovatively and creatively with children and young people using symbols. He suggests that symbols have the potential to open "the doors of meaning, giving access to the spiritual."[947] While he is referring to the richness of historical religious symbols which carry the memory and meaning of the millennia, the methods employed here indicate how readily children can read ordinary, everyday images and find them imbued with rich, deep meaning and which have the capacity to call attention to the longing for meaning embedded in the human heart. To exploit this potential, methods were devised, including photo-elicitation and the Selection Box, which proved to be very useful in eliciting from the children descriptions of the

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[945] Adrian Coyle, "Qualitative Methods and 'the (Partly) Ineffable' in Psychological Research on Religion and Spirituality.," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 5, no. 1 (2008): 58. In this paper Coyle notes (P. 59) that "The quality of a research study is not the method used but the appropriateness of that method to the research questions, the skill with which the method is applied and the way in which the data are interpreted in light of appropriate theoretical concepts (among other considerations)."

[946] Adams, "Spiritual Development in Schools with No Faith Affiliation: The Cultural Ambivalence Towards Children's Spirituality in England," 30.

[947] Gellel, "Nurturing Spirituality through Symbol Literacy in Religious Education," 48. See also "Engaging Young People with Spiritual and Moral Languages through Art and Narrative."

spiritual fruits of meditation in their lives. In light of the literature review which stressed the importance of the non-verbal nature of spirituality, especially for children, it was decided to include photo-elicitation as part of the methodology. Instead of searching for verbal precision, the images were used to evoke the memory of an experience in the children and they were encouraged to describe the experience, how it felt and what, if anything, it meant to them.

There were many examples in this study where children were drawn to certain images presented to them in the photo-elicitation phase of the interviews and these images helped them to articulate what they had experienced but may otherwise have found difficult to put into words. For example, many were drawn to the images of nature, in particular that of the red rose, or to the colourful image of fish on a coral reef and such images held powerful, distinctive, meaningful and spiritual connotations for them. The method gave rise to responses that manifested a deepening spirituality at work in the children which they attributed to the practice of meditation. Clearly, although the images often evoked a perceptual, heart-felt response from the children, they still had to return to words to give their descriptions. Even though this dependence on language may have been limiting in some ways, the images seemed to have stirred some form of embodied knowledge and they found words, however haltingly, to describe experiences that seemed to have been deeply spiritual for them. While photo-elicitation has often been used in qualitative research, I have not seen it used in the same way as used in this study. Photo-elicitation, as employed in this study, demonstrates how readily children can read ordinary, everyday symbols helping them to give expression to their deepest spiritual intuitions, inspiring them to trust in their own essential nature, their true-self.

The Selection Box, an innovation for this study, also worked very well and enabled the children to relate to what other children had said but in a context that was free of direction. Just as the photo-elicitation elicited responses that had not cropped up in the initial verbal exchange, so too new responses cropped up for individual children as a result of the comment cards and the Selection Box; and in some cases, elements already raised through the other methods were further enriched by the use of the Selection Box. Indeed, during the initial phases of data analysis, the process of extracting brief phenomenological descriptions for the comment cards led to the first intimations of the four elements that later became the heuristic model outlined in

Chapter 6. I suggest that the Selection Box method may have considerable potential for qualitative research across the social sciences.

Both methods had the additional benefit of moving the focus to the agency of the interviewee – they gave control to the child rather than the researcher - helping to mitigate any power imbalance. These methods played a central role in giving a voice to the children, enabling them to give metaphorical expression to their innate spirituality.

7.5   Extension of Existing Knowledge

This study is original in that it demonstrates that whole-school meditation has the potential to

- enkindle the innate spirituality of children
- provide opportunities for their personal spiritual experience and growth
- nurture the spirituality of children, inspiring them to more authentic living

The phenomenological description in chapter five explicates the themes of the study in the words and thoughts of the children and helps others to understand what it may be like for a child to meditate. The study also highlights the central importance of personal spiritual experience in the lives of children. They consciously relate to the transcendent in their lives through the practice and have an awareness of being nourished by it. The heuristic model it proposes makes a contribution to contemplative psychology, providing a structural map of spiritual transfiguration through the practice of meditation; it makes a significant contribution to understanding how the practice awakens children to their innate spirituality and enkindles and nurtures it; it suggests that meditation may help to counter the tendency of modern society to suppress and repress their spiritual potential by such awakening, enkindling and nourishment.

This study also contributes to the debate on defining children's spirituality. In outlining the spiritual foundations underpinning this study, I suggested that a definition of spirituality as "a search for the truth and a willingness to live by

whatever is found" was in harmony with the definitions proposed by academics such as Schneiders, Frohlich and others. Using the language of Thomas Merton, I described that quest for truth as a search for the true-self; an understanding that one is, in reality, a spiritual being on a human journey rather than a human being on a spiritual journey. While spirituality is generally considered to involve a search for connectedness and meaning, this study conceptualises that quest as a search for the true-self. While this was not explained to the children nor discussed with them, it is clear from their conversations that many of the children experienced meditation as a means of finding their true-self. Although they described it in terms of discovering their innate goodness, it was in essence a discovery of the true-self and its connectedness with the source of all creation, a discovery that transfigures how the child sees the world. This transfiguration involves an awakening to mystery, to the numinous, waking up to an ineffable inner truth, and being open to allowing one's lived experience to be guided by it. In essence, for this study, spirituality was understood to be about awakening to the mystery of God within and living life from that evolving perspective. Jason's metaphor, of meditation as a map where the destination is "who you really are," captures that understanding in a remarkably insightful manner for a 12-year old. Many other children echoed this understanding in their simpler descriptions of how meditation freed them and helped them to be themselves. The findings of this research accord with the view that spirituality is an innate capacity for relational consciousness, including one's relationship with the transcendent, and spirituality-in-action involves waking up to this essential truth and living one's life out of a more responsive, profound way of seeing and being. The children in this study found that, through the practice of meditation, an inner wisdom seemed to simply arise from within their being; they experienced and described it as a goodness that simply welled up or flowed in giving rise to a sense of expansion of being. Awareness of truth, realisation of the true-self simply arose in the spaciousness of the inner-self, when they took the time to attend to that inner-spaciousness through the whole-school practice of meditation.

7.6 Limitations of the Research

The study took place in a limited context involving four schools. The views expressed by the children came from those who volunteered to be interviewed which was generally 20% of each class approached. The limited number of respondents resulted in self-selection of participants rather than random selection. While it is never possible to generalise the findings of qualitative research, it is nonetheless an additional limitation in this case; it is possible that those who volunteered were those who most valued the practice. Nonetheless, that does not invalidate the finding that for them meditation awakened their innate spirituality and nourished it. The sample was also limited to children aged between 7 and 12 years old. Because it was convenient to conduct the pilot in a school that was accessible to the researcher, which happened to be an all-girls school, the overall sample was weighted significantly towards girls, of whom there were 54 out of a total of 70 children. In hindsight, the researcher may have learned something further if the pilot had been conducted in a co-educational school; while there was a good male/female balance of participants in two of the schools, in one of the denominational schools just one boy volunteered to be interviewed. It is also a limitation of this study that there remains some ambiguity regarding the extent to which teachers in the faith schools stressed the spiritual nature and roots of the practice when introducing it to the children.

7.7 Implications for Practice

This research has potential implications for practice. A significant area for consideration is that of personal spiritual experience and the potential for meditation to facilitate it. This has implications not just for children and teachers in schools, but for the whole of society. There is potential for reconsidering the place of personal spiritual experience within the Religious Education curriculum in primary schools, perhaps introducing silent meditation as a daily practice. Indeed, there is a strong case for incorporating meditation into the daily life of all schools as a means of promoting the spiritual development of all children. It has implications for teacher training, in terms of the distinction between spiritual unfolding and religious education, how religious education contributes to spiritual development, the spiritual life of the teacher, their understanding of children's spirituality and how it manifests itself and the capacity of teachers to engage with children about their personal spiritual experience, helping them to apprehend more

deeply the spiritual fruits of the practice. A case can be made for a compulsory module on children's spirituality as part of primary teacher training and for an elective module on contemplative practice, including meditation.[948]

The study also has potential implications for the development of adult *spiritual* formation, building on Rahner's theological anthropology; in modern secular society there is a need for forms of pre-evangelisation that can ultimately lead to more profound and meaningful adult *faith* formation and it seems clear from this research that the practice of meditation may have a great deal to offer in that context also.

The findings also have implications for the meditation with children project which inspired the study: for the redesign of the in-service training programme offered to schools – including an element exploring the spirituality of children - and the need for teachers to engage openly with children about the capacity of the practice to deepen their spiritual lives. The findings of this study can assist in the development of holistic didactic strategies to promote children's spiritual development through the practice of meditation. There are lessons to be learned too about the sustainability of the practice in the longer term and the resources required within schools and the project to enable the practice to take root in the culture of the school and the role of school principals in nurturing that process. The study also points to the need for the development of resources for teachers and parents to help the children fully realise the spiritual fruits that flow from the practice. The absence of a suitable text suitable for children hinders the development of the practice and it is recommended that a simple, creative text, accessible to children should be produced. Likewise, a text for teachers outlining the value of the practice for mental health and spiritual wellbeing would be very helpful. A text for parents would be an additional welcome resource, especially one that encouraged parents to remain fully open to the potential for childhood spiritual experience and which gave them resources to engage with their children about their spirituality. This study has highlighted the importance of talking about the practice as well as engaging in it. There is a need to develop practical, creative resources that might be used to aid such conversations, based, inter alia, on photo-elicitation and the concept of the Selection Box.

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[948] Such a module would need to distinguish between spiritual and religious development. Adams, "Seeking the Spiritual: The Complexities of Spiritual Development in the Classroom," 815.

7.8   Areas for Further Research

Jennifer Mata has called for further research "in order to truly grasp and be able to further along our understanding of what experiencing and expressing spirituality really looks like for our young children … and thus … be better prepared to recognise, nurture and promote children's spirituality for future generations of children."[949] This research makes an important contribution to that goal. It also suggests the potential for further research in a number of areas, not least on the practice of meditation and its potential impact on the spirituality of children. The current study involved an external agency, Christian Meditation Ireland, promoting the practice of meditation in primary schools and this researcher engaging with schools from that project to explore the children's experience and it benefits and fruits. It might be valuable to explore if the impact on children might be greater if more was done to engage with the children about the spiritual nature of the practice and its hidden depths and riches. Linked to this, there is a need for research regarding the teacher's role as a facilitator of children's spiritual unfolding (as distinct from and/or as part of religious education.

The current study engaged with children aged 7 to 11 years. It would be really interesting if similar research was carried out with younger children; with primary school children in participating schools and perhaps with pre-school children as part of a targeted intervention. Similarly with children who are differently abled e.g. with children in special schools or children with autism spectrum disorders.

It would be interesting to undertake a case study approach on a greenfield site, introducing the practice of whole-school meditation within that context in a planned way with a view to carrying out a longitudinal study over time mapping the experience of the children over a number of years and its impact on their spiritual lives. Such a study might enable the school community as a unit to evaluate its impact and to suggest modifications that might improve outcomes.

It would be interesting also to work with a group of schools within a shared context e.g. schools under common patronage sharing a common ethos, perhaps within a diocese which was willing to put in place resources to sustain the practice over time and to seek to assess how such an integrated approach informed the implementation of the practice and impacted on the experience of the children and

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[949] Mata-McMahon, "Reviewing the Research in Children's Spirituality (2005-2015): Proposing a Pluricultural Approach," 10.

teachers. Research within a set of schools in a given parish is another possibility; such an approach might involve not just the school community but the whole parish community (or diocese) in the study. It would be interesting also to assess the impact on the teachers and other participating adults in such settings. It is likely that parents may have valuable insights regarding their perception of the benefits and fruits of the practice on their children and that might be a very useful further line of inquiry.

This study offers a heuristic model which sets out the key elements that children encounter along the contemplative journey as they practice meditation regularly in a whole-school context. The model may suggest additional areas for further research including quantitative and mixed-method approaches.

7.9   Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have recalled the aims of the study and summarised the outcomes of the study in light of those aims. The study identified four themes linked to the experience of the practice for the children: simplicity, serenity, self-awareness and heart-awareness and included a phenomenological description which captures the essence of what it is like for a child to meditate. The children identified three practical benefits arising from the practice: meditation calms and restores, generates energy and confidence, and improves decision-making – and these correspond well with the findings of other research studies on adolescents and adults.

Regarding the spiritual fruits of the practice the study found that meditation deepens the child's capacity for self-awareness and attentive self-presence as an ongoing fruit of the practice, awakens and enlivens the innate spirituality of children, nurturing their spirituality and leading them mysteriously, sometimes unconsciously, in the direction of their true-self; it helps children to accept themselves for who they really are and to accept others likewise.

The spiritual fruits disclosed by this study may be summarised by saying that meditation leads ultimately to a new way of seeing and being in the world. I suggest that it cultivates the perceptual understanding in children that their relationship with the transcendent is not a separate relationship but is, as Freeman expresses it from the Christian perspective, the ground of their daily lived experience.[950] This study

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[950] Laurence Freeman, *The Ego on Our Spiritual Journey 2* (London: World Community for Christian Meditation, 2007), 6.

suggests that meditation and action go hand in hand because meditation awakens and reveals the true self from which, the Christian tradition suggests, all authentic action arises. In addition, as a whole-school practice, meditation generates and builds a stronger sense of community self-presence and, within the context of faith-schools, contributes to a stronger sense of that community as a faith-community. It should be emphasised that these fruits arise from disciplined, regular practice on a whole school basis. Both silent meditation and guided meditation seem to be effective in achieving these outcomes.

One of the fruits of this research is to point to meditation as an important means of nurturing the spirituality of children in a holistic manner, a means of enabling children to have personal experience of the transcendent. It also creates fertile ground for the possibility of engaging with children about how they experience its fruits in their lives, including how it helps them to find and be themselves. Such explorations should be designed not for the adult to give answers or impose dogma or doctrine, but to allow children to imaginatively and creatively explore their own meanings and connections with them and to come to understand that such an exploration will be a life-long journey which will be filled with surprises, adventures and challenges along the way.

Who Said This?[951]

Something whispered something
that was not even a word.
It was more like a silence
that was understandable.
I was standing
at the edge of the pond.
Nothing living, what we call living, was in sight.
And yet, the voice entered me,
my body-life, with so much happiness.
And there was nothing there
but the water, the sky, the grass.

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[951] Mary Oliver, "Who Said This?," in *Red Bird*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).

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Appendix A   Ethical Approval

Institiúid Teicneolaíochta Phort Láirge   Waterford Institute *of* Technology

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Ref: 13/AA/05

14th November, 2013.

Mr. Noel Keating,
4, The Glade,
Oak Park Road,
Carlow.

Dear Noel,

Thank you for submitting your amended documentation in relation to your project *'Exploring the Practice of a Christian Meditation with Children in Irish Primary Schools on a Whole-School Basis'* to the WIT Research Ethics Committee.

I am pleased to inform you that we now fully approve WIT's participation in this project and we will convey this to Academic Council.

We wish you well in the work ahead.

Yours sincerely,

Professor John Wells,
Chairperson,
Research Ethics Committee
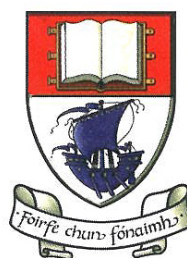
c: Dr. Michael Howlett

Appendix B   Recruitment and Consent Process

Material for Boards, Principals, Teachers, Parents and Children

B1.   Letter to Board of Management Seeking Approval

To:

[*Enter Name Here*],
Secretary,
Board of Management,
Name of School,
Address Line 1,
Address Line 2,
Address Line 3

From:
Mr Noel Keating,
4 The Glade,
Oak Park Road,
Carlow,
Republic of Ireland

Insert Date Here

Waterford Institute *of* Technology

REQUEST TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH PROJECT

On the Practice of Christian Meditation in Primary Schools

Dear [*Enter Name Here*],

My name is Noel Keating and I write to seek the permission of the Board of Management to conduct a research project on Christian meditation with children in your school.

I work in a voluntary capacity for Christian Meditation Ireland and I am Coordinator of the project introducing the practice of meditation with children to schools in Ireland and Northern Ireland. I regularly visit schools to conduct in-service for staff on the practice of Christian meditation with children. A retired former Principal of Presentation College, Carlow, I was awarded an M.Litt. by NUI, Maynooth in 2005 and a Masters in Applied Christian Spirituality, through All Hallows and DCU, in 2013. I am currently a mature student at Waterford Institute of Technology undertaking doctoral research on the child's experience of Christian meditation; this builds on a smaller dissertation on the topic which I conducted last year and which demonstrated clear benefits for the children interviewed, from the practice of Christian meditation.

The project will involve my interviewing a small number of children from 1st Class and 5th Class. If approval is granted, I will work with the Principal and class teachers to invite children to volunteer to be interviewed. I would like to conduct interviews with about eight children to elicit from them their experience of Christian meditation

in the school. I hope to interview each child on two occasions, set approximately 10 days apart and lasting between 20 and 30 minutes in each case. The interviews will be conducted so that the child and I will be within sight of school staff at all times; however, they will be confidential and will not be overheard by others. I have sought and received Garda Vetting clearance through a school in the midlands and will make a copy available to the Principal.

I enclose an Information Leaflet which explains what the study hopes to achieve and what will be involved. This study has the ethical approval of Waterford Institute of Technology. The school and the children will **not** be identified in any published material. I will be happy to make a summary of the findings available to the Board of Management, upon request.

Thanking you in anticipation,

_____

Noel Keating

B2:   Letter from Principal to Parents

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

Insert
School
Logo
Here

[Enter Principal's Name],
Name of School,
Address Line 1,
Address Line 2,
Address Line 3.
Insert Date Here

On the Practice of Meditation

in Primary Schools

Dear Parent,

You will be aware that at the school we have been practicing Christian meditation with the children each week for some time now.

Mr. Noel Keating is Coordinator, for Christian Meditation Ireland, of the project introducing the voluntary practice of meditation to schools in Ireland and Northern Ireland. He is currently a mature doctoral student at the Department of Applied Arts at Waterford Institute of Technology. He wishes to investigate the child's experience of meditation. Mr Keating has been given permission by our Board of Management to invite pupils from your child's class to participate in the study.

I have agreed to act as a contact person for him. I enclose information from him inviting your child to take part in this significant study. While it is important that each child chooses for himself or herself if they wish to participate, children must have the permission of a parent or guardian to do so. In other words, children will be interviewed only where both the child *and* the parent agree. If your child wishes to participate and you agree to your child's participation, please complete and sign the Parental Consent Form (enclosed) and help your child to complete their Consent Form also. To make things easy the two Consent Forms have been printed back to back.

Time constraints mean it may not be possible to include all who which to participate. From those children who return the completed Consent Forms, a small number will be chosen at random from the class list and those children will meet with Mr. Keating for a short conversation about their experience of meditation.

I enclose an Information Leaflet prepared by Mr. Keating. It explains what the study hopes to achieve and what will be involved – in essence, two short conversations, about three weeks apart, with each participating child. This study, which is independent of this school, has the ethical approval of Waterford Institute of Technology.

Please ask your child to return the form within the next few days but before _____.
Thanking you in anticipation,

_____

[Enter Principal's Name]
(Principal)

B3: INFORMATION LEAFLET FOR CHILDREN
Research on Meditation in Primary Schools

Waterford Institute *of* Technology

Some time ago your school began meditating once or twice each week. Many schools in Ireland are starting to do the same now.

The person who told your teachers about meditation is Mr. Noel Keating. He would really like to hear what you have to say about meditation.

Mr Keating may be 60 years old but he is still a student! He used to be a teacher but he is now retired and went back to College last year. One of the things he wants to learn more about is how children feel about meditation.

He would like to come and talk with you about it and to ask you some questions about it.

How did you feel about it when it started?
How do you feel about it now?
Do you look forward to it each week?
Do you think it makes any difference to you?

Would you like to be one of the children he speaks with? If so, please bring home this note and the information leaflet from your teacher and ask your parents if it is OK for you to do so. Then, if they agree, bring the signed forms back to your teacher.

When Mr. Keating visits the school for these conversations, you and your teacher will choose who will talk to Mr Keating.

Will anyone else know what I say?

Anything you say will be strictly between you and Mr Keating. No one else will know what you have said, unless it is necessary to protect you or another child from harm. In that case Mr Keating will discuss the matter with you first.

Your parents can ask for a copy of the conversation afterwards, if they wish, and they can have it if you agree. Mr Keating will destroy the recording and all his notes of your interview when he no longer needs them for his studies. When the study is published your name will not be mentioned – so nobody will know what *you* said.

Thank you for reading this.

Will you talk with me?

What happens if I agree?

If you are picked, you will meet with Mr Keating here at the school for an easy, friendly conversation.

Mr Keating will record the interview so he won't forget anything you have said. It is not a test and there are no right or wrong answers. He just wants to hear what you really think of meditation. Each conversation will take about 25 minutes.

The conversation will take place in a quiet, safe place here in your school. There will be a second short conversation about three weeks later.

B4:   Information Leaflet for Parents

Further Information

If you require further information about this research project, you may contact the researcher whose contact details are:

The Researcher

Name: Noel Keating
Tel. No.: 087 2251183
Email: meditationwithchildren@eircom.net

If your child would like the opportunity to participate in this study,

and if you give your consent,

please sign the

Parental Consent Form

and witness your child's signature on the

Child Consent Form

(which are printed back to back)

and have your child return the forms to the school as soon as possible.

Are the conversations confidential?

Any information your child gives will be held securely in strictest confidence.[1]

The information collected will be stored under an imaginary name and the real names of the children to whom they refer will be known only to Mr Keating. You may have a copy of the transcript of the interview, if so desired – with your child's agreement. The information will be stored securely for the duration of the study and for a period of nine months beyond and all of the original data will be destroyed at the end of the study, by June 2018 at the latest.

The findings of the study will be presented to Waterford Institute of Technology as a dissertation and may be published in relevant reports, books or articles and other media.

Names and participants will not be identifiable at any stage in the study.

[1] Anything said during the interview will remain confidential unless it is necessary to protect your child or another child from harm. Under Child Protection Guidelines, any such matter must be reported to the child's teacher or the Designated Liaison Person at the school. This will be done after discussion with the child, ensuring that they are aware that the disclosure must be made to comply with Child Protection Guidelines.

Meditation with Children

Doctoral Research Project

Waterford Institute *of* Technology

Exploring the Practice
of Christian Meditation
with Children
in Irish Primary Schools

INFORMATION
LEAFLET
FOR PARENTS

What is the aim of the study?

The aim of this study is investigate the child's experience of Christian Meditation –
to discover what the practice means to the child and to explore how it may best be supported to enable children to gain the maximum benefit from the practice.

Children Can Meditate

Who is the researcher?

Noel Keating is a retired former Principal of a large co-educational secondary school in the midlands. In a voluntary capacity he coordinates the introduction of Christian Meditation to primary schools across Ireland.

Noel holds an MA in Applied Christian Spirituality from All Hallows College in Dublin and is now undertaking doctoral research at Waterford Institute of Technology. In the interests of child protection, Mr. Keating has sought and received Garda Vetting clearance through a school in the midlands and your child's school has a copy on file.

Waterford Institute *of* Technology

If you have any questions about the conduct of the research, you may contact the research supervisor. His contact details are:

Research Supervisor at WIT:
Name: Dr. Michael Howlett
Tel. No.: 051 302479
Email: mhowlett@wit.ie

Random Sampling

On Mr Keating's behalf, the school is making contact with the parents of pupils from a number of classes which were chosen at random. Children from these classes are invited to speak with Mr. Keating about their experience of meditation – if they like it, what it means to them, if and how it helps them and so on.

From those children who return completed Consent Forms, a small number will be chosen at random for the study. The school will not supply any data to Mr Keating about the pupils or their families.

What is involved for pupils who agree to participate in the study?

Each child will meet individually with Mr. Keating at the school for a friendly, easy-going conversation, which will be recorded by the researcher so that he won't forget anything important that is said. While no one will overhear the conversation, the child and the researcher will be within sight of school staff at all times.

Pupils will be invited to talk about their experience of Christian meditation in their own words. It is expected that each conversation will last between 20 and 30 minutes. In many cases there will be a second short conversation about three weeks after the first one.

Each child who agrees to participate, and their parent(s) who give permission, will retain the option to withdraw from the research at any time up to 1st June 2016 and any data collected will be destroyed upon their withdrawal from the study.

Thank you for your help and for taking time to consider giving your child consent to participate in this valuable study.

B5: CHILDREN'S CONSENT FORM (Senior) for Research Study

Exploring the Practice of Christian Meditation with Children

School: _____

Child's Name: _____   Class: _____

Class Teacher: _____

Parent/Guardian: _____

This research study has been explained to me. The researcher has answered all of my questions and I understand what will happen during the study. All of my questions have been answered and I do want to take part in the study. I have read the information sheet that the researcher has given to me, which explained what the study was about.

If I agree to take part in the research study, I know that anything I tell the researcher will not be linked with my name so that nobody will be able to know what I tell the researcher unless it is necessary to protect me or another person from harm. In that case the researcher will discuss the matter with me before telling the school about the risk of harm.

If I decide to stop participating in the study, that is okay and nobody will be annoyed with me. I can ask the researcher to stop recording at any time. Even after the interview, at any time up to 1st June 2016, I can ask my parents or teacher to contact the researcher to say I wish to withdraw from the study. By signing my name below I agree to take part in this study.

Child's Signature: _____

Witnessed: _____
(by parent/guardian)

Date: _____

B6:   CHILDREN'S CONSENT FORM (Junior) **for Research Study**

Exploring the Practice of Christian Meditation with Children

School: _____

Child's Name: _____   Class:
_____

Class Teacher: _____

Parent/Guardian: _____

My name is Noel and I need your help!

I am doing a project for my school on how children feel about meditation.

If you have time, I would like to talk to you about how you like to meditate:

- What it is like to meditate in school?
- What do you like about meditation?
- Do you ever meditate at other times, on your own or with other people?
- And anything else you might like to tell me about meditation.

If you would like to help in my project, all you have to do is write your name below and that is the same as saying Yes!

If your answer is Yes, then I will come to talk with you during school one day.

Yes, I would like to help.

To Say, Yes, Write Your Name Here: _____

B7: CONSENT FORM for Research Study

Exploring the Practice of Meditation with Children

Waterford Institute *of* Technology

School: **Name of *Multi-denominational National School***

Child's Name: _____   Class:
_____

Class Teacher: _____

NOTE FOR THE YOUNG PERSON

My name is Noel and I need your help!

I am doing a project for my college on how children feel about meditation.

If you have time, I would like to talk to you about how you like to meditate:

- What is it like to meditate in school? What do you like about doing it?
- Do you ever meditate at home? And anything else you might like to tell me about meditation.

If you would like to help in my project, all you have to do is write your name below. If your answer is Yes, then I will come to talk with you during school one day. Soon and again about three weeks later.

Yes, I would like to help.

To Say, Yes, Write Your Name Here: _____

NOTE FOR THE ADULT PARENT OR GUARDIAN

My name is Noel Keating and I am doing research about children and meditation – what they think about it and how they feel it helps them in school and in life. I need your permission before I can talk with your child. From those who agree, the school will pick children at random to speak with me about meditation: once next week and again about three weeks later.

If your child would like to speak with me and if you are happy for me to speak with your child please sign your name below. Your child can changes his or her mind at any stage. Your child's name will not be mentioned in anything that I write in my finished study. Everything said will be confidential.*
Further information in English is available from the school.

To give permission, please write Your Name Here: _____

---

* Unless it is necessary to protect your child or another child from harm. If that happens, Mr Keating will speak with the Principal about it.

All About Me

My Name is _____

My favourite food is _____

My teacher is _____

My teacher last year was _____

My birthday is _____ and I am ____ years old.

I live with my _____
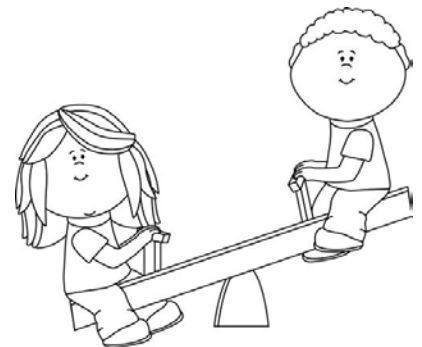
We are from _____

I have _____ sisters and _____ brothers.

_____

_____

_____

My friends are ...

What I love to do most

_____

R: _____   ChAtt: _____   M@H: ___

B9: Meditation Journal

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

If you think of anything you would like to say to Noel about your meditation or a question you would like to ask Noel, write it down here when you think of it. That way you will remember to ask him later. Of course, you may not have anything in particular you wish to say or to ask about and that is perfectly OK!

_____
_____
_____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

My Meditation Journal   ID:___

My Name: _____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

Day: _____ Date: _____

I meditated outside of school–time today at _____ in _____.

I meditated on my own ❑ OR _____ meditated with me ❑

_____
_____
_____

Appendix C The Interview Protocol & Photo-Elicitation Images

Interview Guideline: This outlines the general format for the interviews with the children. It is intended as a guideline, not as a rigid format. The first question under each heading is the main prompt to initiate a discussion; the words used will vary depending on the child, his or her age and level of understanding etc. The indented prompts are additional and may be used as required to generate additional conversation on a particular area of interest. (The comments in grey will only be used where a child's answers are exceptionally brief.)

Interview 1

<u>**Introduction**</u>:

Ask the child to press the record button on the iPad.

Check that the Consent Form is signed by both the child and parent/guardian.

Ask child to complete the All About Me Sheet

> Ask about Religion, Church Attendance and if ever meditate at home … note responses on the sheet.
>
> Remember there are no wrong answers, it's a bit like asking what's your favourite food. Whatever they have experienced themselves is always right.
>
> Sometimes, there is no easy way to answer a question. Sometimes it's hard to find the right words … especially when talking about meditation.
>
> The interview won't take long- about 25 or 30 minutes at the very most
>
> You can ask me to stop the conversation at any stage or to ask any questions you like at any stage. Is there anything you would like to ask before we start?

<u>**Beginning the conversation**</u>:

I meditate as an adult but I never had the chance when I was your age and I wonder what is it like to meditate at your age? (*Pause… allow for a response*)

> How often do you meditate in school? When was the last time you meditated?
>
> Take a moment to bring yourself back to then … and describe to me what you did?
>
> Describe how you feel *when you meditate*? What does it feel like in your body?
>
> What goes on in your mind? How do you feel about all the thoughts that arise?

How do you keep your thoughts at bay?   …   How do you feel *after* meditation?

When you meditate, **does time go quickly or slowly**? In a good way or a bad way?

Laminated Cards:

Ask the child to pick a laminated card from the top of the pile of upturned laminated cards and to read the card out loud and then respond to the question.

Card 1: What I like about meditation … What do your friends say about meditation? Do children *talk to one another* about meditation? (Why not, do you think?)

Card 2: What I don't like about meditation … What's the hardest thing about meditation?

Card 3: People meditate because … Is that why you meditate?

> What good is meditation? Can you think of a few ways it you feel it has actually helped you? (*For each one, ask*) Can you tell me more about that?
>
> Have you ever discovered something about yourself or life because of meditation?
>
> Have you ever deliberately taken time to meditate for a specific reason?
>
> Was there ever a time when it really clicked for you – when you just knew that meditation was something you wanted to keep doing? Will you tell me about that?
>
> Does meditation bring a person deeper inside themselves? Have you felt that? Tell me more about that …
>
> What does your school tell you about meditation? (Who tells you? How often?)

Card 4: If meditation was a colour, what colour would it be?

> If meditation is a journey, where does it go? Where does it bring you?
>
> Describe to me what it's like there? What does it feel like to be there?

How would you feel if the school stopped doing meditation?

Do you ever meditate outside of school? Where? What's your favourite place? What difference does it make to meditate there? When is the best time to meditate, do you think? What difference does it make to meditate at that time?

What helps you to meditate? What makes it harder to meditate? What helped you to do it at home? (prevented you from doing it at home?) Was there a time when you liked meditation more (or less) than you do now? What changed?

How would you explain to someone else *how to meditate*?

Does meditation make a difference to a person? How would you explain *that to another person?* Is your class any different after meditation? *Tell me more?*

What is the nicest thing about meditation? Is it *only about that*? What do you think is most important about meditation? Why?

About God

Can we leave meditation for a minute and talk about God for a little while? Do you ever wonder about God? *What do you wonder about?* What comes into your head *when people talk about God?*

> What kind of personality does God have? What do you think God is like?
>
> What is your favourite thing about God?
>
> [Do you have a favourite story about religion? about Jesus?
>
> *What makes it your favourite?* What is Jesus like?
>
> Do you think is God close to us or far away? Do you ever feel God is close to you? When do you feel <u>closest</u> to God? *Where* does that happen? *When?*
>
> Do you like to talk to God sometimes? *Where do you do that? When?*
>
> Would you like to tell me about the sorts of things you talk to God about?
>
> Have you ever felt God was <u>really, really close</u> to you? *Will you tell me about that?* (*How did that make you feel?)*
>
> Have you ever felt close to God when you meditate? Tell me about that?
>
> Can you describe what happens inside you when you meditate?
>
> Does meditation ever make you feel better or worse about yourself? *Tell me about that?* Have you ever meditated when you felt angry or cross or sad?

Photo-Elicitation

Will you look through these photos and pick out three that remind you about meditation, what it is like to meditate? And put the others over here? Now for the first photo, will you read the number from the back and describe the picture for me. Will you *describe what it is about the photograph that makes you think about meditation* or reminds you of what it is like to meditate?

Next Time

Will you talk with me again in a few week's time?

   Will you meditate at home, in the meantime, in silence?

       Will you write in this booklet every time you meditate and write a sentence about what it was like to meditate at home?

Thank You. It means a lot to me that you were willing to speak with me so openly about meditation.

Note: Thumbnails of the photographs used are reproduced below. They were each 8 inches by 6 inches in size and were laminated. The cards were reshuffled after each interview and presented to the next candidate in the random order that resulted.
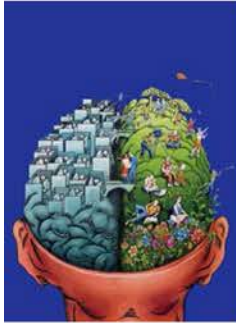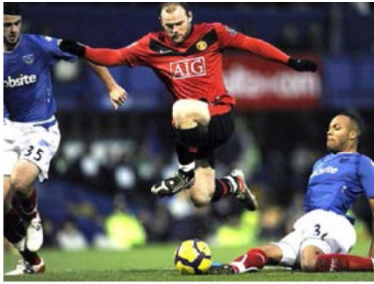
Interview 2

Reflecting on this child's conversation from the first interview

1. Thank you _____ (*say child's name for the audio recording*) for meeting me again today.
2. Some of the children have said that just talking about meditation has helped them to understand it better and why it is good for them. Have you learned anything from our last chat? Since we met the last day, has anything struck you about meditation that you wanted to say to me?
3. Did you practice meditating at home? Was there anything you learned from it? Did you bring back the little journal? Will you talk me through it?
4. Did you do any artwork for me for the book cover or the CD? Will you talk me through your ideas?
5. The last day we spoke you mentioned that …. (read comment from the transcription of this child's round 1 interview). Can you say a little more about that? Repeat for each marked comment from this child.
6. I wonder can meditation make you a better person? What do you think?
7. Think of some ways in which meditation has helped *you* or changed *you*.

Reflecting on comments made by other children about meditation (Selection Box)

1. As part of my research I have spoken with other children from many schools about meditation. I learned that different children get different things from meditation. In this pile are some things other children said about meditation e.g. lots of children, but not everybody, said '*Meditation helps me to be calm and relaxed.*' Did you ever notice if meditation helped you that way? If that card comes up and it is true for you, you can put it on the YES side. If it is not true for you, if it doesn't apply to you, put it on the No side. In other words, if meditation does not make **you** feel calm and relaxed, put it on the No side. And if you are not sure, or you don't really understand what the other child meant, leave it to one side, in a separate pile, over here.
2. Will you take your time and go through these cards, one by one, and put them in the Yes box, the No box or on top if you are not sure. When you have done that we'll talk about them more. Take your time. Don't worry if you're not sure what a card means – we'll talk about those too.
3. If any cards are left on top of the selection box, ask 'Do you have a question about any of the cards you left on top of the box?'
4. Ask the child's help in sorting the cards into four groups using the coloured border around the cards to distinguish them. Then ask the child 'Where would you like to start?' Which card stands out for you?' When the child has chosen a card say 'So meditation has helped you to …. … …. ….? Can you tell me

339

more about that?' Can you give me an example of when you noticed that? Tell me about a specific time when you remember that happened to you.

5. As each card is finished, ask the child to turn it upside down in its group so we will know we have already commented on it. Ask the child to choose another card that really means something for them.
6. Next encourage the child to pick a card from a group not already touched upon and go from group to group until the time is up or all the cards have been exhausted.
7. What is missing from all those benefits**?** What else has meditation done for you that none of the other children mentioned?
8. Every year I get older I see the world differently. Does meditation mean more to you as you grow older?

For the next few questions, I don't want you to answer straight away. Just close your eyes and be silent for a minute before you answer; then say whatever comes to mind, even if it doesn't make immediate sense to you!

Final Question: Are you glad you volunteered to speak with me? Why? What have you enjoyed about it?

Thank You. It means a lot to me that you were willing to speak with me so openly about meditation.