

Through the dark night¹

Imagine if we had evolved without language, but only communicated with our feelings, and closely watching one another and responding accordingly. Or, perhaps, for some very good reason, we decided to live together without speech, only communicating peacefully with simple sign language. Indeed, such a remarkable way of life is described in a sutta where three monks, who are close friends, live together in silent meditation retreat, yet harmoniously working together and responding to one another whenever necessary.² Here, we will reflect on how such silence can impact religion in general, even chart its future course.

It would be easier to follow this reflection if we understood two key terms: spirituality and religion. **Religion**, on the other hand, is basically a belief system at best, or at worst, an exploitation of goodness and fear for worldly, even selfish, ends. **Spirituality** is a powerful experience of the spirit that invariably makes us good, or at least, inspires us to ask ourselves some deep questions about life. Religion divides, spirituality unites.

Those of us who diligently follow a religion tend to have spiritual experiences. As a rule, such an experience is one of joy and peace, but it can also move us to have profound doubts, even in our religion itself. Somehow we continue to plod on the spiritual path. One reason we tend to doubt our religion or, more often, our religious experiences, is simply because we do not really understand what they are, and they seem to contradict what we have known from holy scripture, preachers or religious authority.

St John of the Cross,³ a Catholic saint, for example, is said to have had such a powerful religious experience which he could only express in a way he was most familiar: erotic language. This was in the form of a short but famous religious poem called “The Dark Night” (La noche oscura). Two of the verses go thus:⁴

O guiding night!
O night more kind than the dawn!
O night that joined
love with beloved,
love transformed in her lover.

On my flowery breast,
all kept for him alone –
there I stayed sleeping –
and I caressed him,
breathing the fragrance of sweet cedars.

St John was a European Christian with mystical inclination. Understandably, St John could best express his spiritual experiences in ways with which he was conditioned and familiar. Hence, there is nothing miraculous here, but nonetheless ecstatic and ground-shaking, at least for St John.

Mystical experience is very similar to dhyana experience, sometimes overlapping it. Simply put, a “mystical” experience is, according to Buddhism, a direct experience of true reality.

¹ This reflection is inspired by L S Cousins, “[The stages of Christian mysticism and Buddhist purification](#),” London, 1989:101-117. This is to help those who are God-inclined or conditioned by the God-idea to connect more spiritually with early Buddhist teachings that inspire them.

² See **(Anuruddha) Upakkilesa Sutta** (M 128), which is about how three monks live together, each doing his own solitary meditation (M 128), [SD 5.18](#). See also **Silence and the Buddha**, [SD 44.1 \(1.2.2.2\)](#).

³ In Spanish, San Juan de la Cruz (1542-1591), a major figure in the Counter-Reformation.

⁴ See also Reflection, “[When God walks away](#),” R332, 2014.

Such an experience simply baffles us because scriptural teaching or religious language cannot make much sense of it, or might even forbid it.

Early Buddhism, however, often describes deep states of meditation, known as dhyana, with all its peace and ecstasy. In other words, Buddhist meditators who are familiar with the suttas would easily understand a mystical experience, and may even have interesting dialogues with those who have such experiences no matter what religion they belong to. Conversely, a person with mystical experience would also easily understand the Buddha's teachings on deep meditation, that is, if they are not caught up with religious dogmas and views. Inner joy, peace and insight transcend all religious beliefs and views.

In early Buddhism, we have a set of 4 texts with the name of **Bhaddekaratta Sutta** (M 131-134). The enigmatic word *bhadd'eka,ratta* can be translated as the "one auspicious night" or "one night of blessedness." This describes a meditator's present-moment awareness to let go of the past and the future, and living in the present moment. This is the kind of teaching that even contemplation-inclined God-believers would at once connect with.⁵

Let one not pursue the past,
nor hold fond hope for the future.
for, the past is gone,
and the future has not yet come.

The present state, as it arises,
one sees each of them with insight;
immovable, unshakable
having known that, let one be sure of it. (M 131), SD 8.9

Someone with the insight or inclination of St John would at once relate to these precious words, whose meaning can, at least in part, be rather mystical. We are drawn to its truth and beauty. It is the Buddha's teaching of the "living presence."

St John of the Cross and a fellow contemporary, St Teresa of Ávila,⁶ are regarded as the founders of the Discalced [Barefoot] Carmelites, a contemplative mendicant order. Teresa was even more mystical. While both John and Teresa wrote about their spiritual experiences, those of St Teresa were more detailed and interesting.

Teresa's interesting observations, especially those recorded in the *Interior Castle* (1577),⁷ reveals her mature introspection and careful recollection. She wrote how she saw the "soul" (which, in meditation language, is really the mind) as a castle with many dwelling-places or mansions. In the suttas, to "dwell" often means to "diligently practise" moral virtue and meditation.⁸ The sense-world heavens of Buddhist mythology, too, are said to be populated by gods or angels who dwell in their own "mansions" (*vimāna*).

Teresa speaks of 7 stages of her experiences. Early Buddhism speaks of the 7 stages of purification (*satta visuddhi*). Both share some remarkable similarities, at least by way of practical description and spiritual direction.⁹ According to Teresa, the 1st Mansions (note the plural) stress the need for self-knowledge, humility, courage and not having doubt. The 2nd Mansions are to let go of worldliness and concerns. The 3rd Mansions are where we strive to

⁵ See **Bhaddekaratta Sutta** (M 131), [SD 8.9](#).

⁶ Baptized as Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada (1515-1582).

⁷ In Spanish, *El Castillo Interior* or *Las Moradas*.

⁸ See eg **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10,3), [SD 13.3](#): The verb "to dwell" is *viharati*. The abstract noun, *vihāra*, "dwelling," is famously found in *brahma, vihāra*, "divine abodes," or for God-believers, "God's dwellings" or Godly qualities, which are lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity, qualities which we can and need to cultivate to live in joy and peace in this very body in this life itself.

⁹ For details, see Cousins' article mentioned above.

harmonize our will to a divine level, one of “an upright and well-ordered way, both body and mind.”¹⁰

The idea of simply surrendering our will – even letting “God’s will” guide us¹¹ – is clearly taught in **the (Ekādasaka) Cetan’ākaraṇīya Sutta** (A 11.2) – on the “will-free” effort – where the Buddha declares that the morally virtuous would naturally be free of remorse and guilt (common in God-based religions), so that we are joyful, and turn away from what is bad, even giving up all notions of “sin.” We are then easily liberated.¹²

Teresa describes the 4th Mansions as the Prayer of Quiet (like samatha) and the Prayer of Recollection (like vipassana). Here, we see the natural (the peace that the mind feels) and the supernatural (the true vision of reality) mingle subtly and beautifully. According to Teresa, here, “the senses and all external things seem gradually to lose their hold while the soul is regaining its lost control” (T 59). Remember where we see “soul” (a theistic notion), we understand it as “the mind,” which is here more focused.

Then, continues Teresa, we “become markedly conscious of a gentle interior shrinking” (T 60) like a hedgehog or a tortoise retiring into itself, “but this is not a question of our own will.” **The Kummōpama Sutta** (S 35.240) – the parable of the tortoise – tells us how a tortoise, on seeing a jackal approaching would withdraw its head and limbs into its safe shell. So, too, when we are undistracted by the 5 senses, our mind is safe and ready for mental stillness.¹³

The 5th Mansions are the Prayer of Union. Here, we are neither asleep nor awake, meaning that our mind is thought-free – a common description of the dhyanas.¹⁴ This is like “a death full of delight,” when hands and feet cannot move, and breathing either stops or occurs without us knowing it. “The soul (the mind) can neither see nor hear nor understand.” (T 73). All this sounds very familiar to the dhyana meditator. This is the kind of experience that transcends all religious dogma and chatter, and which truly touches our hearts.

The 6th Mansions are where Teresa explains in some detail how to distinguish between true and false experiences, like distinguishing between what is the path and what is not the path. This, too, is a state where, according to Teresa, we are rapturously one with God, like a Spouse (note the erotic language). This refers to a profound aloneness of the spirit, the mind focused on itself.

In the 7th Mansions, the Trinity is revealed, but we understand that all three Persons are one in essence. The mind is profoundly at one (*eka*) with itself. In the divine abodes (*brahma-vihāra*) practice – beginning with the cultivation of lovingkindness – this is where we, as it were, become one with Brahma. Since we *are* lovingkindness itself, we are no different from Brahma or God. The Spiritual Marriage, according to Teresa, is now complete and consummated.

Here, says Teresa, “it is like rain falling from the heavens into a river or spring; there is nothing but water there and it is impossible to divide or separate the water belonging to the

¹⁰ P Silverio de Santa Teresa, *Obras de Sta Teresa de Jesus*, Burgos, 1917 4:37. (Henceforth “T.”)

¹¹ This is the language of those familiar with God-based teachings, but Buddhists would not use such a language.

¹² In important ways, while the Buddhists have mostly lost their experience of the mystical (such as the dhyanas), the Catholics do not have the right language to understand any mystical experience. See A 11.2 ([SD 33.3b](#)).

¹³ S 35.240 ([SD 19.17](#)).

¹⁴ See Reflection, “[Is dhyana possible?](#)” R413, 2015; see also Reflection, “[Feeling meditation](#),” R418, 2015.

river from that which fell from the heavens.” This remarkable imagery echoes the teachings of the **(Sotāpatti-y-aṅga) Vassa Sutta** (S 55.38), which says that just as the rains from the heavens fall in the mountains, down into the plains, and into the sea, so, too, our faith in the 3 jewels and moral virtue will fruit in streamwinning.¹⁵

Both John and Teresa used erotic (that is, sexual) language to describe their mystical experiences. This is understandable because they are unawakened people with powerful human feelings, and the Church of their days was a most worldly body, very power-centred. In psychological terms, the religious language suggests the unconscious defence mechanism of sublimation,¹⁶ that is, an acceptable way of channeling one’s unacceptable impulses.¹⁷

The comparison continues. Teresa tells us that “there is a forgetfulness of the self which really seems no longer to exist” (T 193). For a practising Buddhist, it does not merely “seem” so; it actually *is* so. The self-view or self-identify view, along with attachment to rituals and vows, and doubt, are all abandoned, and so we become saints as streamwinners.¹⁸

To be truly spiritual, then, is to rise above even religion itself. We must rise above the limitations of words and views, and live life in all its truth and beauty. **A mystical experience** is an immediate and pervasive insight into worldliness and words, seeing the goodness hidden behind them in our lives and in others. We may be powerfully uplifted by them or profoundly troubled by them, but we simply feel its beauty and truth: it’s like falling in love: we lose our self and feel one with everything.

Such saintly people probably best understand and express their mystical experiences by way of their social and religious conditionings. But mystical experiences are universal, and can happen to any of us who is willing and able to free oneself of worldliness and look deep within oneself. Early Buddhism clearly provides the best understanding and perspectives to understand such profoundly beautiful visions beyond religion, as spiritual liberation – if we truly see and know them for what they really are.

We now understand how religion is man-made, and how spirituality is as natural and alive as our breath itself. Spirituality is the windows and doors that free religion from its own chains and walls. Spirituality will wed us to the best of religion to beget universal spirituality that we can and must naturally relate to and live with. This is the spirituality that will coexist with a human-centred science that loves and respects a wholesome world. This may not yet be, but it must and will surely be.

R422 Simple Joys 283
Piya Tan ©2015

¹⁵ S 55.38 ([SD 45.10](#)).

¹⁶ See **Khaluṅka Sutta** (A 8.14/4:190-195), [SD 7.9](#); also [SD 24.10b \(2\)](#).

¹⁷ Such experiences are clearly seen in the centuries of child sex abuse and systematic cover-up by the Church, on account of unresolved sexuality of the clerics, see **Vedanā**, [SD 17.3 \(2.3\)](#). See esp: <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/sex-crimes-and-the-vatican/> & its transcript <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/panorama/5402928.stm>.

¹⁸ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), [SD 16.7](#).