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# Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection and Mindfulness in Buddhism

A comparison between the teachings and practices of Brother Lawrence and  
Ajahn Sumedho

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# Abstract

This work will explore some of the possible relationships between the teachings and spiritual practices of two religious teachers – Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection and Ajahn Sumedho. Brother Lawrence was a Discalced Carmelite brother that lived in France during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Ajahn Sumedho is a monk within the Thai Forest Tradition of Theravadan Buddhism, who currently lives in Hertfordshire, UK. This exploration will include even a description of their respective religious heritage, together with a short discussion of the value or shortcomings of the comparative method of research.

**Key Words:** Brother Lawrence, Ajahn Sumedho, comparative religion, Christianity, Buddhism, mysticism.

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# Introduction

I first came in contact with Brother Lawrence's text when I was living in a Buddhist monastery in England. I was immediately struck by his descriptions of the religious life and his techniques for deepening awareness of what he calls "the presence of God". I think part of the impact for me was the fact that I was reading an account of religious life that echoed with the aspects of Buddhism that I found so attractive, but here they were expressed in a context that was familiar from my upbringing – that is, my religious "heritage".

I find it striking how mystics from different religious traditions – and even those that claim to stand outside of any tradition – seem to be talking about and describing the same things. Obviously there are substantial differences in the language they use and the form of their expression, but the descriptions of their actual experiences, and the teachings and methods that arise out of these experiences, are often too similar to ignore. Some of these similarities will be the subject of this work.

I will also briefly discuss the question whether it is at all useful to make comparisons of religious teachings and experiences between traditions that are built upon different (or even directly opposing) foundations, with reference to the "personal religiosity" that appears to be growing rapidly in many Western countries.

# Aim

My primary goal with this essay is to give an overview of the life and teaching of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection and to compare this with mindfulness teachings and practices within Theravada Buddhism, especially as taught by Ajahn Sumedho.

There appears to be similarities between Brother Lawrence's and Ajahn Sumedho's informal and personal styles and what they consider to be essential in the “everyday” aspects of living a religious life. This emphasis on the simple and practical instead of dogma or complicated systems of belief enables both these teachers to reach a modern audience and make their respective traditions relevant even in secularised societies.

Even though some of the obvious differences between the different traditions will be raised in this essay, I will tend towards the similarities and the common ground that exists between what are essentially two radically differing religious traditions. I will also discuss some of the issues raised by postmodernist thinking in relation to comparisons of religious traditions, and some responses to this critique. The main questions I will work from are as follows:

- Who was Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, and why is he regarded as a mystic?
- What similarities exist between Brother Lawrence's and Ajahn Sumedho's teachings and spiritual practices?

Unlike the meeting between for example Christianity and Islam, which has been going on for well over a thousand years, “large-scale” contact between Christianity and Buddhism is relatively new. Therefore I will include some of the relevant issues and points raised by modern writers who have approached this relationship, from both sides of the fence.

# Material

The material that is central in this essay are an English translation of Brother Lawrence's book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Ajahn Sumedho's *Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless* and *Intuitive Awareness*, Geels and Wikström's *Den religiösa människan* and the *Satipatthana Sutta*.

This primary material will be complimented with verses from the *Dhammapada*, Ross Thompson's *Buddhist Christianity: A Passionate Openness*, and *The Good Heart* by H. H. Dalai Lama.

The Practice of the Presence of God is actually the only source available for Brother Lawrence's teaching and is therefore an essential text in this essay. It gives a very clear and concise description of his spiritual practice, methods, his thoughts on many issues, and how he actually lived the religious life he spoke of. Ajahn Sumedho's books are collections of talks he has given that describe his understanding of the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness together with reflections on the importance of these teachings in our daily lives. Geels and Wikström's book gives many models for interpreting mystical experiences and has been an important instrument in exploring what mysticism is and what it means for the individual.

The *Satipatthana Sutta* or Four Foundations of Mindfulness gives a systematic description of the foundations of mindfulness practice and is a core text in all schools and traditions of Buddhism. The *Dhammapada* is a collection of the Buddha's words and teachings in verse-form. These verses give a summary of often very detailed and complicated teachings and have been extremely useful in finding the essential aspects of the Buddha's teachings.

The works by Thompson and the Dalai Lama that I have referred to in this essay are all explorations of the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism and give – each in its own way – unique insights into the benefits and drawbacks of comparisons between the two traditions. They also each spell out the dangers involved in vague and muddled attempts to integrate the traditions in ways that ignore the fundamental differences that exist.

This theme of the value of comparative religion as a method is developed in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, which is compiled and edited by Kimberly Patton and Benjamin C. Ray. This text gives many perspectives on this subject and has been extremely useful in supplying a background to some of the ideas and perspectives I wish to discuss in the final

section of this work. This work is further supported by a related article from the scientific journal *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion: Journal of the North American Association for the Study of Religion* written by David M. Freidenreich. The article, *Comparisons Compared: A Methodological Survey of Comparisons of Religion from “A Magic Dwells” to A Magic Still Dwells*, explores both the state of modern comparative religion and the models of comparison that have used in recent times – both successfully and not-so-successfully. This work has been instructive in regard to choosing an appropriate model with which to approach the subject matter of this essay.

# Method

This work will involve an aspect of textual analysis and historical study, together with an attempt to implement a model from the field of comparative religion; that is, to “compare elements from multiple religious traditions only after examining them in their original contexts.”<sup>1</sup>

We can assume that there has been no historical “exchange” or “borrowing” between the two religious traditions in which these teachers developed their views and teachings (even though there is a small group of writers<sup>2</sup> who assert direct links between Jesus and the Buddhist tradition during his “Lost Years” before he started his ministry as described in the New Testament. However, these claims appear tenuous at best, and will not be referred to in this essay) so therefore it is important to try to view the teachings under investigation in the light of the traditions that have provided their foundation.

Freidenreich also states that a straightforward “presentation of similarities and differences” model is frequently used “in works that seek to promote or inform inter-religious dialogue.”<sup>3</sup> The shortcomings of this model, however, are that the results become little more than “catalogues of information about (the) comparands,”<sup>4</sup> though I feel that with an element of analysis, this approach can be useful in highlighting points of similarity and difference between traditions that, as stated, can be a starting point and foundation for dialogue.

Something I have tried to avoid in this essay is *evaluation of difference* – it is not my intention to prove that one teacher or tradition has a better grasp on a particular subject or aspect of spirituality than the other, or that one tradition is inherently “superior” to the other.

Even though I will include a short discussion of the possible value and negative aspects of comparisons between different traditions, it seems to me the act of comparing one thing with another – similar or otherwise – is an instinctive way of organizing and categorizing the reality in which we live, and is therefore an inevitable consequence of globalised society and a justification for taking a comparative view of the religious traditions that are available to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Freidenreich, 2004. Pg. 96

<sup>2</sup> For example, Gruber & Kersten (1995). *The Original Jesus*. Shaftsbury, Element Books.

<sup>3</sup> Freidenreich, 2004. Pg. 85

<sup>4</sup> Freidenreich, 2004. Pg. 86

# Outline

In this essay I shall first give a biographical presentation of Brother Lawrence's life. This will be followed by a description of mysticism combined with a religious-psychological analysis of Brother Lawrence's descriptions of his religious experiences.

After an outline of the central source of mindfulness teaching within Buddhism – that is, the *Maha Satipatthana Sutta* – I will give a description of Ajahn Sumedho's teachings on mindfulness and his methods of practice. I will then analyse some of the similarities and differences between this and Brother Lawrence's teachings and methods. This comparison will be complemented with more general reflections on the meaning and usefulness of the “meeting” between Christianity and Buddhism that seems to be taking place to a limited degree in the West, together with reflections on the value of comparative religion as a subject of research.

This essay will conclude with a summary of the subjects I have explored together with a list of the resources I have referred to.

There are several Buddhist terms that I have used in the original Pali form, which is the ancient oral language used by the Buddha and recorded in the *Theravadan Tripitaka* or “three baskets” - the collections of discourses, training rules for monks and the *Abidhamma* teachings, or systematic philosophy of mind. I have also included the Sanskrit form of those terms that are better known in the West.

# Background

## Biography of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection

Brother Lawrence – who’s lay-name was Nicolas Herman – was born around 1614 in Lorraine, which lies in eastern France. It is likely that he grew up in a relatively poor but actively religious family, with an uncle that was a Discalced Carmelite brother. Lawrence received an ordinary school education and it is said that he was quite bright, even if a little clumsy.

Lawrence was 18 years when he had his first religious experience – or “conversion” as he puts it – whilst sitting in woodland in winter and reflecting how, even though the trees around him showed no signs of life just then, they would soon blossom and leaves would grow forth. This produced in him a “high view of the Providence and Power of God”<sup>5</sup> which, he says, freed him from the matters of this world and generated an enormous love of God which never left him.

Even though this experience had a deep effect on Lawrence, it was not until six years later that he took the step to dedicate himself to the religious life. During this interim time he became a soldier (mostly because of poverty) in the Thirty Year’s War. There is little information available from this period of his life, but it is known that on one occasion he was captured by the opposing forces (who apparently were extremely impressed by Lawrence’s calm and piety, even in the face of their intimidation and threats) and that he received an injury to the sciatic nerve that forced him to leave the military and that left him lame for the rest of his life.

After a period as footman to a bank director, Lawrence took the decision to apply for entry into the Discalced Carmelite monastery in Paris. He was then around 26 years of age, and he was to reside there as a lay-brother for the rest of his life (though intelligent, he lacked the necessary theological training and qualifications to become a priest). He spent this period – around 40 years – dividing his time between work, formal prayer and his own practices to maintain and deepen the sense of God’s presence.

Even though much of Lawrence’s time was spent in the monastery’s kitchen and as shoe-maker for

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<sup>5</sup>Lawrence, pg. 4

the other brothers it had no negative effect on his religious practices and prayer life. On the contrary, he described how, after a few years in the monastery, it made no difference for him if he was working or doing his formal prayers – his experience of God’s presence was always equally strong.<sup>6</sup>

It is said that this “contact with the Divine” radiated out from Lawrence and that has regularly received visits from priests and other monks and nuns that wanted to learn more of his methods and teachings. One of these visitors was Joseph de Beaufort, whom we have to thank for writing down summaries of his conversations with Lawrence and later, after Lawrence's death in 1691, collecting together letters that Lawrence had sent to other acquaintances. This collection was released as a small book – *The Practice of the Presence of God: The Best Rule of Holy Life*.

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<sup>6</sup>Lawrence, pg. 6

# Investigation

## Brother Lawrence's mystical teaching

Brother Lawrence's teachings and methods are simple, direct and practical, with little of the complicated and systematic theological reflections that we find in the writings of, for example, St. Teresa or St. John of the Cross. Therefore, to help give a clearer insight into Brother Lawrence's experiences and reflections and what “mysticism” means in general, I shall use as a model the five aspects or dimensions described by Geels and Wikström in the book *Den religiösa människan*.<sup>7</sup> These five dimensions are the actual mystical experience, the experience's consequences, the ritual conduct, the intellectual dimension and the religious traditions relevance.

### *Brother Lawrence's mystical experiences*

Brother Lawrence received his first mystical experience (that we know of) when he was around 18 years old, before he entered the monastery in Paris. In the First Conversation from the book *The Practice of the Presence of God* he describes this experience as follows:

*That in the winter, seeing a tree stripped of it's leaves, and considering that within a little time, the leaves would be renewed, and after that the flowers and fruit appear, he received a high view of the Providence and Power of God... this view had perfectly set him loose from the world, and kindled in him such a love for God...*<sup>8</sup>

On another occasion Lawrence describes how:

*I feel all my spirit and soul lift itself up without any care or effort of mine; and it continues as it were suspended and firmly fixed in God, as in it's center and place of rest.*

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<sup>7</sup>A. Geels and O. Wikström 2006, pg. 254-255

<sup>8</sup>Lawrence, pg. 4

These are clear examples of spontaneous mystical experiences that appeared without any effort or conscious preparations from Lawrence. It is possible that Lawrence (like many other mystics and others that have had mystical experiences) had been through a period of, for example, great anxiety, stress or some kind of life-crises before the experience<sup>9</sup> but there is too little information on his life before entering the monastery to answer this question.

These examples can also be interpreted as mystical experiences within a profane context (that is, a mystical experience that occurs outside of a situation or place with a strong traditional religious connection) such as during a walk in a forest, within a prison cell, whilst sailing in a boat, etc. The *interpretation* however is, in Lawrence's example, strongly coloured by his religious background (this I shall return to later).

Lawrence describes also how at times these mystical experiences were so strong that he felt compelled to try to hide his rapture and joy from those around him. He states that:

*When outward business diverted him a little from the thought of God, a fresh remembrance coming from God invested his soul, and so inflamed and transported him that it was difficult for him to contain himself...*<sup>10</sup>

*...his soul (in some of his correspondence he speaks of himself in the third-person) has been filled with joys so continual, and sometimes so great, that he is forced to use means to moderate them, and hinder their appearing outwardly.*<sup>11</sup>

(We can assume that Lawrence's restraint was caused both by his own sense of modesty but also not to provoke negative reactions from his fellows in the monastery and avoid the possibility of being accused of boastfulness or self-promotion.)

For Brother Lawrence, God was the ever-present Father – a presence that, according to Lawrence himself, could be felt in the heart and soul of anyone who made the love of God the goal of life. His mysticism consisted of a silent and continuous prayer to God that wished for nothing more than that God should do precisely what He will in his life.

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<sup>9</sup>Geels and Wikström, 2006. Pg. 217

<sup>10</sup>Lawrence, pg. 9

<sup>11</sup>Lawrence, pg. 20

## *The consequences of Lawrence's mystical experiences*

The most central consequence of Brother Lawrence's mystical experiences was his constant sense of God's presence in all aspects of his life. We can say that he had a clear awareness of God's reality and the relevance that this knowledge should have in the every-day lives of men and women. This awareness is a fundamental step beyond faith, as he says in the Eleventh Letter: "*I believe no more, but I see.*"<sup>12</sup>

If we look at Lawrence's earliest mystical experience – that of the tree in winter – it is easy to wonder why he didn't immediately begin living a "holy life" or enter the Carmelite monastery that his uncle belonged to, which was situated not long from his home town. Instead of this, he enters the military, and after receiving an injury which he sustained in combat, he gains employment as a footman.

It seems obvious that Lawrence's first mystical experience must have had a profound effect on him, but it must also be remembered that he was still only in his late teens, and the idea of living in a monastery may not have been that appealing. We have no information on how his uncle experienced life as a monk, and his influence could have been a factor – positive or negative – in Lawrence's decisions at this time.

One thing I think we can be fairly sure of is that an experience of the sort that Lawrence had would require a long period of time to deepen and be "digested" fully. The description of this experience in the text is given by a much older Lawrence, with an understanding of these matters that had developed over more than 30 years of monastic training and reflection. As a young man trying to build a clear understanding of what had happened and what the experience meant in his life, it could have led to a sense of confusion or uncertainty. Or maybe it just never occurred to him to enter a monastery at that time.

Another consequence or result of his mystical experiences was the trust he felt when faced with all the different situations he met with in his daily life, and this is something he returns to quite often in the conversations and letters contained in the book. After a few initial, turbulent years in the

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence, pg. 28-29

monastery, there developed a balance and calm within him, and all anxiety and uncertainty disappeared – not because he had an unrealistic appreciation of his own capabilities or through some form of “positive-thinking” strategy, but because he *knew* that his life was completely in God's hands and that He would always do that which was best for Lawrence:

*...he had so often experienced the ready succours of Divine Grace upon all occasions, that from the same experience, when he had business to do, he did not think of it beforehand: but when it was time to do it, he found in God... all that was fit for him to do... without anticipating care...*<sup>13</sup>

From this statement from Lawrence can we assume that he was very well-acquainted with some form of present-moment awareness that is taught and recommended by many modern spiritual teachers,<sup>14</sup> and which resonates especially strongly with Ajahn Sumedho's teachings? This point I will return to later.

Lawrence's attitude does not suggest either that he regarded God as some kind of divine bodyguard that would never let any harm come to him, but that God did everything possible to bring Lawrence closer to Him – sometimes through joy, sometimes through sickness, sometimes through suffering etc:

*...the greatest pleasures or pains of this world were not to be compared with what he had experienced of both kinds in the spiritual state; so that he was careful for nothing and feared nothing...*<sup>15</sup>

## *Lawrence's ritual conduct*

This section shall focus on the practices and techniques that Lawrence used to maintain and strengthen his awareness of God's presence – that is, what did he actually *do*?

From his letters and conversations we find that he actually had quite a low opinion of the practices that were popular at that time – ascetic training, visualisation techniques and long periods of

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<sup>13</sup>Lawrence, pg. 9

<sup>14</sup>Eckhart Tolle and Andrew Cohen are two examples

<sup>15</sup>Lawrence, pg. 8

isolation, amongst other things. He states that “...*all bodily mortifications are useless...*”<sup>16</sup> and that he rather reflected on God through “...*devout sentiments, and submission to the lights of faith, that by studied reasonings and elaborate meditations.*”<sup>17</sup>

Lawrence himself summarised his own opinions and views on how one should best walk the path to God by saying:

*...the most excellent method... of going to God was that of doing our common business without any view of pleasing men... and... purely for the love of God.*<sup>18</sup>

This theme of unifying the holy with the profane in our daily existence is repeated many times in his letters and conversations, and is often complimented with practical advice and guidance. This is clearly stated when he says, for instance:

*...that to arrive at such resignation as God requires, we should watch attentively over all the passions which mingle as well in spiritual things as those of a grosser nature...*<sup>19</sup>

This statement indicates an attitude of attentiveness and mindfulness – which I shall discuss in more detail later, in relation to Ajahn Sumedho’s teaching and to mindfulness within Buddhism in general – but it can also be seen as an insightful warning against a black-and-white perspective on the holy-life and against spiritual pride and arrogance that can arise when one has gone along the spiritual path a certain distance.

I will return to the theme of Brother Lawrence’s methods and practices later in this work, when I discuss the similarities of these practices with those of Ajahn Sumedho’s.

## *The intellectual dimensions*

From Brother Lawrence's letters and conversations it is clear that which was central in his thoughts

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<sup>16</sup>Lawrence, pg. 7

<sup>17</sup>Lawrence, pg. 12

<sup>18</sup>Lawrence, pg.11

<sup>19</sup>Lawrence, pg. 5

and what he most wanted to share with others – that is to say, his experiences regarding Gods presence and how we can open to this presence in the most effective way. He expresses this focus saying:

*Were I a preacher, I should above all other things preach the practice of the presence of God; and were I a director, I should advise all the world to do it: so necessary do I think it...*<sup>20</sup>

Lawrence attempted to integrate his spirituality and his mystical insights into his everyday life and this, it can be assumed, will have affected his way of viewing many things and his thoughts regarding different aspects of the spiritual life. We see, for instance, that for many years Lawrence actually feared that he would be damned:

*...he had long been troubled in mind from a certain belief that he should be damned... but that he had thus reasoned with himself about it: I did not engage in a religious life but for the love of GOD, and I have endeavored to act only for Him; whatever becomes of me, whether I be lost or saved, I will always continue to act purely for the love of GOD.*<sup>21</sup>

This passage reflects his belief that man is not always able to understand the meaning of Gods actions (or lack of action) but that “God knows best what we need.”<sup>22</sup>

Another example of how Lawrence interpreted his experiences on an intellectual level is his ideas regarding the need to “empty the heart” of all that – in his opinion – is unessential in the spiritual life, and thereby create a vast emptiness into which God may enter:

*I know that for the right practice of it (that is, the practice of the presence of God), the heart must be empty of all other things; because God will possess the heart alone; and as He cannot possess it alone, without emptying it of all besides, so neither can he act there, and do in it what He pleases, unless it be left vacant to Him.*<sup>23</sup>

It is interesting to compare this viewpoint, and in particular this last statement, with Lawrence's description of his first clear mystical experience in the woods at the end of winter, and the circumstances surrounding this experience. That is to say, his description contains no details of any

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<sup>20</sup>Lawrence, pg. 22

<sup>21</sup>Lawrence, pg. 6

<sup>22</sup>Lawrence, pg. 33

<sup>23</sup>Lawrence, pg. 22

kind of preparations on his side – no meditation, no prayers, no techniques for emptying the heart – and yet, this was probably one of the most intensive and life-changing experiences of his life. God entered his heart unbidden, requiring no elaborate invitation, and seemingly made Himself at home.

This does not seem to be at all an unusual event in the lives of some well-known mystics, where some form of spiritual awakening takes place or, as is often the case with those that have grown-up within or follow a tradition with a central “Creator” or divine being, that God “enters” the individual and remains there permanently, or, at the very least, makes certain changes within the individual’s way of looking at things. I think we can therefore assume that for the individuals in question – including Brother Lawrence – the spiritual practices they describe have as a goal to *deepen* the communion and awareness of God’s presence that has already spontaneously arisen, whilst for the rest of us, who have yet to experience such profound contact with God, these practices work to prepare the ground, so to speak.

### *The influence of the religious tradition*

Brother Lawrence belonged to the Discalced Carmelite Order that developed as a reform-movement within the Carmelite Order during the second-half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This reform-movement was founded in Spain by St Teresa of Avila and led by a “working-partnership” between her and St John of the Cross. Central to the Discalced Carmelite Order is the contemplative lifestyle with special emphasis on prayer. When establishing the Order, St Teresa stated that “prayer must be the foundation on which this house is built.”<sup>24</sup> The word *discalced* means “barefoot”, indicating they wore sandals and that this in turn is a symbol for the values they wished to endorse – namely simplicity, poverty and humility.

Another of the foundational principles within the Order was the necessity of removing the superfluous in religious forms and practices, leaving only the essential; that is, that which is needed to establish a union with God. This theme permeates the whole movement, and Brother Lawrence’s writings and conversations (as I have already described above).

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<sup>24</sup>Quote taken from: <http://www.carmelite.org.uk/carmway.html>. The quotation itself is from St. Teresa’s book *The Way of Perfection*

There are also many references in Lawrence's book to traditional Catholic ideas regarding sin, regret, sickness, suffering, happiness, death and redemption, amongst others:

*Give him thanks... for the many favours he has done to so miserable a sinner as I am.*<sup>25</sup>

*I consider myself as the most wretched of men, full of sores and corruption, and who has committed all sorts of crimes against his King; touched with a sensible regret I confess to Him all my wickedness. I ask His forgiveness...*<sup>26</sup>

*I do not pray that you may be delivered from your pains; but I pray God earnestly that He would give you strength and patience to bear them as long as He pleases. Comfort yourself with Him who holds you fastened to the cross... The men of the world do not comprehend these truths... (and) suffer like what they are, and not like Christians.*<sup>27</sup>

From these and many other quotes can we assume that Lawrence's perspective on his experiences, on religion, and on life in general, was strongly influenced by the tradition in which he lived and which was dominant in his surroundings. However, I believe it is important not to forget that there exists a fundamental difference between the spiritual life of an accomplished mystic and that of the “ordinary” faithful. Whilst the religious life and knowledge of God lies on the *belief*-plane for most of us, for the mystics it lies on the *experience*-plane.<sup>28</sup> This difference gives some explanation as to why some of the statements of mystics can seem incomprehensible, contradictory to common-sense, outrageous, or even blasphemous, and which has led to tensions and conflicts even with those who share the same religious tradition.

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<sup>25</sup>Lawrence, pg. 15

<sup>26</sup>Lawrence, pg. 17

<sup>27</sup>Lawrence, pg. 28

<sup>28</sup>Geels & Wikström, 2006. Pg. 252

## Central sources of mindfulness teachings within Theravada Buddhism

The most fundamental of Buddha's teachings on mindfulness is found in the *Satipatthāna Sutta*, which translates as The Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. This discourse was given to a gathering of *bhikkhus* or Buddhist monks while the Buddha was residing in the town of Kammāsadamma in the Kuru region in North West India and presents a systematic description of the methods and practices that are fundamental and essential if one is to realize enlightenment or *nibbāna* (*nirvana* in Sanskrit). Nibbāna is often translated as “extinction” or “cessation” which sometimes leads to the perception of Buddhism as a negative or nihilistic teaching. However, the term is used in the sense of an extinction of *the causes of suffering* – that is, attachment to craving. The process is often described in the metaphor of a fire that is extinguished due to a lack of fuel.

The four foundations or objects of mindfulness and contemplation described in the discourse are mindfulness of the body, of feelings, of mind and of mind objects. In the sutta this teaching is being addressed to the *Sangha* or gathering of monks, hence it is stated “a *bhikkhu* dwells perceiving again and again the body...” but the teaching applies to all who consider themselves to be disciples of the Buddha.

Mindfulness of the body means the practitioner should reflect over the body (*kāya*) as being just the body – not as mine or the self, but just as a phenomenon – again and again with diligence, clear understanding and mindfulness.<sup>29</sup> *Anāpānasati* or mindfulness of breathing is the most common practice but the teaching includes mindfulness and contemplation of the body's mortality, of bodily postures and movement, of the repulsive aspects of the body, and of the four elements (fire, earth, water and air) of which the body is constructed.

Mindfulness of feelings means the practitioner should reflect (just as with mindfulness of the body) over feelings (*vedanā*) as being just feelings – not as mine or the self, but just as phenomena – again and again with diligence, clear understanding and mindfulness. In this teaching feelings are categorized as being either pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant (that is, neutral feelings).

Mindfulness of the mind means the practitioner should reflect over the mind (*citta*) as being just the

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<sup>29</sup>Maha Satipatthana Sutta, pg. 7

mind – not as mine or the self, but just as a phenomenon – again and again with diligence, clear understanding and mindfulness. This section relates to the practitioners *state of mind* – that is, he/she should know if the mind is tainted with for example greed, or not. This applies also to angry, dull, deluded, distracted, “superior” and concentrated states of mind.

Mindfulness of mental objects means the practitioner should reflect over mental objects (*dhammas*) as being just mental objects – not as mine or the self, but just as phenomena – again and again with diligence, clear understanding and mindfulness. The mental objects referred to in the sutta are the five hindrances, the five aggregates of clinging, the six internal and external sense bases, the seven factors of enlightenment and the Four Noble Truths. Of course there are many other phenomena that could be regarded as mental objects, but these are seen as being the most essential for the dedicated practitioner to have deep insight into and extensive knowledge of.

As in many of the Buddhist suttas, there is a great number of lists and much repetition in the Satipatthāna Sutta – especially in the section dealing with mental objects. Therefore I will give only an outline of the relevant *dhammas* here.

The five hindrances are the mental objects that most effectively block the practitioner’s progress on the Buddhist path to liberation. These five are sense-desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, distraction and worry, and doubt.

The five aggregates of clinging are the objects dependent on which the four types of clinging arise (clinging to sense-pleasures, clinging to wrong views, clinging to the belief that other paths can lead to liberation and clinging to the view that there exists a separate self of soul). These five aggregates are material forms, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness.

The six internal and external sense bases are “the things that expand and extend the range of the mind”<sup>30</sup> beyond itself, so to speak. These bases are the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the tongue and tastes, the nose and smells, the body and tactile objects, and the mind and mental objects. In this teaching, fetters arise dependent upon the interplay of these bases and therefore should be seen clearly and with wisdom by the practitioner.

The seven factors of enlightenment are mindfulness, investigation, effort, rapture, tranquility, concentration and equanimity. These seven develop and build each upon the other and, as their

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<sup>30</sup>Maha Satipatthāna Sutta, note 81

name suggests, are integral aspects of the enlightened mind. It is also said that their appearance depends upon a wise attention that sees clearly the three characteristics of all phenomena – impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and void of a soul or self.

The Four Noble Truths are the foundation to the entire teaching of the Buddha and was the subject of his very first discourse – the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* or the Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of Truth – given to five ascetic friends of his at Sarnath, India. These four truths are: *dukkha*, the cause of the arising of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha* and the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*.

Whilst *dukkha* is often translated as “suffering” this seems to be quite an inadequate definition and can easily reinforce the perception of Buddhism being overly negative and pessimistic, as I mentioned earlier. It appears that “unsatisfactory” is a superior translation inasmuch as it gives a clearer sense of the fact that nothing that arises dependent on other factors (in other words, all that has form) can lead to lasting happiness and peace. Whilst the “things of the world” can bring a certain measure of joy, excitement, pleasure, and even contentment, these are always impermanent and inevitably lead to their opposites. Thus there is created a tension between what we imagine the world to be or should be and the realities of existence – a situation which will always, sooner or later, lead to dissatisfaction.

The Good News, however, is that the Buddha also describes a path leading to the cessation of unsatisfactoriness (this way of describing phenomena or ultimate reality in terms of what it is *not* is common within mysticism - to describe the goal of this path as “complete satisfaction” would be misleading and inaccurate). This eightfold path consists of Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

## Ajahn Sumedho's teaching on mindfulness

Ajahn Sumedho (*ajahn* means “teacher”) has been a monk since 1966. After training for 10 years under Venerable Ajahn Chah, a well-known and respected Thai meditation master, he was invited to establish a *sangha* (a Buddhist community, specifically relating to *bhikkhus* or monks) in England. Since that time he has been the driving force in building up two main monasteries in England, with “daughter”-monasteries in USA, Australia, New Zealand and Europe.<sup>31</sup>

One thing that makes it difficult to analyze Ajahn Sumedho's experiences in a similar way to that which I have done with Brother Lawrence is the fact that it is an offence (according to *vinaya* or the writings concerned with the conduct of monks and nuns) for a monk to talk about his mystical or spiritual experiences or accomplishments with anyone who is not a Buddhist monk. Therefore I shall give a more “general” overview of his teachings as described in the book *Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless*.

Sumedho seems to use the terms “meditation” and “mindfulness” in quite a flexible way that makes it difficult to set clear boundaries between the two – assuming that there even exists a difference between them in his teaching. However, the centrality of *anapanasati* (or mindfulness of the breath) in his teaching is clearly stated, and is the ground upon which his interpretations, reflections, and his teachings are built.

As already stated, *anapanasati* is probably the most widely used aspect of the “mindfulness of the body” teaching from *Satipatthāna sutta*, and although very simple in theory, the practice of it requires great patience and determination. To practice *anapanasati* means to be mindful and aware of the breathing – not to alter it in any way, but to simply pay attention to the in-breath and the out-breath. What makes this difficult and frustrating for most is the restless activity of our minds; our thinking, our fantasies etc.<sup>32</sup> The benefits of the practice, however, are relaxation and calm, and a developing of insight into the way things are in ourselves and the world around us. It is even stated in the *Anapanasati Sutta* that development of this practice can “bring clear knowing and release”<sup>33</sup> - that is *nibbāna*, or awakening or enlightenment.

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<sup>31</sup>Sumedho, 1987. Back cover

<sup>32</sup>Sumedho, 1987. Pg. 13

<sup>33</sup>*Anapanasati Sutta*

Another important theme from the Buddhist teachings that Ajahn Sumedho takes up quite often in his book are the three characteristics or marks of existence, namely *anicca* (all phenomena are impermanent), *dukkha* (the general state of dissatisfaction and suffering. See above) and *anatta* (all phenomena are not-self, not me; are without an enduring essence or soul). One of the goals of mindfulness are to see these characteristics with clear insight; to develop a deep, first-hand understanding of their meaning and consequences that goes beyond a mere intellectual grasp of the words and concepts.

Through mindfulness and meditation we can observe, for instance, hatred or greed within ourselves, but without having to identify with these feelings or energies. Sumedho points out that greed cannot observe itself – that is, that which observes greed must be something other than greed, and therefore greed is not-self or *anatta*.<sup>34</sup>

One sign of progress in mindfulness and meditation practices is that the mind is “detached, alert and balanced.”<sup>35</sup> Even if at first glance it sounds a little contradictory, Sumedho also warns against setting up the attainment of a calm and balanced mind as a *goal* – it isn't something we can control in the ordinary sense of the word. It is through observation and mindful attention that we see the true character of phenomena, and it is this that leads naturally to a calm state. One can almost say that calm and balance are positive “side-effects” of the mindfulness and meditation practices.

According to Sumedho it is very important to be aware of our interpretations and judgments of phenomena, especially when it concerns our views of ourselves and other people around us. We sometimes believe we see things as they are, but reality is usually distorted by and filtered through our presumptions and prejudices, which all too often are quite negative. Reality is then perceived in a way that makes it conform to our expectations. One of the useful tools that Sumedho describes in relation to this kind of problem is *mettā*, which is usually translated as loving kindness.

*Mettā* is both a specific practice (*mettā bhāvana*) and an attitude within Buddhism. According to Sumedho it is not about *liking* everything we meet in life, which would be totally unrealistic, but that we can generate a feeling of love and tolerance towards those situations, people, feelings etc. that we normally regard as oppressive or uncomfortable.<sup>36</sup> For Sumedho, loving kindness or *mettā* means that we don't create problems around situations or circumstances that already exist. We can refuse to get stuck in aversion and not react to someone else's unpleasantness – just let it be, in other

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<sup>34</sup>Sumedho, 1987. Pg. 20

<sup>35</sup>Sumedho, 1987. Pg. 26

<sup>36</sup>Sumedho, 1987. Pg. 35

words.

Of course, some situations require action from us, whilst others demand patience and tolerance. This is reminiscent of Reinhold Niebuhr's *Serenity Prayer*:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference.*

A situation that Sumedho tells of as an example of this practice is of when he was compelled to use the Tube or subway in London. He describes how he felt great aversion to the whole experience – to sitting in the dirty, full-packed carriages; all the noise and bad smells; having to walk through the long, dingy tunnels to get to the platforms, etc. In this situation it was easy for his thoughts to become dark and negative and to fasten on all that was unpleasant and uncomfortable, but it was also a wonderful opportunity to practice patience, friendliness and equanimity – towards the situation itself, the people involved, the environment, and especially towards himself.<sup>37</sup> This last point is especially important when we consider how many of us tend to turn our anger and resentments in on ourselves, and is why the mettā practices usually begin by directing love, acceptance and well-wishes to oneself (before moving on to friends and family, to those we have neutral feelings toward, and finally those whom we dislike or could regard as enemies).

As Ajahn Sumedho describes, it is impossible to completely avoid “problematic” people, and situations which we find unpleasant, but we can – with mindfulness and meditation as a support – receive benefit from such situations and meetings in our everyday lives if we use these opportunities as material for our self-development and insight. Sumedho summarises his own way of living with this teaching on mindfulness as follows:

*In the monastery what we do is get up in the morning, do the chanting, meditate, sit, clean the monastery, do the cooking, sit, stand, walk, work; whatever, just take it as it comes, one thing at a time. So, being with the way things are is non-attachment, that brings peacefulness and ease. Life changes and we can watch it change, we can adapt to the changingness of the sensory world, whatever it is. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, we can always endure and cope with life, no matter what happens to us. If we realise the truth, we realise inner peacefulness.<sup>38</sup>*

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<sup>37</sup>Sumedho, 1987. Pg. 37

<sup>38</sup>Sumedho, 1987. Pg. 34

# Analysis

Even though Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection was born nearly 400 years ago, and lived a life that is quite unlike that most of us live today, his words and his teachings seem to resonate with many, and this interest seems to be growing.<sup>39</sup> It is striking for me to find descriptions and statements by Lawrence that seem to bear a strong resemblance, not only to mystics of the same age and tradition as Lawrence, but even to modern spiritual teachings and teachers with completely different backgrounds.

In the preceding sections of this essay I have described some foundational aspects of the teachings and methods of Brother Lawrence and Ajahn Sumedho, together with an overview of the central source of mindfulness teachings within all Buddhist schools and traditions. Now I will explore some of the “meetings” between these two teachers – their teachings and practices – together with their interpretations of their experiences. This exploration will be aided by references to the current dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity and the question of what kind of “relationship” is possible between these two fundamentally differing traditions.

Even though Ajahn Sumedho’s teachings are firmly grounded in the Theravadan Buddhist tradition, I will sometimes refer to other Buddhist sources in order to emphasize certain comparable aspects of these teachings. I have also chosen to focus the comparative aspect of the analysis on elements of the religious life that are of central importance to all seekers of truth, salvation and liberation: happiness, the question of self-power or other-power etc. Hopefully this will add another element of “usefulness” to the work.

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<sup>39</sup>There are several websites dedicated to his teachings, and the book *The Practice of the Presence of God* has been released in dozens of editions by different publishers.

## Comparison between the teachings of Brother Lawrence and Ajahn Sumedho

Brother Lawrence's description of his powerful and transformative experience that was triggered by his reflecting over the leafless tree in a winter landscape has a very Zen-like feel to it, reminiscent of Japanese Zen Buddhist poems and stories of *satori*, or spontaneous enlightenment experiences. Satori is often described as being part of the process of awakening – that is, one takes another step on the road to awakening with every experience of satori, but these “small awakenings” must occur many times before a permanent and full awakening can take place. However, it does seem that for certain individuals this process is more intense and deeper than for most others.

The Zen monk poet Ryōkan would probably understand Lawrence's experience better than most, and shared a similar capacity for seeing expressions of the divine or the infinite in the natural world, and is the theme of many of his poems. For example:

*After a night of rain, water covers the village path.  
This morning the thick grass by my hut is cool.  
In the window, distant mountains the colour of blue-green jade.  
Outside, a river flows like shimmering silk.  
Under a cliff near my hut, I wash out my sore ear  
with pure spring water.  
In the trees, cicadas recite their fall verse.  
I had prepared my robe and staff for a walk,  
But the quiet beauty keeps me here.<sup>40</sup>*

Nature speaks with a silent voice, and provides many of the symbols that mystics have used to express and communicate their experiences and insights. There seems to be some quality in nature that resonates with the truth these mystics experience within themselves. This resonance can captivate them, as in the example from Ryōkan above, and I believe this connection with the natural world is something many “ordinary” people (those who do not regard themselves as mystics) share a sense of.

Although Ryōkan can sometimes come across as quite “dreamy”, being taken up with beauty and play, both Lawrence and Sumedho seem to be more practical types; rougher around the edges, one

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<sup>40</sup>Ryōkan, 2006. Pg.24

can say. This straightforwardness is reflected in the simplicity and directness of their teachings and practices, and their strong emphasis on the importance of integrating spiritual practice into all aspects of daily life – both the lovely and the not-so-lovely.

For them, prayer, mindfulness and meditation is not something that is performed only according to formal prayer schedules or during meditation retreats; it is an integral part of life, and everything we meet with can be regarded as an opportunity to stay open and mindful, or to praise God and maintain awareness of His presence. This aspect of integration seems essential for a balanced development which avoids a “splitting” of the holy from the mundane, and vice versa.

Lawrence indicates that he teaches a form of training that develops with practice, and that this method is part of a process that lead one's awareness deeper into Gods presence:

*That in order to form a habit of conversing with GOD continually, and referring all we do to Him; we must at first apply to Him with some diligence: but after a little care we should find His love inwardly excite us to it without difficulty.*<sup>41</sup>

This is reminiscent of many types of mental training, and Buddhist mindfulness and meditation practice is no exception. When describing the outlines of anapanasati practice, Ajahn Sumedho reiterates the need for patience and persistence, especially when one is new to the practice. He also lightens the load, so to speak, by reminding the practitioner not to set-up unrealistic goals – to have the expectation that one can sit and meditate for 30 minutes without any disturbing thoughts arising is merely creating the conditions for failure. However, to aim at being mindful for the length of a single in-breath *is possible*.<sup>42</sup> Then one can aim to be mindful for a single out-breath, and so on. This perspective shifts the focus away from our ambitions and striving, and brings us back to a present-moment awareness that has little interest in what happened yesterday or what will happen tomorrow.

In the Third Conversation Lawrence gives a clear example of this kind of present moment awareness when he describes how, when he has some kind of business to attend to, he did not think or worry about it beforehand; when it was time to act “he found in God, as in a clear mirror, all that was fit for him to do.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Lawrence, pg. 6

<sup>42</sup>Sumedho, 1987. Pg.23

<sup>43</sup> Lawrence, pg. 9

An important aspect of Lawrence's practice is the emphasis on bringing the awareness of the presence of God into all we do. He states that:

*Our sanctification did not depend upon changing our works. Instead, it depended on doing that for God's sake which we commonly do for our own... (and that) ...the most excellent method he had found for going to God was that of doing our common business without any view of pleasing men but purely for the love of God.*<sup>44</sup>

*The time of business... (he continues) ...does not with me differ from the time of prayer. In the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Supper.*<sup>45</sup>

These statements can be compared to Sumedho's "mindfulness of the ordinary."<sup>46</sup> Although some of the meditation practices he describes, such as mindfulness of the breathing, are best performed during "sittings" (where one sits on the floor, with crossed legs and straight back), the other mindfulness practices can and should be used as much as possible in all activities of life – here there is also little division between formal and informal practice. For example, his "sound of silence" technique – awareness of a vibrational sound in the mind<sup>47</sup> - uses an object that can be the focus of attention at any time or place, as long as the practitioner doesn't get lost in thought. This applies equally to mindfulness of the body.

Lawrence and Sumedho talk also about wandering thoughts as an obstacle to meditation and prayer, and anyone who has practiced these knows why this subject is so relevant. Both offer the same advice; when you discover that your attention has wandered from the object or focus of meditation or prayer, one should accept that this has happened and then return the attention back to the object – that is, the breath, God's presence, a mantra etc.

There are several points to remember in this process that are mentioned both by Lawrence and Sumedho. Firstly, it is important to accept that the mind will wander – it is unavoidable that the mind will seek out other things – and that to be angry or disheartened when this happens will only have negative consequences for the individual in question. One must accept things as they are, and not set up unrealistic goals or impossible expectations of oneself. Therefore, when we become

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<sup>44</sup> Lawrence, pg. 11

<sup>45</sup> Lawrence, pg. 13

<sup>46</sup> Sumedho, 1987. Pg. 39-40

<sup>47</sup> Sumedho, 1987. Pg. 50

aware (when the mind is lost in thoughts, mindfulness and awareness are absent) that the mind has wandered, it is simply to return the attention to the object with gentleness and humility.<sup>48</sup>

This process of the mind wandering and a gentle returning of awareness to the object of meditation or prayer will repeat itself many times during a sitting or prayer session, and this is why a certain steadfastness and persistence is necessary if one is to progress. When Sumedho talks of *vipassana* (insight) meditation he makes it clear that one should use these wanderings and distractions to develop insight into the way things are. For example, the mind wandering from the object we have chosen can cause a certain amount of suffering or frustration (*dukkha*); however, as we watch the mind and thoughts we see that they are always hopping from one thing to another, always changing (*annicca*); if we look at these thoughts clearly, we see that they are not “I”, not who we are, and slowly learn not to identify with them (*annatta*).

Brother Lawrence, however, regards these distractions and disturbances in prayer as a trial or test of our love for God. God will, as it were, test our devotion and faithfulness by creating difficulties, and thus ensure we are not only “fair-weather friends” who abandon our prayers and faith in God when faced with hardship. This appears also to be a reminder from Lawrence that a life lived in the love of God is not just about ecstasy, joy and light – sometimes faith will be tested to the point where one believes it is impossible to continue. During these times “a complete act of resignation”<sup>49</sup> is required.

In Brother Lawrence's words there appears a certain “tension” between the Christian doctrine of the sinfulness of man, with which Lawrence often interprets his existence, and his own contentment in life. On many occasions he states his own worthlessness and miserableness (see the section *The influence of the religious tradition* above) but the fact is that he was mostly joyful and happy in his day-to-day existence, especially under the second half of his life. For example:

*He is now so accustomed to that Divine presence, that he receives from it continual succours upon all occasions...*<sup>50</sup>

*...he passed his life in continual joy...*<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Lawrence, pg. 23

<sup>49</sup>Lawrence, pg. 4

<sup>50</sup> Lawrence, pg. 20

<sup>51</sup> Lawrence, pg. 12

From a Buddhist perspective, however, this joy and happiness is completely understandable. As we have already seen, joy is one of the seven factors of enlightenment that must be developed if one is to progress on the path to awakening. In the Dhammapada it states that:

*The bhikkhu (monk) who experiences great joy, and has faith in the religion of the Buddha, will attain the place of peace, the satisfaction of stilling the functions of the mind.*<sup>52</sup>

In another of his letters Lawrence makes the following statement:

*...those devotions are only means to attain to the end. Once we have established a habit of the practice of the presence of God, we are then with Him who is our end. We have no need to return to the means...*<sup>53</sup>

This bears a striking resemblance to Buddha's raft-metaphor that appears in the *Alagaddupama Sutta* from the *Majjhima Nikaya* (one of the collections of suttas). In this sutta the Buddha describes a man who decides to cross a river, even though there is no bridge or ferry nearby. He takes sticks, rope etc. and builds himself a raft, which he then uses to paddle himself to the other shore. Buddha then asks the group of monks present which is right – for the man to then pick up the raft, thinking thus:

*How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don't I, having hoisted it on my head or carrying on my back, go wherever I like?*

Or would be better for the man to simply leave the raft where it is, thinking:

*How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore. Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?*

The Buddha, unsurprisingly, indicates the latter as being the correct response, saying:

*In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the raft. In the same way, monks, I have*

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<sup>52</sup>Dhammapada, verse 381

<sup>53</sup>Lawrence, pg. 23

*taught the Dhamma (Dharma in Sanskrit) compared to a raft, for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of holding onto. Understanding the Dhamma as taught compared to a raft, you should let go even of dhammas, to say nothing of non-dhammas.*

This metaphor can be interpreted as meaning the shore on which the man stood (and on which most of the rest of us stand) represents this world or life lived without insight and right understanding. The river represents the stream of distractions and ignorance that we must overcome through our efforts in order to come to the other shore; that is, awakening or nibbana. Once there, one must let go of everything – all dhammas, and even the Dhamma itself.

This process of letting-go of all attachment leads to an interesting difference between Sumedho and Lawrence. For Lawrence, the experiences of God's presence have an inherent value because they come from, and through contact with, God:

*Please give Him thanks with me, for His great goodness towards me, which I can never sufficiently express, and for the many favours he has done to so miserable a sinner as I am.*<sup>54</sup>

Sumedho, I believe, would regard this attitude as attachment to pleasant sensory experiences, which should be let-go of, even though these experiences may be very inspiring and uplifting. Even extreme conditions – such as Heaven or Hell – are, in reality (or according to the Buddhist teaching), nothing more than simply conditions that arise and cease; therefore, faith and attachment to these conditions inevitably leads to disappointment and suffering.<sup>55</sup>

In regard to other important differences between the two religious traditions in question, one matter that is important to raise is whether the individual is wholly responsible for realising liberation, or is help from God or some other divine being is essential. In Theravadan Buddhism the answer is clear – one must do the work oneself, with guidance from the teachings and wise teachers. In the Dhammapada, verse 276 it states:

*The awakened ones (that is, the Buddha's) can only point the way; we must make the effort ourselves.*

In Lawrence's teaching, and Christianity in general, this perspective is rejected – here, mankind is

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<sup>54</sup> Lawrence, pg. 15

<sup>55</sup> Sumedho, 1987. Pg.16

helpless without Gods assistance and help. Man is a weak and feeble creature that is destined for an unhappy fate if God does not choose to give us strength, hope, insight, and inspiration. For this to happen, we must humbly ask for Gods help:

*...when an occasion of practicing some virtue offered, he addressed himself to GOD, saying, LORD, I cannot do this unless You enable me; and that then he received strength more than sufficient. That when he failed in his duty, he only confessed his fault, saying to GOD, I shall never do otherwise, if You leave me to myself; 'tis you must hinder my falling, and mend what is amiss.<sup>56</sup>*

However, as Thompson points out, the concept of assistance from an “other-power” was developed in later forms of Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>57</sup> In Shin Buddhism, for example, the concept of transference of merit and good karma is developed to the point where a Bodhisattva can “rescue” another sentient being by releasing them from their bad karma; and in Pure Land Buddhism, Amida Buddha has promised rebirth in the Pure Land for those who live a good life.

This perspective does not seem to attract many Westerners:

*Perhaps because it does not offer the stark alternative to Christianity many Westerners are looking for, Pure Land Buddhism... is often sidelined in Western accounts of Buddhism.<sup>58</sup>*

It appears that the traditional Buddhist view of emphasis on self-power sits better with the individualism of most westerners; however, this raises the question of whether or not this can be interpreted as an attitude of arrogance and conceit? And can the Christian position be equated with passivity and relinquishment of responsibility? Unfortunately, there is not space to pursue these important questions further in the present work.

One thing I have reflected on whilst investigating the current Christian-Buddhist dialogue is that this “dialogue” seems rather one-sided. Whilst certain Christian writers and groups are paying Buddhist teachings and practices a great deal of attention, there appears to be little of a similar interest from the Buddhist side. The obvious exception to this is, of course, H. H. Dalai Lama, who is frequently involved in meetings and dialogues between the two traditions.

I recall meeting a Tibetan monk who lived in Rome, Italy. His name was Geshe Gedun Tharchin,

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<sup>56</sup>Lawrence, pg. 6

<sup>57</sup> Thompson, 2009. Pg. 132-138

<sup>58</sup> Thompson, 2009. Pg. 135

and he was a Lharampa Geshe (the highest academic grade in the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, which requires around 17 years of intensive study to complete) from Ganden Monastic University in Karnataka in South West India, who had been sent to Rome by H. H. Dalai Lama, primarily to study the Catholic tradition and engage in dialogue with interested Christian groups and individuals. This task he performed diligently, even taking university courses in Catholicism, whilst also teaching traditional Tibetan Buddhism to Buddhist groups. He made no attempt to integrate aspects of the Christian teachings into the Buddhist tradition he had studied.

This approach seems in accord with the Dalai Lama's view that even though dialogue between religious traditions is very helpful and to be encouraged, it should be from the perspective of enriching and deepening one's understanding of the religious tradition and culture in which one lives, rather than changing to another religious tradition or trying to integrate them in a way that disturbs or even destroys the essence of each.<sup>59</sup> In the Foreword to *The Good Heart* Lawrence Freeman reminds us that “conversion is not the purpose of dialogue” and that an attitude of friendship, and respect for differences, are the appropriate means of approaching such meetings.<sup>60</sup>

There have been, however, attempts to integrate some aspects of these teachings. Thompson states in his book that one of his goals is to:

*...show that in making a Buddhist commitment, Christians need not be rejecting their baptismal Christian commitment.*<sup>61</sup>

It is interesting that Thompson doesn't reverse this statement; that is, claim that a Buddhist can make a Christian commitment without rejecting important aspects of Buddhist doctrine. Maybe this is one possible explanation for the lack of mutual interest.

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<sup>59</sup>Dalai Lama, 1996. Pg.45

<sup>60</sup>Dalai Lama, 1996. Foreword, Pg. V

<sup>61</sup>Thompson, 2009. Pg. 38-39

## Final reflections - The benefits and drawbacks of inter-religious comparisons and dialogue

Now we come to the question of whether the comparative method of studying religion – including that which I have written above – is a valid and useful approach to the subject. According to Patton and Ray:

*...the substantial and often well-founded charges brought against the comparative method are many: intellectual imperialism, universalism, theological foundationalism, and anti-contextualist<sup>62</sup>(and) ...the standpoint of the comparativist was once privileged as a vantage-point of objective description, classification, and comparison of “other peoples” and their beliefs. The focus of deconstructive scrutiny “reveals” it instead, at worst, as a subjective mélange of culturally biased perceptions that cannot but distort or, at best, as an act of imaginative, associative “play”.<sup>63</sup>*

These criticisms come in large part from postmodern thinkers who have reacted very strongly against the methods of, for example, Mircea Eliade, whose vision of a universal, transcendent, sacred realm linking all of humankind is the epitome of all that the postmodernist movement has been opposed to.

However, Patton & Ray also see great difficulties in applying postmodern thought to analytical reflection on, for example, religious narratives or worldviews. According to their view:

*...postmodernism denounces order and ordering principles in favor of “otherness, difference, and excess,” and further wishes to “destruct the status quo in favor of the fluxus quo”; the religious worldview is nothing if not global, universal, systemic, unequivocal, and symmetrical in its claims, “totalizing” in its metaphysics or anti-metaphysics. If we are to take the claims of postmodernism seriously, the possibility of describing religious systems with integrity or comparing them to one another is thus permanently compromised.<sup>64</sup>*

To counteract some of the shortcomings of certain comparative models, Jonathan Z. Smith emphasizes an approach based on *differences* instead of *similarities*, which avoids the risk of “an

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<sup>62</sup> Patton & Ray, 2000. Pg. 1

<sup>63</sup> Patton & Ray, 2000. Pg. 2

<sup>64</sup> Patton & Ray, 2000. Pg. 2

*assertion of identity*, in which the comparativist effectively maintains that there are no significant differences between two religious traditions with regard to a given subject.”<sup>65</sup> However, this can lead to a situation where the “other” is rendered or regarded as wholly unintelligible and alien, if taken to extremes.

In an essay from the book *A Magic Still Dwells*, Diana L. Eck writes of her first major project as an academic studying Indian religion, when she conducted a study of what meaning the Indian city of Banares has for Hindus. Apart from studying many ancient Sanskrit texts and histories of the city, she also visited numerous temples, talking to and interviewing priests and pilgrims and asking what the city meant for them. When she later presented the work to a group of Banarsi scholars, she was surprised at their reaction:

*...the thing I found most interesting was their astonishment that this book about a city so familiar to them had been written by an American scholar, not by a Hindu. I realized that no Hindu would have written the book, organized the material, or used the interpretive voice that I had used, and yet it was possible... to articulate an understanding of Hindu religious life that Hindus themselves would recognize and find illuminating.*<sup>66</sup>

We ourselves are often interested in an outsider’s perspective on our culture, habits and customs – being an Englishman living in Sweden I get asked quite often what differences I notice between the cultures, etc. Why shouldn’t this interest be appropriate in religious circles?

Whatever the scholarly standpoint one takes on any religious tradition, we are still more than just students, scholars or “curious bystanders” looking with detachment and objectivity at an organized structure of belief and ritual. Our perspectives come from a unique collaboration of factors that can add new elements and broaden our understanding of these subjects. Eck goes on to say:

*...understanding is not sequential, as if we must learn “this” before we learn “that,” but dialogical. It is precisely the dialogue with what is “other” of “different” that begins to make us more aware of and interested in what we ourselves presuppose and take to be normative.*<sup>67</sup>

Maybe, from the perspective of scientific analysis and methodology, the comparative method of studying religion is flawed; but, when we take into account the individual and personal religiosity

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<sup>65</sup> Friedenreich, 2004. Pg. 82

<sup>66</sup> Eck, from Patton & Ray, 2000. Pg. 144

<sup>67</sup> Eck, from Patton & Ray, 2000. Pg. 146-147

that is becoming more prominent in western countries (the same lands that first devised and developed the concept and practice of comparative religion) then dialogue and contact, and even exchange, between different religious traditions can become both desirable and inevitable.

Through this dialogue and exchange, individuals, such as Ross Thompson, are finding ways to enrich and deepen their understanding of their own religious inheritance – both as a result of exposure to different beliefs and traditions, but also from the challenges to one’s own tradition and belief that this meeting raises. An honest appraisal and questioning of one’s own presumptions and fixed-views of religion, God and the world, is essential for real spiritual progress, which is something most genuine teachings express, and this kind of dialogue helps expose our “blind-spots” – the reality we may not wish to see; the realities of ourselves that are in strong contrast to the selves we would like to be.

I believe using the comparative method, even in our postmodern age, is comparable to using Newtonian physics in the present age of quantum physics – maybe the limitations are obvious, but so too are the benefits in our lives *as we live them*. It strikes me as futile to argue whether the aspects of reality that are highlighted by one system of thought are more “real” than the realities of another system; but the fact is that the comparative method provides knowledge and understanding that is relevant for the religious life of ordinary practitioners.

# Summary

In this essay I have attempted to give answers to the questions or goals I named above:

- Who was Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, and why is he regarded as a mystic?
- What similarities exist between Brother Lawrence's and Ajahn Sumedho's teachings and spiritual practices?

I have written a brief biographical sketch on Brother Lawrence which includes details of his upbringing, family background, training and education, his work-life, and how his life was lived within the Carmelite monastery in Paris. I have also given a little background information on the religious tradition that most influenced Lawrence during his life, and which helped give form to his religious life.

This background information suggests that Brother Lawrence was an intelligent, wise and devoted individual who was prepared to invest all of him-self in the religious life. Relatively early in his life he had mystical experiences that played a large part in his decision to enter a monastery from the religious tradition that was surely most well-known to him, and where he lived, worked and prayed for the rest of his life.

Through Lawrence's progress and success with his method of maintaining constant awareness of God's presence, he realised a high degree of balance, joy and calm and became a source of inspiration and guidance for many who were acquainted with him.

Furthermore, I have described some of the central aspects of Brother Lawrence's mysticism using the descriptive model given in Geels and Wikström<sup>68</sup> as a framework. From this we have seen that Lawrence developed a method and practice that was very simple, direct and effective (at least for himself) and which was grounded in the religious tradition to which he belonged.

This practice permeated every aspect of Lawrence's life, and we have seen how he successfully managed to integrate his faith with his intellect, his mystical experiences with his daily life, and

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<sup>68</sup>Geels and Wikström, 2006. Pg. 254-255

even the physical realm with the spiritual. This total integration of all aspects of life and of the individual has – from my own point of view – an extremely modern ring to it, and is possibly one of the reasons for the increasing interest in his teachings and practices. This is also one of the main reasons why I believe it relevant and useful to compare his teaching with that of a modern spiritual teacher – especially one that has been trained in a completely different tradition to Lawrence.

I have also included an overview of the central source of teachings on mindfulness within Buddhism, and an example of how these teachings are taught and practiced in a Western Buddhist environment. This modern, western perspective on mindfulness is taken primarily from Ajahn Sumedho's book *Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless*, but partly also from the writers own observations and experience.

We have seen that mindfulness is a cornerstone in the Buddha's spiritual teaching, and that it is essential that the practitioner permeate every aspect of life with mindful awareness, if reality is to be seen as it really is. One can say that these methods and practices have as their goal to develop insight and wisdom through directing the attention towards all that one meets in life, and then interpret these experiences through the fundamental teachings the tradition is built upon – for example, the Four Noble Truths.

I have described several striking similarities between the experiences and teachings of Brother Lawrence and certain teachings relating to mindfulness within Buddhism – in particular, Ajahn Sumedho's teachings and methods of practice.

These similarities have tended toward the practical aspect of spiritual practice – that is, what the practitioner should *do*, and some of the methods for resolving problems and difficulties. A comparison of *what* one should be mindful of is more problematic because of substantial differences in world-views between the traditions.

Finally, I have discussed a few points relating to the value of the comparative method of investigating religion, in light of heavy criticism from postmodern thinkers. I have argued that comparison as a method of exploration and investigation comes naturally to human beings, and that this method, when applied to religious traditions, seems appropriate in a modern, multicultural setting, where a “pick ‘n mix” approach to religious and spiritual truths seems perfectly acceptable.

# Resources and literature

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