

# The Buddhist Christian Vedanta Network

Newsletter November 2010



**The Network is for those who are interested in exploring these traditions in relation to their spiritual practice**

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# News From Elizabeth

Dear Friends

Another year rapidly drawing to a close, reminds us of how quickly the precious life we have been given is passing by. The nearer the end we get, of course, the faster it goes. At one level this can give rise to fear and anxiety, at another it can be a constant wake up call to use the time we have left as well as we can, to help ourselves to awaken on the one hand and to benefit others on the other.

Once again there are many to thank for content of this newsletter. We had a wonderful weekend at St Mary's led mostly by Katie Morrow with a little help from me. People were very happy and I am delighted to see that the people who attended are keeping in touch by email. Katie has done a summary of the talks she gave for the benefit of those who could not be there. Donna has shared her first experience of BCVN.

Mother Mary is becoming a regular and popular feature of the newsletter and this time is no exception. Then we have a journey 'from Jesus to Buddha and back again' shared by Susan Stabile, who I am sure we will be hearing more from in the future. This is particularly interesting as she is the first person I think we have had who has returned to Catholicism after being a Buddhist nun.

I am delighted to be able to announce that Alan Wallace will be teaching in the UK for two weeks in June 2012. Please note the details which are on the last page of this newsletter. Here I have published an interesting interview with Alan, which throws light on his work and aims and will surely be an encouragement to attend the various events when he is in the UK.

This edition is rich also in books reviews, not to mention the books mentioned in Susan Stabile's article which we will review in future editions when they are published, and a good number of Alan's books are also put in context in his interview.

The interest in and demand for meditation which is being offered in the secular world as a result of the interface of Buddhism and Science is growing rapidly. We are in the process of working towards starting a charity based on the work of this network and the field of Alan Wallace's activity in Research into Consciousness from a contemplative standpoint and its applications to public benefit. I will be writing to you more about this before very long.

Sr Ishpriya will be teaching a weekend at Emmaus House in Bristol, and in Ireland. See the loose sheet enclosed for more details of this.

Warm Wishes to All

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Elizabeth', with a horizontal line underneath.

## **Lost and Alone—Edgware Abbey Weekend by Donna Gibbs**

Heading off to Edgware Abbey for my first Buddhist Christian retreat, my primary aims were to achieve rest and relaxation and meet some new people. I was looking forward to the stillness and comfort that I had previously experienced on retreats many years before. It was only as I sat down to eat with my fellow retreatants that it dawned on me that I had taken a step into the world of fusion. A Christian all my life, with minimal knowledge of Buddhism and even more limited experience of practicing Buddhists, I had this slow sense of walking into a brand new experience. I hadn't really considered what I was signing up for, and now I was here excitement and intrigue were stirring energetically within me.

In the first session we chose words on cards associated with travelling. Some alternative words that I don't usually associate with travelling – these words focused on identity – tramp, refugee (taking refuge), tourist. And to what sense you belonged. There were two common themes that emerged as individuals shared the word they had chosen and its significance to their spiritual journey. The first theme was that of not quite fitting in, being on the edge and not conforming, and not only to Christianity or a particular religious group, but to a lifeseet in general.

Next we were asked to draw a summary of our individual spiritual journeys which we did alone and then shared in pairs. We were encouraged to listen without advising or trying to shape or direct the meaning from another person's experience. I learnt so much from listening without comment. In fact, I felt graced with peace and serenity so many times throughout the retreat and truly believe this was generated from the constant moments of stillness, silence and grounding that comes from a slower, more focussed approach to each moment.

Katie, one of the speakers, had an incredible style that was new to me. She spoke in a humbling way, and would punctuate her dialogue with pauses and breathing, as though waiting for the next insight to land on her tongue. I was mesmerised and found that much more of the content of her talk landed squarely with me, compared with more lively, charismatic speakers who have made me feel high for a while but a few hours later I can barely remember the talk. Katie had a way of presenting a view in a convincing way and then presenting the other side in just as convincing a way. And yet each time she did that, I felt I had learnt something new to take with me along my path.

One theme that resonated particularly with me was that of shedding things, both positive and negative, along the path to awakening. The importance of being able to move along and let go, balanced with the value of holding the experience as it happens in order to savour and learn from it.

Both Elizabeth and Katie promoted friendliness and kindness to ourselves throughout the weekend. I had expected the weekend to be serious, frugal, deep, quiet. Even though it was at times all those things, there was much laughter, rich vegetarian meals, and flexibility in how individuals were able to engage with the activities.

In the afternoon, a lively exercise ensued whereby we all identified obstacles to strengthening our practice of meditation. We then split into small groups to discuss. My small group discussed the need for approval, and the struggle to believe in what you are doing if it is not valued or understood by friends, family or church

On the Saturday afternoon we spent more time alone, to contemplate what, if I could only have it, would make life perfect? It could be a quality, a tool, a way of life, maybe a question that needed to be answered. I wandered in the grounds of the Abbey, and felt so much peace and contentment that I almost couldn't be bothered to search for something to focus on. Interestingly and most wisely, when I reflected this back to the group later, Katie said, "I think if you find a place of peace, you should just go with it. And why wouldn't you?" such a liberating approach, and totally the opposite of how I had approached the task, thinking about what I should do rather than going with the flow of life in that little garden.

So, as I walked through the garden, searching for something within me, I found a huge tree stump and climbed up onto it. It was higher than I had expected and I wobbled, almost falling off. That's when I heard the question: How can I improve my balance? What a wonderful way to learn, I thought, as I jumped down from the tree stump.

Sunday flew by. The two significant memories that I have are of joining in the chapel services with residents from the nursing home, and an open question and answers session facilitated by Elizabeth and Katie.

The service was high Anglo catholic and the contrasts between the loving kindness to self philosophy of the retreat versus the unworthiness and sinfulness of self in the service were tangible. Yet I found that I was detached from the words of the service, and felt like I was floating above, experiencing the love of my God as I understand him

Throughout the weekend so many of my fears or unhelpful beliefs had been gently challenged, enabling me to continue to stumble along the path with more confidence. Not because I knew I was doing something the right way necessarily, but because I now understood that the key element of my path is

me. So if I am as fully alive on my path as I can be, then that is the best indicator that it is the right path for me.

At different periods over the weekend, there was a focus on two words that create fear and anxiety in me: Lost and Alone.

Katie suggested that to be lost is merely to be somewhere you haven't been before. Like an explorer. I related very much to that and could see how much more relaxing my journey along the path may be if I saw myself as a spiritual explorer where being lost is essential. The second word was Alone, and even though I know the difference between being lonely and being alone, I realised I had negative associations with being alone and often craved to increase my sense of belonging. Through the weekend discussions and activities I began to trust in the beauty and the necessity of being alone, and found the realisation that my journey has to be travelled alone, albeit with companions and teachers along the way, a far less daunting prospect. In fact, since coming home from the retreat, my silent meditations have become an energising and valuable part of my day to day life, and I no longer find them a lonely experience.

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## **Stumbling Along the Path by Katie Morrow**

Recently Elizabeth asked me to join her in leading a Buddhist-Christian Network weekend at St. Mary's, which we called "Stumbling Along the Path." I was delighted, not only because it is always a pleasure to work with Elizabeth, but also because it gave me an opportunity to reflect upon the path. I have been a Buddhist for more than thirty years and I generally tend to explore matters from within the Tibetan Buddhist framework. This seemed like a wonderful opportunity to explore the nature of the spiritual path a bit more broadly. Although I feel rather shy about putting my thoughts on paper, she also asked me to summarise some of what we explored together.

William James defined spirituality as "an attempt to be in harmony with an unseen order of things." If we are reading this newsletter, it is probably safe to say that we have all had a glimpse of something—call it the mystery, God, the true nature of being, or what-have-you. We might have had this experience as we looked out at the world: seeing the moonlight through oak leaves or listening to the surge of waves at the ocean. Or we might have experienced this unseen order through some kind of inner experience of wonder and transcendence. No matter how fleeting such experiences might be, we often have a powerful intuition about them:

that what is behind or what pervades our experiences of the mystery does not come and go. It is unconditional and at the same time it is always accessible. It is we ourselves who somehow seem to turn away. We seem to lose it, to forget, to become distracted by other things, to get caught up in our preoccupations and we sense that our anxiety, suffering and confusion comes from that disconnection. The path, then, is our way of trying to bridge that gulf.

As I thought about the similarities and differences between my experiences of the Christian and Buddhist paths, I came across a very interesting quote from my main Buddhist teacher, Trungpa Rinpoche, from the introduction to his most famous book, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. He wrote:

Although the Buddhist way is not theistic, it does not contradict the theistic disciplines. Rather the difference between the ways are a matter of emphasis and method. The basic problems of spiritual materialism are common to all spiritual disciplines. The Buddhist approach begins with our confusion and suffering and works toward the unravelling of their origin. The theistic approach begins with the richness of God and works toward raising consciousness so as to experience God's presence. But since the obstacles to relating with God are our confusions and negativities, the theistic approach must also deal with them.

The great Sufi poet, Shabistari put it this way:

The journey's two steps,  
No more.  
One step out of self,  
One step toward you.

Two steps sounds pretty straightforward, but somehow, as usual, the devil is in the details. No matter whether we take an orthodox approach within a given tradition or attempt to forge our own path from several traditions, we generally come across a plethora of practices, approaches, methods, ideas and teachings. We try this, and we try that and things seem to work for awhile and then they don't. What to do?

My favourite definition of the path is "one mistake after another." That sounds a bit flippant, but I think it is profoundly true. We often begin our spiritual journey quite naively, thinking that there is such a thing as the path which we are going to follow and thinking that this teacher or that church can give us the provisions, maps and guides we need for the journey. All we have to do is show up and follow along.

At some point, for most of us, we realise that we are lost. It's not that the maps or guides or provisions are useless, but we find ourselves in unknown territory. Things don't quite match up and we are somehow on our own. The path is a lonely journey

at its very heart—no one can travel it for us. I like the comment by historian Aaron Sachs that explorers are always lost because they have never been to that place before. There are no guarantees. Regardless of whether we experience this as being lost in the wilderness or as opening up to the unknown, it helps to have a reasonably robust sense of practice. And no matter what particular traditions we follow, a well-rounded practice life will help us to discover the depths of wisdom and love.

In Shabistari's terms, as we make the step out of our narrow sense of self, we need practices that can help us develop love. We might be drawn to heart-opening practices like tonglen or we might simply practice being kind and helpful in our daily lives, actually giving love to ourselves and others. As we take the step toward the divine, toward the true nature of reality, we also discover love through devotional practices, affective prayer, offering praises, and visualisation practices. With these practices, by honouring and letting ourselves receive love, letting it come to us, we can discover that we are love.

We cultivate wisdom primarily through meditation practices. Initially, we need a meditation practice like Christian meditation, mindfulness or shamatha practice, which helps us to settle the mind, let go of discursive thought and find peace, stability and precision in the silence and stillness at the core of our being. This is the starting place for letting go of our confusion. Ultimately, we will need to open out that practice further into what in Buddhism is called vipashyana practice. This is difficult to define, but could be said to be cultivating the open space within which wisdom can dawn. Martin Laird, the Christian theologian in his practical manual on contemplation, *Into the Silent Land*, describes it this way, "Our practice, if it can be called that anymore, is simply luminous vastness gazing on and gazed through by luminous vastness." This is the practice beyond practice, the entry into the cloud of unknowing, and the gateway to it is through our other practices.

As I stumble along my particular path, sometimes hacking through a thicket, sometimes meandering along dreamy by-ways, I am beginning to learn the importance of cultivating two qualities that are making the travelling more fun and more interesting. The first is being a bit gentler with myself, a bit less harsh and perfectionist and a bit more sympathetic. The second, not unrelated, is to be more interested and more curious about where I am than

where I might be going. And carrying on, really.

The poet David Wagoner ends his poem 'Stand Still' with better advice than I can give:

No two trees are the same to Raven.  
No two branches are the same to Wren.  
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,  
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows  
Where you are. You must let it find you.

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## The Ladder of Divine Ascent by Mother Mary

*Renunciation, reconciliation and repatriation in the writing of St. John Climacus*

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of our God." (Isa. 2:3)

When a spiritual door opens, the memory often remains vivid for a lifetime. After I was received into the Eastern Orthodox Church, I was asked to take a copy of an Oxford doctoral thesis to the Monastery of St John the Baptist in Essex. There, the librarian asked me if I would take it into the nearby town to make photocopies. As I read the text emerging from the copy machine, I knew that a spiritual door was opening. The text, by John Chryssavgis, was later published as *'John Climacus: From the Egyptian Desert to the Sinaite Mountain.'*



### Renunciation

'The Heart itself is a small vessel, yet dragons are there, and lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil. There are rough and uneven roads; there too are precipices. But there also are God and the angels. Life is there and the Kingdom. There too is light. There the Apostles and Heavenly cities and treasuries of grace. All things lie within that little space.'

These words, spoken by another man of the desert, Macarius the Great, describe our dilemma. Within our Heart, the central and deepest aspect of our spirit and humanity, we find all things. We tend to think of the Heart as a safe haven and our journey's end in seeking an encounter with God. It is, but as the desert Fathers and

Mothers found, it is also where we come face to face with terrors within.

*The Ladder* is a 7th Century book of advice and personal encouragement for monks in Sinai from an abbot and former hermit. It encourages them to tame their wild beasts and travel the rocky road towards the joy, truth and love within that little space of the Heart. As John Chryssavgis writes,

'...it is an extraordinary Christian response to the precept adopted by Socrates from the Oracle of Delphi: 'Know yourself!'. Although written for monks, it is a teaching that is relevant for us all, as we are all called to live as fully realized human beings in communion with God.'

It has become one of the most widely read and translated of Eastern Orthodox texts. However, we should remember that John would have assumed that his readers were receiving the sacraments and following a prayer rule, and it is within this religious context that we should understand his teachings. John stresses the importance of a personal relationship with God and his words are sometimes revealing and intimate. Although structured into thirty steps of a ladder, this is not meant to imply a sequence of ascetic work, but rather that there is an inter-relationship and dependency between the passions.



John begins with the remembrance of God, emphasizing that 'God is life of all free beings.' The first step, Renunciation, is followed by Detachment and Exile. In this withdrawal from the world of the senses John establishes the theology of the whole book; that the body and soul are undivided and to return to our 'natural' selves (united with God) we need to purify the corporeal as well as the spiritual, 'The monk has a body made holy, a tongue purified, a mind enlightened.'

### **Reconciliation**

The central core of *The Ladder* deals with the ascetic work of reconciliation with God through acquisition of fundamental virtues (obedience, repentance, remembrance of death, joyful sorrow), and stilling the non-physical passions (anger, malice, slander, talkativeness, falsehood, despondency), physical and material passions (gluttony, lust, avarice), and spiritual passions (insensitivity, fear, vainglory, and pride).

In the Orthodox Church, Lent (The Great Fast) is the liturgical time when there is the greatest focus on reconciliation with God and our fellow human beings. Lent begins

with the very moving service 'Forgiveness Vespers' where, at the end of the service, the priest asks the congregation to forgive him. Individually the people prostrate together with the priest, ask forgiveness and receive a blessing. Then the people ask forgiveness of each other in the same manner. 'Repentance is the renewal of baptism and is a contract with God for a fresh start in life.' It generates a change of Mind and Heart that uproots the most deeply seated and long held barriers where resolve and discipline fail. Repentance is preceded by watchfulness or alertness, 'The vigilant monk is a fisher of thoughts, and in the quiet of the night he can easily observe and catch them.' It is no co-incidence that John Climacus is venerated as a saint on March 30th and the Fourth Sunday of Great Lent, and that *The Ladder* is read aloud in monasteries during meals throughout Lent.

If you read *The Ladder* you will come across an account of John's visit to an Alexandrian monastic prison which you may find profoundly disturbing, if not unbelievable. Even John was shaken after his thirty days there and the abbot of the main monastery noticed that he was 'very much changed'. I agree with John Chryssavgis that, given the quality of the rest of the text, we should assume that the prison was a real place, the conditions and degree of penitence accurate and John's visit a life changing experience. John says that he came close to despair comparing the prisoner's degree of mourning and humility with his own indifference (to his passions). How are we to view this passage today? Rather than dismiss it, I think we can study the underlying elements of repentance and see in them the pivot in our turning towards God. The monk's imprisonment was voluntary and we are told of how some begged for it. We can view this as facing up to our destructive actions and the church as a specialist hospital for healing the soul. Although the monks never lost faith in God's loving mercy and forgiveness, they did not assume that repentance entitled them to mercy. They cried out that they did not dare to ask for it because in spite of God's previous kindness, they continued to 'stain their vows.' John says that 'they could not speak, could not pray to God.....they could only offer God a blank soul and wordless mind.' Archbishop Damianos, the current abbot of the Sinai monastery has said,

'despite the various external methods of struggle to achieve catharsis (cleansing), there is a great peace, tranquility and joy in the soul. We use a term in monasticism called 'joyful sorrow' (*harmolipi*) - joy for Jesus Christ and sorrow for our sins.' John's concluding words on repentance are both confronting and reassuring, 'Where the spirit of the Lord is, there the chains of sin are let loose; where there is real humility, all bonds are made free, but those without the one or the other should not be deceived; they are in bondage.'

## Repatriation

John groups together four final steps that he names as Stillness, Prayer, Dispassion and Faith, Hope and Love - and he quotes St. Paul 'But the greatest of these is love.' (1 Cor. 13:13) Stillness prepares the ground for prayer and is generated in the body by 'the accurate knowledge and management of one's feelings and perceptions' and in the soul by 'the accurate knowledge of one's thoughts.' John stresses the need for a spiritual guide, whom he calls the Good Shepherd, to help us discern accurate perception and knowledge.

'The start of stillness is the rejection of all noisiness as something that will trouble the depths of the soul. The final point is when one has no longer any fear of noisy disturbance, when one is immune to it. He who when he goes out does not go out in his intellect, is gentle and wholly a house of love, rarely moved to speech and never anger.' 'Stillness is worshipping God unceasingly and waiting on Him. Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with your every breath. Then indeed you will appreciate stillness.'

In the step on Prayer, John stresses the importance of simplicity and brevity (*monologia*) and enclosing our mind with a 'single thought' (*monologistos*) and this, with the remembrance of Jesus, suggests repetition of the short prayer that has become known as The Jesus Prayer. John says that we should begin prayer with thanksgiving, then confession and finally requests. However, 'when a man has found the Lord, he no longer has to use words when he is praying, for the Spirit Himself will intercede for him,' and if the Spirit leads us to this state of prayer we should not use images, or even chant the Psalms, as it will be a distraction. He concludes by saying that we cannot learn the beauty of prayer from others, but God grants prayer to those who pray.

John says that the final two steps which return us home to God, Dispassion, and Faith, Hope and Love, should be seen as one, just as 'light, fire and flame join to fashion one activity'. He points out that praise can challenge dispassion as much as criticism, and during both we should 'keep our thoughts under control.' John is reluctant to talk about Love as this is talking about God, but he does say that when we are 'perfectly united to God then what God has said is somehow mysteriously clarified' and we will be changed,

'He who loves the Lord has first loved his brother, for the latter is proof of the former....If the sight of the one we love clearly makes us change completely, so that we turn cheerful, glad, and carefree, what will the face of the Lord Himself not do as

He comes to dwell, invisibly, in a pure soul?'

Does this work of clearing the heart's thorny path to purify the soul only concern the Orthodox? In the recently published book 'A Simplified Life,' a 17th Century, Welsh Puritan preacher called Morgan Llwyd is quoted on the voices of the heart, '... there the sounds of the thorny worldly cares, and the sound of carnal sweet desires, and the sound of an old corrupt guilty conscience, and the sound of hard thoughts about God and men, and the sound of some hope from this world, and the sound of some good works that you have done, or some gifts or grace that you have received, or the sound of the news of the kingdom, or the sound of your task outside. And while the sound of one, yes one, of these is in your mind, you cannot hear the eternal Word. So seek of God (until you obtain) a still heart within, a heart careless of everything but God, beyond the memory of creature, hidden with God, in God's peace, which is beyond understanding (that peace which was before there was a creature or thought) and as you sink into yourself and from thence out of yourself into God your root, through setting the will on God alone, you shall know the eternal Word in time, who knew you and I before time was.'

'For He shall command His angels concerning you, To keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone; You shall tread upon the asp and the basilisk, and you shall trample the lion and dragon.

For he hoped in Me, and I will deliver him; I will shelter him, because he knew My name.' \*

### **Further Reading**

\*Psalm 90 (91) is chanted in the Sixth Hour, Great Compline and the Burial Service.

John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent (The Classics of Western Spirituality) by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (*paperback - Dec 1982*)

*Some criticise this translation for introducing western sentiment not found in the original.*

St. John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent by Archimandrite Lazarus [Trans.] Moore, 1973 Holy Transfiguration Monastery *hardback*, Paulist Press *paperback*.

John Climacus: From the Egyptian Desert to the Sinaite Mountain by John Chryssavgis, Ashgate Publishing Ltd. 2004. *A theological commentary. Illustrated with my photographs from Sinai.*

Ascending the Heights by Fr. John Mack, Conciliar Press 1999. *An easy to read introduction.*

A Simplified Life by Verena Schiller, Canterbury Press 2010 - Morgan Llwyd quote p122

*For 'The Ladder' Lenten reading scheme similar to monastic lectionaries, see webpage:*

<http://i18.photobucket.com/albums/b118/sparrowshell/LectionaryforLadderofDivineAscent.jpg>

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## **From Jesus to Buddha and Back Again by Susan Stable**

Having recently completed the manuscript for a 250 page book describing my conversation from Catholicism to Buddhism and back to Catholicism, it is a daunting task to describe my journey in a short essay. But here goes.

I grew up Catholic in a New York City neighborhood where Catholicism was in the air we breathed. Everyone went to the same Catholic school, all of our activities were organized through our Catholic school and parish, and the neighborhood was always filled with the nuns and priests who populated the parish convent and rectory. My family did know a couple of Jewish families, but I didn't meet a Protestant – or hear the word Buddhism – until I went to high school.

While attending Catholic high school, I began to have difficulties with my faith. I had very many questions about Catholicism and it seemed as though the answer to every one of them was some version of "well, you just have to believe in that as a matter of faith" or "that's just one of the mysteries of our faith." There simply weren't any explanations offered for any of the things that confused me. For an inquisitive, thinking person, being consistently told that you just have to accept things "on faith" with no explanation is not very satisfactory.

Sometime during my last year of high school, I realized I no longer believed in God or in what the Catholic Church had been teaching me. I went into the chaplain of my high school and said something like, "I'm done. I don't believe in God anymore." The priest, to his credit, didn't dismiss me out of hand; he knew that I was a serious and thoughtful person, and he gave me what seemed an unsatisfactory response at the time, but which, in retrospect, was probably the best response I could have had. He told me I had walked into the desert and there was no turning back. There was nothing I could do but make my way to the other side and along the way figure out where God and I would stand with each other.

For a long time, I was nowhere with God. Although I attended a Catholic (Jesuit)

college, whatever faith life there was on campus had no impact on me. I had no God at all for those four years of my life, and I'm a little embarrassed to say that lacking God, I also lacked an effective moral compass in my life. If I had a philosophy at the time, it would have sounded pretty much like, "Well, if it feels good, and if it doesn't hurt anyone else, that's good enough."

After college, I moved back to New York and went to law school, where most of my friends were just as non-religious as I was. We inhabited a completely secular environment. Nobody I knew went to church on Sunday or synagogue on Saturday. We all just went to school, working hard during the week and partying hard (i.e., doing lots of drinking) on weekends.

Then something happened that would enormously change my life. I became friends with another law student, someone who had been a Tibetan Buddhist for a number of years. One day she said to me, "You know, you're a Buddhist without knowing it." Our conversation intrigued me enough for me to start attending a Buddhist meditation center in New York. Although I didn't have the time – or as yet, the inclination – for a consistent, regular meditation practice, I started to do a lot of reading about Buddhism. Given my prior Catholic experience, one of the first things that drew me to Buddhism was the Buddha's insistence that one should never believe something merely because someone else said it, but that everything needed to be tested by one's own meditation experience. Not: believe because on faith, but believe because if you sit and meditate, this is the truth you will experience. I responded well to that.

Notwithstanding the appeal of Buddhism, following law school I started working in a large New York City law firm, which meant long hours of work every day. Late nights at work, followed by late dinners with too much to drink, left very little time for meditation, although I did continue to read books about Buddhism and to think that Buddhism had something to offer for me. After a couple of years of this, I asked my law firm to send me to their Hong Kong office, with the idea of being closer to Buddhist countries and having the opportunity to take my growing interest in Buddhism more seriously.

During the year and a half I spent practicing law in Hong Kong, I did not find a place to study Buddhism in Hong Kong itself. Nonetheless, its proximity to Buddhist countries allowed me to take short trips to Thailand and Malaysia, where I spent time in various Buddhist monasteries learning what I could. After a year and a half of short-hop trips, I finally decided if I was serious about pursuing Buddhism, I had to be – well – serious about it. So, I quit my job, gave away literally everything that I owned, packed a backpack, and spent the next two years living in Buddhist communities in Nepal and India (with some long periods in Thailand as well), spending all of my time taking teachings and doing meditation retreats.

My primary place of abode was Kopan Monastery, outside of Kathmandu, under the guidance of Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, who became my root guru. I can't express how wonderful it was to find myself at Kopan. I had found a spiritual community which felt like home to me and the teachings resonated with me, so strongly that within a few months of my initial arrival in Kathmandu, I reached the decision to become a Tibetan Buddhist nun. Several months later, I was ordained by the Dalai Lama. I truly believed that I had found my place and that I would remain a Buddhist nun in Nepal and India for the rest of my life. The two years I spent there, moving back and forth between Nepal and India were wonderful in many ways. I had a teacher I had faith in and devotion to, I was living among other people who shared my spirituality and, most importantly, I developed a practice of daily prayer and meditation, having come to realize how important a regular practice was. As I still tell people today, I became a spiritual person as a Buddhist, not as a Catholic.

At some point, things changed. For one thing, I was living in Tibetan communities that had no resources to support Western monks and nuns. I knew that I would run out of savings and would need to support myself. More importantly, I started to be bothered by some of the same things that had earlier been a problem for me in Catholicism. I soon came to realize that what had initially attracted me to Buddhism – the idea that you believe nothing just because of what others say, but test everything by your own experience – was not, in fact, how people behaved in the communities in which I lived. The concept of guru devotion, so much a part of Tibetan Buddhism, meant that people simply took on faith whatever their lamas told them. I didn't see a whole lot of the testing and questioning the Buddha talked about. Rather, what I frequently heard was that something must be true "because that is what the lamas tell us." The combination of that discomfort with increasing questions I had about whether the vows of a nun were contributing to my Buddhist practice or inhibiting it led me to decide that being a Buddhist nun for the rest of my life was not the right path for me. And so, I gave up the vows and moved back to the United States as a lay Buddhist.

I moved back to New York, went back to practicing law, and slowly adjusted to life in the United States (in some ways this was a much more difficult adjustment than moving to Asia had been). I continued to practice Buddhism for some period of time but, over time, the intensity of my practice faded. I still considered myself a Buddhist but didn't practice with the same regularity or intensity as I had before. This went on for some years, during which I switched from practicing law to teaching in a law school, got married and had a daughter, Elena.

When Elena was born, I was still Buddhist and my husband, a former Catholic. As a result, Elena wasn't baptized when she was born and we raised her for the first several years of her life in an bizarre mixture of religious traditions—I'd tell her

Buddhist stories some night and Bible stories another night, we lit a menorah during Hanukah – everything had a place. It was a complete mishmash of practices and faiths and I felt like I was doing a miserable job of it all. I was, thus, almost relieved when, at 8 years old, Elena asked if she could have Catholic religious education. I thought, well, okay, I'm Buddhist, but we are not living in a Buddhist society and she has to be raised in something in order to make her own choice of faith when she grows up, so it might as well be Catholic. We registered her for religious education, and the following year she was baptized and received the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation.

The effect of this on me was that I started going to Church with her. Not as a Catholic – I was still a Buddhist. I was just a Buddhist taking my daughter to a Catholic church. Sitting there week after week, something happened. Things started stirring in my heart.

Two things happened that accelerated what might have been a slower process of conversion. The first was hearing in Mass one day the Gospel passage in which Jesus tells his disciples that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they would be able to move mountains. I remember feeling a little irritated as I listened to the Gospel being proclaimed. By the time Mass ended, the irritation had grown to annoyance. By the time I got into my car to drive home, I was actually angry. And I found myself driving down the street and pounding on my steering wheel, saying, "Well you know, that's all well and good for the people that have a mustard seed, but what about those of us that don't even have a mustard seed?" It took me weeks afterward to realize that that anger itself meant something, that if I didn't already have the mustard seed – if I really didn't have any faith and didn't believe anything – then what was I angry about?

The second, and more significant, thing that happened was 9/11. It is hard to explain to anyone who was not in New York during that period what that experience was, but if you were in New York City when those planes hit the Twin Towers and they collapsed, you know the enormous impact that had on everyone. For days afterward I walked the streets of the City, looking at ash covering the fire trucks, seeing the signs posted on buildings and trees everywhere asking if anyone had seen missing friends and family members. One of those signs was for my uncle, only five years older than I, someone more like a brother than uncle to me growing up. It was devastatingly sad, and it was also scary. Every time I was on a bridge or in a tunnel away from my daughter, I was terrified, absolutely terrified, that I wouldn't be able to get back to her.

Something strange happened during that period: the only place that I felt any peace, any relief from the terror and horror was inside a Catholic church. I would leave my house in the morning and go to my parish church. I would go sit on the

floor and look up and say, "I have no idea why I'm here. I don't believe in God. There's nothing here for me." Then I'd take a train into Manhattan or drive into Queens and I'd stop into another church and sit there for another half hour. At the end of the day I'd do the same thing, each time saying the same thing: "I have no idea why I'm here; I don't believe in God." Yet it was the only place that I felt any solace.

When you talk about conversion and about how God works, you reach a point where it is impossible to explain in a linear and logical fashion what happened. There are no words that really work. The best I can say is that for days I walked into churches and there was no God for me there and then one day I walked into a church, and, where there wasn't God there before, there was God. One day I walked into church saying (as on so many days before), "I'm here for no reason, there's nothing here for me;" the next I walked in saying, "Here I am, Lord." I don't know what else to say, except that the Holy Spirit sometimes acts in strange ways.

The next morning I went to see a priest who was a friend of mine and received the sacrament of reconciliation. I not only continued to attend now many years later, I still go to daily Mass as often as I can. Over the course of the next few years, I started to go regularly to a nearby Jesuit retreat house for daily masses, for retreats and for other programs. Over the course of time, I discerned a call to train to do retreat work and spiritual direction work. I spent the next several years in New York, both teaching law school and working as a member of the adjunct ministerial staff of this Jesuit retreat house in New York. Then three years ago, I moved to my present position in Minneapolis, where I have a chair at the University of St. Thomas School of Law, and where part of my job is giving retreats to the law school and university community.

When I talk to young people about conversion, I draw two lessons for them from my story. First, it is OK for them to have questions about their faith; that if they are all serious about their faith, questions will arise. The second is that sometimes the path to God is not always very straight. There is an expression: "God writes straight with crooked lines." God can deal with the zigs and zags of our journey.

One of the hardest things for me when I came back to Catholicism was figuring out what to make of my years as a Buddhist. At first, I mistakenly viewed them as something I needed to atone for, that they meant that I had turned away from God. It took me a long time to realize that Buddhism was a necessary and important part of my spiritual journey, and that the Christian I am today is very much informed by those years. Among other things, my experience allows me to more effectively minister to people from other faiths, to people who are Christians now but used to be in another religion, or to Catholics looking for something in Buddhism and

outside of Catholicism. All of my prior experiences contribute to my ability to minister to such people. The lesson is that God somehow manages to take whatever and whoever we are and is able to work with it extraordinarily effectively.

There is no playbook. There is no “right way” for faith to develop and grow. My path involved giving up Catholicism as a senior in high school and coming back to it in my forties, with twenty years as a Buddhist in between. Some people go through their whole life with Christianity and at fifty wake up and say, “Gee, I have questions,” and some people go through their whole lives happy in the faith in which they were born. None of these is better than the other. It’s all part of how you and God relate to each other.

*Susan Stabile is a law professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law in the United States, where she also offers retreats and other programs of spiritual formation for students, faculty, staff and alumni, as well as for other groups in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. Susan is a spiritual director and served as a member of the adjunct ministerial staff of a Jesuit retreat house in NY until her move to Minnesota in 2007. She is currently writing two books, one on her conversion from Catholicism to Buddhism and back to Catholicism and another that adapts Tibetan Buddhist analytical meditations for Christians. Susan authors a blog, *Creo en Dios!* on which she posts daily spiritual reflections. You can find it at: <http://susanjoan.wordpress.com>.*

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## **An Interview with Meditation Teacher B. Alan Wallace**



Dr Wallace continually seeks innovative ways to integrate Buddhist contemplative practices with Western science to advance the study of the mind, much through Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies, which he is president and founder of. The following interview was conducted in Sep, 2010.

### **An Interview by Kathryn Schell, Columbia University Press, USA**

With his unique background, Alan brings deep experience and applied skills to the challenge of integrating traditional Indo-Tibetan Buddhism with the modern world. As we at Columbia University Press said with his previous book, *Mind in the Balance*, Alan is “Our best-selling mind and consciousness scholar, boldly correcting the balance between empirical study and religion.”

**Q:** *How did your background in science inform your experiences as a Buddhist monk?*

**A:** My background in science traces back to my education when I was 13 years old and was deeply inspired by a science teacher to devote my life to the study of ecology and wildlife biology. This was my aim during my high school years and during the first two years of university education. Then at the age of 20, my interests turned more toward Buddhist philosophy and meditation, and a year later I left university and for the next 13 years devoted myself to the study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism, first in India and later in Europe and America. But the spirit of open-minded inquiry, skepticism of commonly accepted beliefs and assumptions, and the emphasis on experiential investigation—which are the great strengths of science at its best—has powerfully influenced my engagement with Buddhism. Here for the first time I found a spiritual tradition that welcomed such pragmatism, constructive skepticism, and empiricism. So this allowed me to unite my scientific interests and spiritual aspirations.

**Q:** *At what point did you realize that science and Buddhism were compatible worldviews?*

**A:** What we commonly regard as “science” is a mixture of (1) rigorously obtained facts about the natural world gleaned from meticulous, repeated observations and experimentation (2) a set of materialistic metaphysical beliefs that underlie and often constrain scientific thinking and investigation, without ever being questioned or put to the test of experience. Some scientific facts are incompatible with Buddhist beliefs, and where this occurs—as the Dalai Lama has often and publicly insisted—Buddhist beliefs have to be changed or abandoned so that they are compatible with the best empirical evidence. But many materialistic beliefs that are widely accepted within the scientific community are incompatible with the experiential findings of generations of Buddhist contemplatives who have investigated the depths and potentials of consciousness in ways unknown to modern science. In such cases, I have found it more reasonable to reject those materialistic beliefs than the direct experiences that are incompatible with them. In short, science and Buddhism are compatible in many respects, but at those points where they are in conflict, it is imperative to investigate the issues with an open mind, critical intelligence, and the willingness to experientially investigate phenomena using not only time-tested scientific methods but also time-tested methods of contemplative inquiry.

**Q:** *Do you envision your book influencing Western scientists, and how?*

**A:** Western scientists and others who are utterly committed to a materialistic worldview may not be drawn to my book, for it challenges many of their most cherished assumptions; and none of us feels comfortable when our basic beliefs are called into question. But for those who are open-minded, I hope this book will open new vistas of understanding, showing how cutting-edge scientific thinking and empirical research may interface in fruitful ways with the most sophisticated theorizing and experiential inquiry presented in Buddhism. The collaboration between these two great, ancient traditions of knowledge may benefit both by casting a bright light on their respective strengths and weaknesses, so that each may be enhanced by the other.

**Q:** *What is the flaw in science's reliance on materialism?*

**A:** The great strength of science since the time of Galileo has been its focus on rigorous observation of objective, physical, quantitative phenomena, together with ingenious methods of experimentation, followed by sophisticated mathematical analysis. The enormous progress made by the physical and biological sciences over the past 400 years, in comparison to a lack of comparable progress in philosophy and the mind sciences has resulted in a profoundly imbalanced picture of reality as a whole. Since we scientifically know so much about the objective physical world and so comparatively little about the subjective mental world, there is a natural inclination simply to equate mysterious subjective mental phenomena, including consciousness itself, with more easily understood physical phenomena, such as brain processes. The role of the mind in nature is thus marginalized, and human nature is reduced to biological mechanisms. This tendency is both dehumanizing and demoralizing, and its effect on human civilization is disastrous. The materialistic worldview is inextricably tied to hedonistic values and consumerism as a way of life, and this triad is destroying our planet and deteriorating human values. It is imperative that science be freed from the intellectual and methodological straightjacket of materialism and adopt a radically empirical approach to the study of the mind and consciousness, as proposed by William James and as practiced by Buddhism at its best.

**Q:** *Have you ever experienced a leap in understanding because of either science or Buddhism?*

**A:** After a 13-year leave of absence from Western academia, I recommenced my undergraduate education, then at Amherst College, where I studied physics, mathematics, and the history and philosophy of science. I was especially drawn to investigating the ontological foundations of quantum mechanics from the perspective of the Buddhist Middle Way (Madhyamaka) philosophy, and my research during that time was published in the book *Choosing Reality: A Buddhist*

*View of Physics and the Mind.* It was during my years of doctoral studies at Stanford University that I encountered the writings of William James, and they were a real eye-opener for me. My research at Stanford in the fields of philosophy of mind, physics, biology, and religion was published in the book *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness*. Since 1987, I have also had the great fortune of serving as interpreter for many meetings between the Dalai Lama and prominent physicists, biologists, and philosophers, and these encounters have also greatly enriched my understanding of Buddhism, science, and their fruitful interface.

**Q:** *Have you ever run into problems as a scientist because of your belief in Buddhism, or vice versa?*

**A:** Over the past 18 years, I have participated in a number of scientific research projects focusing on the effects of meditation. Almost all the cognitive scientists I have collaborated with are committed materialists, so this has led to many lively conversations and debates about the nature of the mind and its relation to the body. But these encounters have not been problems but have rather, for the most part, been intellectually challenging. For we are all in the pursuit of truth, and as we approach these questions from different viewpoints and using different methods of inquiry, our dialogues have often been mutually constructive and enjoyable. Occasionally I encounter closed-minded, dogmatic scientists and philosophers, and conversations with them are generally futile. I have also encountered closed-mind, dogmatic Buddhists, and conversations with them are equally pointless. Dogmatists of all kinds share the same fundamental mindset, and I have concluded it is based on fear of the unknown and a lack of tolerance for uncertainty.

**Q:** *How do you characterize your skepticism?*

**A:** I aspire to the skepticism of the Buddha, who challenged many of the religious and philosophical assumptions of his era. But he wasn't satisfied to remain a mere agnostic but rather devoted himself wholeheartedly to probing the nature of existence through his own personal experience, refined through the use of highly advanced contemplative training. I likewise idealize the skepticism of Galileo and William James, both of whom also challenged many of the commonly held beliefs of their times and responded to them in radically empirical ways. So my approach to science and to Buddhism is one of radical empiricism, tempered by the use of rigorous logic. That is my ideal, but I'm sure I often fail to live up to it fully.

**Q:** *Physicist Steven Weinberg has stated that he believes that science is corrosive to religious belief, how do you think these two disciplines can be better*

*integrated?*

**A:** When Western thinkers refer to “religious belief,” they almost invariably refer to the beliefs of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Our Western notion of “religion” is virtually defined by these three traditions, each one of which unequivocally fits in our category of “religion” as opposed to “philosophy” or “science.” Religion, as we have defined it on our own terms and within the context of Western civilization, is primarily based on divine authority; whereas science as we have defined it within the context of Western civilization is based on empirical evidence and reason. Over the past 400 years, advances in science have indeed often challenged or overthrown religious beliefs. For all of us who are fundamentally committed to the pursuit of truth, and not just the defense of our beliefs and assumptions, such advances are to be welcomed. As I have argued in my first book published with Columbia University Press, *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground*, it is a fundamental error to classify Buddhism solely as a “religion,” for it has always included philosophical and scientific elements as well. So if scientific discoveries repudiate certain Buddhist beliefs, this is a constructive contribution to Buddhism. But scientists should also be open to the possibility that contemplative discoveries by Buddhists may be corrosive to certain scientific beliefs. And they should be as open to this possibility as progressive Buddhists are to being corrected by scientific discoveries.

**Q:** *What do you believe are some other practical applications of Buddhism in the modern world?*

**A:** Epistemically, the greatest strength of Buddhism lies in its theories and methods for studying the mind and the role of consciousness in nature. As I have argued in my second book published by Columbia University Press, *Contemplative Science: Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge*, Buddhist methods of first-person inquiry into the nature of the mind wonderfully complement the sophisticated third-person methods of modern psychology and neuroscience. Likewise, my next book published with C.U.P., *Hidden Dimensions: The Unification of Physics and Consciousness*, shows how Buddhist contemplative methods and theories may complement some of the most sophisticated theorizing about the role of the observer in modern physics. In my last book published with C.U.P., *Mind in the Balance: Meditation in Science, Buddhism, and Christianity*, I review the epistemic convergences between Buddhism and the mind sciences and with physics and also explore the pragmatic benefits of Buddhist meditation in realizing genuine happiness, or eudemonia. While science and technology have enhanced human hedonic wellbeing, they have contributed little to the realization of our inner potentials for finding meaning and fulfillment. Science reveals the hidden

natural resources of the objective world, but Buddhism reveals the hidden natural resources of the human spirit. In today's world more than ever before, we need to avail ourselves of all our natural resources to survive and flourish as a species and as individuals.

**Q:** *How does Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic differ from your previous books?*

**A:** In this new book I synthesize many of the themes addressed in my earlier works, but I also focus more clearly on specific issues such as areas of confrontation and collaboration between Buddhism and science, the role of semantic information and meaning in the natural world, human nature, the question of free will, a Buddhist model of mental health, Buddhist methods of attentional training and contemplative inquiry, and the role of skepticism in Buddhism and how it may help break down ideological barriers that currently inhibit the scientific imagination. All too often, skepticism is applied only to others' beliefs, but a central theme of Buddhism is that it is our own false beliefs and assumptions that lie at the root of our own unrest and discontent. So the primary focus of our skepticism should be inwardly directed, rather than aimed at other's beliefs. My own encounter with Buddhism and science has helped me enormously in this regard, and I hope this book will likewise be of service to others in their open-minded pursuit of greater understanding.

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## Book Reviews

**Without Buddha I could not be a Christian. By Paul F. Knitter. One World, Oxford.2009 Review by Adrian Smith**

A word about the author first. Paul Knitter is a Catholic, ex-priest who was a member of the Society of the Divine Word for 23 years. His writing career began after he left that missionary society and has concentrated on inter-Faith studies. He has written ten books on this subject. He is currently Paul Tillich Professor of Theology, World Religions and Culture at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

This book, as the title suggests is autobiographical. He alternates in the text between particular difficulties he has with Christian beliefs and practices and what he calls "using my Buddhist flashlight" to throw (for him) more meaningful explanations. A few examples.

He understands "Salvation" as coming to the realisation that we have the potential to become Christs. It is "our own awakening .... Our own discovery of our divine nature" "A wakening up to our own unity with God, or oneness with the Spirit".

He quotes Karl Rahner as saying that Jesus realised the full potential of human nature. “He remains one of us, though he “arrived” way ahead of most of us.” (pp116-7)

It is not surprising that he devotes a good portion to the subject of meditation (in the Eastern meaning of that word,) though he does distinguish the Western ascetic terminology: “Meditation is looking from the outside into the unitive experience of God. Contemplation is looking from the inside out – from within one’s oneness with the Divine, for which there are not adequate words.” (p.139) He adds (p.154) “Buddhism can help Christians to be mystical Christians.” He expands on this: “We Christians need an additional Sacrament. It is the Sacrament of Silence”. A Sacrament we need to receive as frequently as everyday. (p.153)

As a person who is active in Justice and Peace matters – especially in Latin America – he tackles the meaning of the Kingdom of God, (which throughout he refers to as Kindom, to be politically correct!) especially the perplexing question of its being present now and at the same time not yet. He struggles with the seeming contradiction between the Christian’s duty to bring about God’s plan for the coming of the Kingdom on earth (Don’t we pray “Thy Kingdom come on earth”?) with what he calls “the starkest contrast between Buddhism and Christianity”, that Buddhists have no eschatology: the world isn’t going anywhere. They don’t believe in an end point for history, when accounts will be settled. So how can Buddhists make the Kingdom present, he asks. He neglects to make any mention of the many researches that have found the relationship between people meditating and its effect on the environment, reducing stress, for instance.

As Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr – as well as Buddha and Jesus before them – realised, the best weapon for changing the hearts of oppressors is to love them. These words of Jesus might be quoted of the Buddha: “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28)

I found this a most helpful book.

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## **Buddhist Christianity: A Passionate Openness, O-Books, 2011.**

### **Review by Maggie Hammond**

Available from [www.o-books.com](http://www.o-books.com) or from Amazon and all good bookshops.

Can you be a Buddhist and a Christian? Is it possible to consider yourself a Christian Buddhist - as Don Cupitt did - or a Buddhist Christian, as Ross Thompson claims? This is a fascinating book for anyone interested in inter-faith dialogue or who has explored aspects of both Christianity and Buddhism, whether at a theoretical or practical level. It is clear that the two faiths, while superficially so different, have much to say to one another; while many Christians have looked to Buddhist meditation techniques to deepen their prayer life, so many Buddhists have responded to the practical Christian call to charity. In looking at these issues and going deeply into both traditions, this book steers a nice balance between personal experience and academic rigour and is always highly readable and accessible.

Ross Thompson starts with an account of his own personal journey with these two great faiths - while making it clear that this book is not a spiritual autobiography, he writes that it was written for autobiographical reasons. He points out that Jesus' comment that 'you cannot serve two masters' which is sometimes referred to in the context of not being able to follow two faiths, was actually meant to mean you could not serve God and Mammon - something both faiths would profoundly agree with. He argues that at the heart of the appeal of Buddhism to many Christians is the lack of the kind of dogmatism which many within Christianity have found stifling - a set of beliefs which you are meant to accept. For these people, Buddhism seems to offer space where 'rational, meditative and mystical aspects are emphasised at the expense of the popular and liturgical.'

Thompson goes on to look at the Buddha and the Christ and how these two great figures have been and can be seen. He deals with the Christian exclusivist position neatly by referring to the Orthodox faith which sees Christ as the second Adam, representing the whole of humanity, rather than as one individual. He also looks at the Buddha as the embodiment of the Dharma. Seen in this way, the Christ is not so different from the Buddha.

We then have a comparison of the sayings of Jesus and the Buddha which reveal the remarkable parallels between them, and a comparison of the Buddhist concept of suffering and the Christian one of sin, both of which are seen to result from egocentricity and desire. The book then examines the concepts of 'liberation'

and 'atonement', before finally turning to the concepts of 'God' and 'emptiness.' The apophatic tradition in Christian spirituality is very useful here in revealing the tendency to idolatry which many forms of Christianity all too easily slip into. Through the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and those who were influenced by him we can see 'God' not as a 'being' or even a 'supreme being' but both 'beyond being' and 'being itself' - concepts which are not so different from Buddhist ones. And even the concept of Trinity is not so different from the Buddhist Trikaya.

Thompson is careful that we do not fall into simplistic comparisons which limit both Buddhism and Christianity, but use the different concepts as a way of cracking open our entrenched ideas and perceiving them in a new and transformative light. For in the end, both religions are about personal transformation, and it is with this that the book ends, with a concrete Buddhist-Christian Commitment that many would find helpful.

The author clearly knows his subject well. After explaining his own background and position, the author persuasively argues that many of the concepts in the two traditions which seem to be so different can usually be reconciled. He also puts religious practice at the heart of his concerns, and in conclusion argues that it is indeed possible, and even desirable, to serve two masters, the Buddha and the Christ.

I can highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in these issues. They will find it informative, challenging and perhaps even transformative.

*Maggie Hamand is a journalist and author. Her novel, 'The Resurrection of the Body', was published by Michael Joseph and has been optioned for film. She has recently completed an MA in Christian Spirituality at Heythrop College - her dissertation was a comparison between some aspects of Buddhist thought and the spirituality of Meister Eckhart.*



## **The Music of Life-Biology Beyond Genes.by Denis Noble**

### **Review by Pamela Ford**

“non sai tu che la nostra anima e composta di armonia?

“do you not know that our soul is composed of harmony?

Leonardo da Vinci (Trattato della Pittura)

This a quotation from the facing title page. Professor Denis Noble CBE FRS is Emeritus Professor of Cardiovascular Physiology at the University of Oxford. He

was one of the co-convenors as well as a speaker at the Colloquium on Buddhism and Science held at the University in March which Elizabeth and I attended.

This book of which he is the author likens the genes in the human body to “an organ with 30,000 pipes. ”There are 20,000-30,000 genes in the human body and each bodily function requires the action of a series of genes not just one to activate a particular action. Eg.the heart beat.

For those with a scientific turn of mind there is plenty of science to stimulate thought and ideas. For those with a more poetic turn of mind the book is rather like a poem. The chapter headings give a sense of this:-The organ with 30,000 pipes; The Score is it written down? The Conductor; The Rhythm Section etc. Each chapter is likened to music. Stories from Far Eastern cultures are used as examples.

Personally, I found the book fascinating, not only for the science, of which I have some knowledge, but also from the musical aspect as well. I will conclude this short review with a quotation at the conclusion of chapter two.” If there is an organ, and some music, who is the player, and who was the composer? And is there a conductor? “

The book is published by Oxford University Press.

ISBN 978-0-19-922836-2

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## Events

### **Developing Buddhist Christian Meditation**

**February 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> 2011: Hilfield Friary, Dorset**

**Ross Thompson** was an Anglican priest for 20 years, but his journey led him to the position described in *Buddhist Christianity: a Passionate Openness* (He offers these two events in 2011 to explore matters further.

**Hilfield Friary**, nestled in the beautiful setting of the South Dorset downs, runs a programme of events dedicated to peace and the environment.

Ross Thompson will explore new ways of bringing together Buddhist and Christian traditions of contemplation and meditation. Includes guided practice and times of silence, with opportunities for questions and discussion. All will be dovetailed with the worship of the Franciscan brothers so that participants may join in if they wish.

**For further information and booking forms see [www.hilfieldfriary.org.uk](http://www.hilfieldfriary.org.uk) or contact the Friary: [hilfieldssf@franciscans.org.uk](mailto:hilfieldssf@franciscans.org.uk) Tel: 01300 341741**

**December 10<sup>th</sup> 2011 Abbey House, Glastonbury 10am-6pm**

**Buddhist Christianity – can we follow both faiths with integrity?**

Ross Thompson describes the journey that has led him from teenage Buddhism via Anglican priesthood to commitment to both faiths. He leads discussion on both the teachings that unite the two traditions, and the issues of self and God that make them profoundly challenging to each other. The day ends with some guided contemplation that draws on both traditions.

£30 for coffee, lunch and tea. Following Buddhist custom there will also be *dana*: an optional contribution for the leader.

**Bookings: [info@abbeyhouse.org](mailto:info@abbeyhouse.org) or Tel. 01458 831112**

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***Early Warning: Alan Wallace in the UK Early Warning***

It gives me great pleasure to announce that we will be hosting **Alan Wallace in the UK in 2012**.

Alan will be leading a **Retreat on Holy Isle from 8th-15th June 2012** on **Shamatha Vipashyana and Dzogchen**

This will be followed from **15th-18th June 2012** by a Buddhist Christian Contemplative Conference. This will be a follow up and development of the private conference we had on Holy Island last year. This one will be open to anyone to participate and some of those who took part last time will give presentations. The Conference will be facilitated by Alan Wallace.

Then from **19th-21st June 2012** there will be other events still to be planned probably in London. On **21st June** Alan Wallace and Fr Laurence Freeman will be leading an evening together.

The retreat and conference are likely to be very popular. Please note these dates in your diary and if you would like to be notified for early booking information please send me an email and I will keep a list of people to be notified.